The First 5 YEARS

An Impact Report Celebrating the First Five Years of Cummings Great Expectations
The first five years of children’s lives are among the most important. During these years, children’s brains make millions of connections and develop faster than at any other time in their lives. Children are born ready to learn. They begin observing, exploring, experimenting, and solving problems from their first day of life. Time spent talking, listening, reading, writing, playing, and singing with young children helps them develop essential life skills, including communication, thinking, problem-solving, moving, and developing peer and family relationships.

As we reflect on the first five years of Cummings Great Expectations, we also reflect on how crucial these first five years have been for the development of Flint children impacted by the Flint water crisis. Five years ago, we opened Cummings Great Expectations amid the Flint water crisis and much uncertainty about how Flint children and families would fare in the years to follow. We know now, five years later, that investing in the earliest years of Flint children’s lives was one of the most critical and beneficial investments we could have made. Through the tireless dedication of our families, staff, and community partners, we have changed the narrative about the Flint community—especially as it concerns its youngest citizens and their families. Flint is not just a city that has been affected by a water emergency; it is a diverse community working to move forward together by building sustainable and equitable solutions that center our youngest residents.

Looking forward to the next five years of our effort to support new opportunities for Flint’s youngest children and their families, we are excited about the opportunity to continue setting the standard for improving equity in education and health services by meeting the needs of two generations, together, while serving as a resource to early childhood professionals in Flint and beyond. As you read about the impact that Cummings Great Expectations has made in the lives of our students and families over these few short years, I hope these stories inspire you to join us on our aspirational journey of ensuring the success of Cummings Great Expectations can be realized for all families in Flint and throughout the state of Michigan.

Ja’Nel Jamerson
Flint Early Childhood
Collaborative & Educare Flint

It is with extreme excitement that I wake up each morning knowing that I get the privilege of being part of a greater approach to early childhood development. An approach that, for the past five years, we have seen have an unwavering impact on our community.

From the students that enter our doors each morning happy and excited to learn to the parents that put their utmost faith in us to teach their children, as well as the funding partners, this community has rallied behind this work and it is providing dividends. Throughout this report, you will find just a handful of stories that I get to experience on a daily basis. I am appreciative of the opportunity to be part of this great work and while I celebrate the past five years, I am eagerly dreaming about the strides that will be made over the next five years.

Michelle Townsend
Cummings Great Expectations
There is a lot of growth that happens in the first five years of life and we are grateful for the ability to have a front-row seat to the development of our community. At Cummings Great Expectations we have had the pleasure of serving over 700 Flint children during our five years of life. Check out some of the milestones our students have accomplished over the last five years.

- **Ages 0 - 1**: 55 children learned to crawl and make their first steps.
- **Ages 1 - 2**: 90 children learned to communicate their own needs through talking and pretending.
- **Ages 2 - 3**: 135 children learned to construct their first simple sentences.
- **Ages 3 - 4**: 140 children learned to pedal a tricycle, balance, and manipulate balls through throwing or kicking.
- **Ages 4 - 5**: 130 children learned to tell stories and develop friendships.
- **Age 5 - Kindergarten**: 165 children transitioned to Kindergarten!
Flint has a rich history when it comes to education and Cummings Great Expectations has been fortunate to be able to build on that history. In doing so, a school that was built in the middle of the 20th century and has been reborn as an industry-leading early childhood education center and community hub for family learning.

In the wake of the Flint water crisis, community partners came together to offer high-quality early education to Flint children. With the desire to preserve the Flint community’s existing education facilities, the shuttered Everett A. Cummings Elementary school was renovated to serve as the new home of Cummings Great Expectations.

On Monday, October 31st 2016, the ribbon was cut! We opened our doors to Flint families to provide free high-quality early care and education for children ages 6 weeks to 5 years old.

The first Cummings Great Expectations students transition to kindergarten, healthy and ready to learn.

2020 Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, Cummings Great Expectations transitions to blended approaches, offering in-person and virtual options for families.

2021 On November 23, 2021, the Cummings Great Expectations neighborhood was impacted by a deadly explosion in a nearby home, resulting in the temporary closure of the school. Despite this, Cummings Great Expectations continues to serve Flint families through various satellite locations.

