

A quality pre-K program dedicated to its mission

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Call it a unicorn of pre-K. Children's Village, on Eighth Street at the edge of Chinatown, is better equipped than many Philadelphia public schools, with a full-time psychologist, a fully stocked library and librarian, a roof-deck playground, and a kitchen that serves up everything from tilapia to Indian chickpea stew.

When the center opened in 1976, the goal was to serve the children whose parents worked in the garment industry that surrounded it then.

The neighborhood has changed, but the mission has not — providing the highest-quality care for children who need it. Today, many of the 450 pupils are poor, and many are learning English.

While the school still relies heavily on grants — it

has two development directors responsible for attracting dollars and running events — it has won both national accreditation and the state's highest quality rating.

There is little staff turnover; many workers earned degrees largely paid for by a now-defunct state program that covered 80 percent of their tuition. They stay despite the temptation of a shorter year and better pay if they worked for a school district.

Like other centers in the city, Children's Village is operating on the slimmest of margins.

Some of its 450 children pay full freight — up to \$370 weekly — but nearly 80 percent of those enrolled qualify for some kind of assistance. Children's Village staff help families figure out what they qualify for, “braiding” funding if possible — coordinating money from different plac-

es to cover a child's care.

“If you look at our fund balance in 2014, it was \$22,000 on a \$5 million budget — and that was good,” said Graham, the center's executive director.

But if Graham, who has testified before Congress on early childhood issues and is a self-professed “math person” with 40 years' experience in the field, operates on the slimmest of margins, how will the smaller centers?

Her message is: It's worth every penny. Graham is rooting for Mayor Kenney's ambitious plan of making pre-kindergarten available to every child in Philadelphia.

“It's about long-term public education,” Graham said. “Our parents are scraping by. Our children will be engineers.”

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