Fair play

A new center promises quality child care for all

by Maggie Ginsberg

Lauren Justice

The wheels on the bus go 'round and 'round, but that's not the song that's playing overhead — it's "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star," with a few key words changed: *Twinkle, twinkle little star, what a wonderful child you are. With bright eyes and nice round cheeks. Intelligent person from head to feet.* Driver Mary Petit pushes play on the CD just before pulling into a south-side apartment complex parking lot, where three sleepy toddlers and their caregivers climb aboard. Each kiddo grabs a Bye-Bye Bear from a bag up front — right near the posted Morning Message reminding parents they can handle this, they're safe, keep breathing — and hands the well-worn stuffed animals to their families, who give the bears hugs and kisses before handing them back, saying their goodbyes and de-boarding. Petit's been driving a school bus for 19 years, but she's never had a route quite like this.

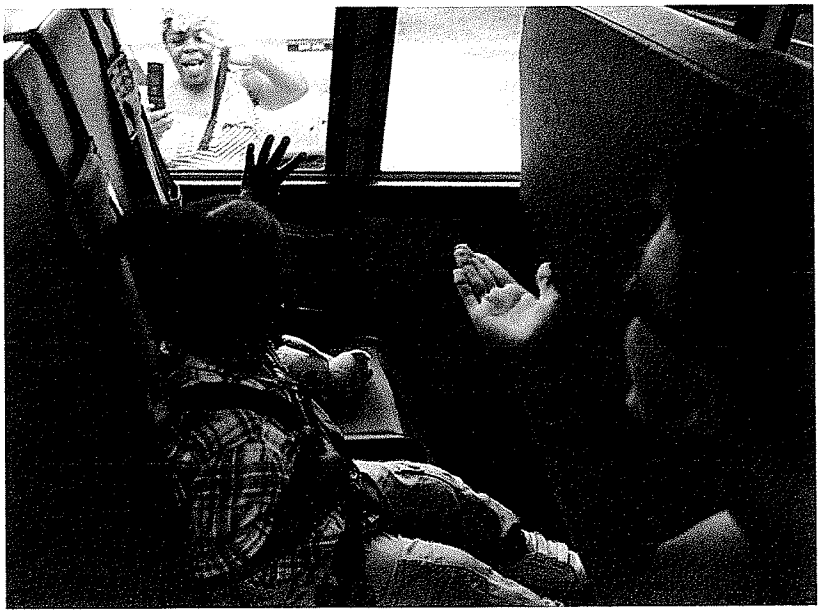
Over the last year, driver Mary Petit has picked up children living in cars, homeless shelters and hotels.

"I'm so glad you're here!" chirps 22-year-old Luke Muentner, a UW School of Human Ecology student and an assistant teacher at the Playing Field. "Let's make sure your body is safe." He buckles in both the kids and the bears, and the little yellow school bus is off again, where it will make three more stops across the city before arriving at the Playing Field, a year-old early childcare center on Mineral Point Road with a unique dual mission: to provide high-quality care to a mix of socioeconomically and racially diverse children ages zero to 3 (with 4- and 5-year-

olds, starting this fall); and to fully implement Conscious Discipline, a research-based, social-emotional curriculum that emphasizes safety and connection and uses everyday conflict to teach self-regulation.

The kids on this bus are those who can't afford transportation to school, and they're on their way to meet those who can; private-pay classmates whose parents are thrilled not only by the high-quality care their kids get at the Playing Field, but who also see value in its mission. The Playing Field was founded by executive director Abbi Kruse just three weeks after the UW School of Human Ecology's Preschool Laboratory vacated its space (and with it, her job) in the lower level of Bethany United Methodist Church. It began the 2016-17 school year with 29 families: 12 Early Head Start-funded kids, 14 privately funded, and three others whose tuition was cobbled together with a mix of child care subsidies and scholarship funds. A new bathroom is being built so that teachers — called "Brain Builders" here — can help children bathe if they don't have housing, and a kitchen remodel — helmed by a staff cook creating nutritional meals from an on-site garden — may give some kids their only meals of the day.