"You Go but You Are Never Gone."

Christi Law, Early Childhood Specialist
Two Generations, One Future

Flint Families Grow Together at Cummings Great Expectations

Five years ago, LaDelvin Walker was participating in what at the time was a pilot program called 2Gen facilitated by the Flint & Genesee Literacy Network which allowed her to actively work on getting her GED. It was during this process that she became familiar with Cummings Great Expectations. “I would go to Cummings to work on my GED program and my son Desmond was able to come with and be involved in the school,” LaDelvin shared.

Desmond was only two years old at the time and while LaDelvin was appreciative to be able to have him in the same building, little did she realize what a critical role that school would play going forward. “I thought it was just another daycare facility” shared LaDelvin but soon learned about all the wrap-around services that are provided and how this school is much different.

The transition for Desmond into school was incredibly easy and the staff made sure that LaDelvin was consistently in the loop on what was happening at school including sending photos of what he was doing.

After about a year and a half, LaDelvin had completed her GED through the 2Gen program and quickly started working as an AmeriCorps member where she spent 4 years serving in the community. She spent the first 3 years assisting with the Flint & Genesee Literacy Network where she played critical roles in helping parents get connected to the vital, wide-ranging resources they needed. “I was helping parents get everything from healthy, nutritious food to signing children up for the Dolly Parton Imagination Library to help them get free books,” shared LaDelvin. Her experience at Cummings allowed LaDelvin to see what a benefit it is to be able to have help in finding the right resources.

During Desmond’s time at Cummings, LaDelvin was able to participate in several parent and family programs. One she remembers fondly is the Women of Worth (WOW) program. It was during these WOW meetings that she was able to learn more about what self care looks like for mothers. “We learned how to prepare healthy meals, how to care for our children and it just gave us a sounding board of other community members that we could connect with.” Parent Cafe also played an important role for LaDelvin in getting connected to resources she wasn’t familiar with.

Cummings was lucky enough to have LaDelvin come back as an AmeriCorps member for her 4th year of service and help out at the market where she worked to help families get access to food and personal items at no cost. Once again, LaDelvin was filling the role of connector to resources and helping the community.

LaDelvin is currently a full-time student at Mott College studying social work while also working with GST Michigan Works as a Workforce Literacy Coach. As part of this role, she is now helping community members reach their career goals.

Today, Desmond is doing great. As an 8 year old, he is now in 2nd grade and is truly thriving. LaDelvin is quick to give credit to Cummings but nothing is done in a silo. The entire model is built around educators and families working together to improve and with the dedication that LaDelvin has, she is certainly helping to build the next generation of leaders, both at home and at work.
Springing Into Action

No Obstacle is Too Much For the Cummings Team to Overcome

"From the moment you step foot into the building you get a sense of family and community." This is what Jacqulyn Estep feels is the best way to describe Cummings Great Expectations.

Jacqulyn has a son, Ezekiel who began going to Cummings when he was just one and two years later, he is thriving. When Jacqulyn began looking for a school for her son, she first learned about Cummings from a friend who was a staff member at the school. After hearing all the positive things the school was doing, she had to check it out. From her first visit, she knew this was the best place for Ezekiel. “They were warm and inviting right away,” Jacqulyn shared. “They made me feel like family.”

Like any mother, Jacqulyn always had a keen sense for how her son was doing and shortly after starting at Cummings, she started to notice Ezekiel had a delay in speech and some difficulties with some fine motor skills. As she began to discuss it with the staff at Cummings, they immediately stepped in to assist. “We started having daily conversations regarding his progress,” Jacqulyn explained. “They did a lot of one on one work with Ezekiel to help him in the classroom and assisting him with speech and fine motor skills.”

When it became time to get speech therapy, Cummings was right there to help. After struggling to get Ezekiel into therapy, Jacqulyn shared that the staff sprang into action. “That was a complete lifesaver,” shared Jacqulyn.

The staff at Cummings has truly become family to Jacqulyn having helped with childcare and watching Ezekiel later into the evening on nights when Jacqulyn had commitments. She often goes and visits with Ms. Vicki’s grandkids to let Ezekiel play and more.

