



KENNEDY CHILD STUDY CENTER

Preschool Special Education Thrives in Manhattan & the Bronx

By EMILY SHERWOOD,
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Peter Gorham, Exec. Dir.

It's 3 PM on a frosty winter afternoon, pick-up time at the Manhattan site of the Kennedy Child Study Center (KCSC). The lobby of the century-old building on East 67th Street, stately from the outside in its architectural grandeur, but now showing the cracks and strains of age from within, is a maelstrom of frenetic activity. Parents are chatting animatedly on their way up the elevator to retrieve their progeny; the children, eager to be free after a long day of concentration, burst forth from their classrooms in a flurry of frenetic motion.

The day may be over for KCSC, a nonprofit agency dedicated to helping primarily low-income preschoolers who experience significant delays in learning and other areas of early childhood development, but there is still much more to be done to improve the lives of its young charges. Each day, the Center renews its commitment to provide a vast array of services to some of the city's neediest children. The services cover an impressive gamut, including: evaluation and diagnosis; multidisciplinary therapy to address deficiencies in physical, cognitive, communicative, social, emotional and adaptive development; one of the largest preschool education programs citywide, with locations in Manhattan and the Bronx; and respite care for families with the most severely disabled children up to the age of 13.

KSCS has come a long way in a half century. Founded in 1958 by the Archdiocese of New

York and later supported by a substantial grant from Rose and Joseph Kennedy (the Center is named after their late son, Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr.), KCSC was one of the first organizations in New York City to educate and advocate for children with mental retardation. "In those days, there was very little money and few services for the disabled," reflects executive director Peter Gorham, a visionary leader with decades of experience in nonprofit management under his belt. "A lot of families kept their disabled kids at home, sometimes till adulthood. They didn't go to school." As public schools began to assume more responsibility for educating the disabled, KCSC refocused its efforts on serving youngsters from birth to five years of age. The Center is now a model for early intervention and treatment of disabilities, operating under the well-established assumption that, with early professional attention and sustained therapeutic resources, children are more likely to gain the skills necessary to become productive adults. Among the Center's many success stories is Chris Burke, a 42-year-old man with Down's Syndrome who started with KCSC as a child and has since thrived professionally as an actor, writer, musician, and inspirational speaker. "He's our unofficial spokesman," says Gorham proudly. (Burke's mother, Marian, a longtime advocate for her son and other disabled youngsters, is a KCSC Board member.)

As KCSC looks ahead to its fiftieth anniversary

celebration next year, Gorham shares his wish list with Education Update. "Space is a problem," he states emphatically, discussing plans for expansion at the Bronx center and, if all goes well, ultimately relocating the Manhattan center to a larger space in Harlem: "I'd create a state of the art building, where all therapies would have enough room in the classroom and in pull-out areas," notes Gorham. With roomier quarters, Gorham is eager to expand enrollments to meet the burgeoning demand for KCSC's services, perhaps even exploring a Universal Pre-K program where disabled youngsters would interact with their non-disabled peers. Gorham would also ramp up his preventive screening initiatives. KCSC has

recently acquired a grant to screen youngsters in Head Start programs, and he's convinced they could do more: "If we can verify developmental delays, we can intervene that much sooner," he adds passionately.

With a recent grant from the Heckscher Foundation, KSCS plans to launch a rigorous outcomes evaluation: "That will lay a greater foundation internally to help us answer the question, 'How are we doing?'" One suspects that KCSC is doing very well indeed for its vulnerable young population, and that many of the children fortunate enough to benefit from its multidisciplinary approach to preschool education and therapy are well on their way to assuming a productive role in society.#