

## **Center for Early Learning-North: Open for Opportunity**

When it comes to making promises, Columbia Public Schools Superintendent Peter Stiepleman says the district intends to keep them. After the community voted to approve a \$50 million bond issue in 2012, part of that promise included building a space to house the district's early childhood programs under one roof—which includes early childhood special education, preschool classrooms and Parents as Teachers.

Not only did CPS fulfill its promise with the creation of the Center for Early Learning-North (CELN), but Columbia Board of Education President James Whitt said it was done on time and under budget—finishing the project at \$9.3 million instead of the expected \$9.5 million.

CPS has been a leader for early childhood education in Missouri for many years and has stayed well ahead of the curve. The school district was the first in Missouri to offer Parents as Teachers programming in 1981 (before it was implemented statewide in 1985), and has had early childhood special education classrooms for more than 25 years. What started as one preschool classroom has grown into a program of 28 that are almost fully funded by the community.

The 54,000-square-foot center has six preschool classrooms, and 11 more will be available on a lower level once the building is completed in June. Two preschool classrooms each were moved from Field School, Derby Ridge and Blue Ridge elementary schools. The six remaining preschool classrooms in Field School will move to the new center in June. Field School will then only house the district's gifted education programs. By the 2017-2018 school year, the center will have around 200 students, but has the capacity for 400.

Amy Wilson, district director for early childhood special education, said the building's opening is a major improvement to the program since it can now provide comprehensive services and education to families across Columbia in one location.

"We've been all over town wherever there has been space, but now it's really great for teachers and therapists to be in one location," Wilson said. "The physical space itself is really a vast improvement and allows our families to connect and collaborate on all our programs in one location."