Cummings staff go above and beyond to support it’s families. Jacqulyn offered another example where recently she was needing to get her son into a dentist. “I just kept running into roadblock after roadblock,” she shared. “I had spent over five hours on the phone with various dentists trying to get him to see someone and wasn’t getting anywhere.” After sharing this story with Ms. Cheryl at Cummings, the entire staff got to work and soon Ezekiel had an appointment the next week at the Mott Children’s Health Center. “I didn’t even know this place existed. I could not have done this without their help.”

The entire team at Cummings is dedicated to helping families succeed, no matter the work involved, the sacrifices they might need to make or the time needed. It is at the core of what they do and who they are as evident by stories like these.

Jacqulyn Estep, Parent
Greater Expectations, Greater Outcomes

Cummings Helps Families Overcome Barriers for a More Hopeful Future

“I don’t want to go home.” This is a phrase that is heard often each Thursday by Rozena Fuller, parent to Cummings Great Expectations student Kai’Denn as they head home for the weekend. This is a common feeling for a lot of the students at the school as they have to leave their “school family” for a few days.

When Kai’Denn was turning two, Rozena began looking at school options and quickly came to the realization that Cummings would be the best fit for her family. “I just felt like I was in the right place when I was there,” she shared. Spending the last three years at the school, she is more confident than ever before that she made the right decision.

Kai’Denn was born deaf and doctors were quick to point out that he would never speak and may not write. While that might be, Rozena was never going to rest on those opinions and knew Kai’Denn was destined for greatness.

When he first started at Cummings, Kai’Denn was placed in Ms. Vicki’s classroom and then transitioned to Ms. Samantha’s room as he grew older. These two educators were determined to help him grow as much as he could and build his skills.

Speech and occupational therapy are important aspects for the development of a deaf child and to help ease the burden of this requirement, the staff at Cummings arranged for therapists to come to the school to help Kai’Denn grow and improve. “It was difficult for me to be able to do this at home and the fact that they were there to help and get him the therapy he needed right at school was a complete blessing,” Rozena shared.

This also provided more time for Rozena to get involved in some of the activities that the school had to offer for families. “I have enjoyed being able to get involved and become more integrated in the Cummings family,” Rozena explained.

Today Kai’Denn is 5 years old and excelling in everything he does. Just a few short years later, he has broken all of the promises that the doctors made years ago. He is now talking and even beginning to write. He is doing all the things any excelling five year old would; learning, doing projects and playing with his friends. All of which are what make it hard to leave each Thursday.

As Kai’Denn gets ready to graduate from Cummings Great Expectations, Rozena shares that she feels anxious. “Cummings has become home, he loves it here.”
Supporting Families Since Day One

The School-Family Relationship Established At Cummings Stands Out

Vicki Blake had just finished her college experience prior to her first day as a support staff at Cummings Great Expectation five years ago. She remembers that day fondly. “I’ve been here since the very first day. I remember unloading furniture off of a semi-truck that day and being excited about the future that the school would bring.”

Vicki grew up in the Cummings neighborhood, having spent many years playing in the area with friends. She was part of the first graduating class of Carman Ainsworth High School.

After starting out as a support staff member, Vicki quickly moved into a lead teacher position and has loved every minute of it. She has been able to build relationships with the families very quickly and create lasting impact and this is in-part due to her passion and love for education. The ability to give new experiences to children is something that never gets old for Vicki.

Nature has always been a love of hers and she works hard to bring new experiences into the classroom and the lives of her scholars so that they can enjoy it as well. One example of this is when she brought butterflies into her classroom so that her scholars could learn about them and just have a new experience.

“When you have a relationship with people like we do with our students and their families, you would do anything for them.” She shared a story of a student who had gone through many negative experiences in his young life. His mom had to spend time in jail which forced the student to live with grandparents and there were just many challenges but when the student was in school, you could tell he felt at home and relaxed. He was one that really enjoyed the butterflies and built up a strong relationship with Vicki. Today, he is in first grade and doing wonderful. Mom had to spend time in jail which forced the student to live with grandparents and there were just many challenges but when the student was in school, you could tell he felt at home and relaxed. He was one that really enjoyed the butterflies and built up a strong relationship with Vicki. Today, he is in first grade and doing wonderful.

Given her love of nature, Vicki lives on a lake and so one day, she decided to bring the lake to the classroom so she packed up lake water, some seaweed and even some minos and brought them into school. “I’ve never seen boys squeal so much in my life,” shared Vicki. “It was so fun to see. You could tell this was something new for the kids and they really enjoyed it.” Vicki understands that part of learning is being able to see something new. Not everything has to be structured learning, sometimes it is about exploring. In talking with her, anyone can quickly realize that she has hundreds of these stories because it is just part of what she does all the time. She also shared about a time that she brought students to bluebell to go fishing. Nature brings a unique element of exploration to learning.

With all of the teaching Vicki does, she is quick to point out that she learns just as much from her Cummings families. She recently was learning French and as she began to become more familiar with the language, she learned that one of the parents of her students spoke fluent French. “She was able to help me learn more and we started to converse a bit in French,” Vicki explained. “I really enjoy being able to learn from our families. I’ve learned so much about other cultures, languages, and so much more.”

Vicki has built lasting friendships over the past five years, ones she cherishes very much. She is still involved in the lives of many students and their families who are no longer in her class but she still goes to their birthday parties and just provides support to them when needed and they help support her.

That integration within the family units is an element of Cummings that really stands out to Vicki. She hears on a regular basis how parents love all the support they receive from school. From workshops on healthy eating and how to plant gardens to self-improvement and support for grandparents, there are a lot of opportunities for growth. “We also have a lot of programs for fathers as well,” Vicki shared, as she spoke about the FAME program as well as how they offer sports for dads to participate in.
Learning Through Play

In Minutes of Play, Kids Learn to Count, Speak, Create, Explore, and More!

As someone who is teaching 3-4 year-old children every day, Nate Standish understands the importance of play-based learning as children develop. Nate’s journey into early childhood education began as a support staff member at Cummings Great Expectations when it first opened. Enjoying the ability to work with youth, he quickly furthered his education and progressed into the role of lead teacher.

“I just love how kids this age are always curious,” Nate explained. “They are generally pleasant and a joy to be around.”

Understanding that the school was formed out of the water crisis, Nate understands the supports that the next generation of students need and because of this, has always put a large emphasis on trauma-informed care. One way to do this is to ensure that, in addition to teaching core competencies, Nate makes sure that his students are developing socially. “I always try to assume one of the largest challenges will be from a social & emotional point of view” Nate shared.

A common misperception is that the program is simply daycare but anyone who has experienced the impact of Cummings quickly realizes that it is much more. “We have a complete curriculum that we follow and we focus on not just the whole student but the whole family.”

Playing, when done right, can be one of the most impactful learning experiences that a child can have. There is so much to be learned from time spent playing with each other as Nate pointed out, children can learn to count, communicate, build, engineer, and find common ground, just in a quick session of play. “It is so impactful at this age,” Nate explained.

The ability to carry those concepts home and have consistent learning experiences for the students are important and one area that Nate works with parents on is through the concept of conscious discipline. This newer approach to child development was impactful for Nate as he was raising his two children and he works with parents of his students to show the benefits.

To highlight some of the work being done to support families, Nate quickly pointed to the Market where families can get food as well as many household items all free of charge. The ability to have access to support services like this allow for families to be better equipped to provide for their families and eliminate a barrier to education and success that may have presented itself otherwise.

Nate lifted up a recent story where a student was living with their grandparents and there became some food insecurity. The market was able to step in and provide support for the family and provide items to the student’s grandparents to help ensure that there was healthy, nutritious food available for the family. In addition to providing assistance through the market, there are countless other programs that are provided. One such program that Nate felt was support classes on career building and helping parents get the career they desire.

At the end of the day, it is all about supporting the families of Cummings. Whatever it takes, the staff has been there to help and will continue to do so.

From helping demonstrate the benefits of play to providing support services and bringing new strategies to families, Cummings is leading the way in early childhood development.

Cummings parents ranked their most effective support systems as follows:

#1 Cummings Great Expectations!
#2 Family (Spouses, Parents)
#3 Their Own Children