One of those private-pay kids waiting at the school for the bus is Patrick, who's 18 months old; he was one of the Playing Field's first students. "He likes to give his friends hugs when he leaves," his dad, Matt, will tell me later. He's a data analyst, and his wife, Tam, is a grad student (they requested their last name be withheld to protect Patrick's online identity). "And it's nice because his friends are white and they're black," says Matt a bit sheepishly, because he knows it sounds simple — but it's not. Racism is personal for Matt, whose Japanese American grandfather was imprisoned in 1940s U.S. internment camps, and to Tam, whose Vietnamese parents immigrated to America just before the Vietnam War made their welcome less than warm. They like that, at the Playing Field, they don't have to choose between racial or economic diversity and quality programming.



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Strapped in for the bus ride to school, John Moore, with teacher Luke Muentner, waves goodbye to his mother.

Child care is a big expense for everyone, but communities of color — particularly in Madison, where gaping racial disparities are well documented — are hit particularly hard. As Kruse puts it, "There are centers for students who can afford anything and there's centers for everybody else." Here in Dane County, a shocking number of kids are living in poverty, particularly families of color — half of African American children, one in four Latino kids — and Matt is a numbers guy.

"There's a very different thing between reading about it through a spreadsheet and when you're meeting them in person," says Matt, whose problems are put in perspective when he's hanging out with other school parents and learning what they're going through. He also thinks the "soft skills" his son learns at the Playing Field about basic, empathetic human interaction will serve him just as well as science and math, if not better. "I think it's important for me to remember that there is this breadth of human experience in Madison that you don't often necessarily see."

Matt, like the other private-pay parents at the Playing Field, wants his kid to see it from the start. Children play and parents socialize at the school's monthly Family Fun Nights, where Kruse, center director Michelle Henner and their staff of 12 full- and part-time teachers share some Conscious Discipline training for parents to practice at home, or the science that supports it. They eat dinner together and talk about how at birth, the brain is 25 percent of its adult size, but by age 2, it's 85 percent. Or that for optimal brain development, 46 percent of a child's time should be eye-to-eye, face-to-face with an attuned, attached caregiver. That's why the Playing Field has lower-than-required teacher-student ratios and why, on this hour-plus bus ride, "class" is already in session.

Travis Wright, an assistant professor of multicultural education at UW-Madison, says that while access to high-quality child care is often out of reach for families experiencing homelessness or high mobility, it is potentially one of the most important supports for children and their families. He also notes that diverse-income preschool communities, like the one at the Playing Field, have tremendous potential. "Mixing the strengths of children from different types of backgrounds allows them to develop broader perspectives and multiple skill sets," he says. Moreoever, education is not just about learning, Wright adds. It is about building society and social networks.

"Spaces that bring people from mixed-income backgrounds together allow families with low incomes access to social networks and opportunities that could give them a leg up or way out and allow families with more privilege to challenge their stereotypes about families navigating poverty.

"There is no place better than preschool for families from different walks of life to build connections."

"Luuuuuke," calls 3-year-old Rikyla from her seat, and Muentner appears before she's finished enunciating his name. He floats from row to row as each child boards, performing an "I Love You" ritual on each Bye-Bye Bear, a little song that covers the Conscious Discipline bases of eye contact, touch, presence and playfulness — looking directly into the bear's eyes, singing to it and tickling it. If Rikyla gets upset later or misses home, she can snuggle with this bear and remember this moment, or her mom kissing it goodbye. Two rows up, 2-year-old, blond-headed, bespectacled Ezra is warily eyeing 3-year-old Christopher, who is holding Ezra's purple truck. "Ezra is being such a good friend letting Christopher use your car, thank you so much!" says Muentner, defusing the situation. "Don't worry, Ezzy, Christopher is keeping your car safe."

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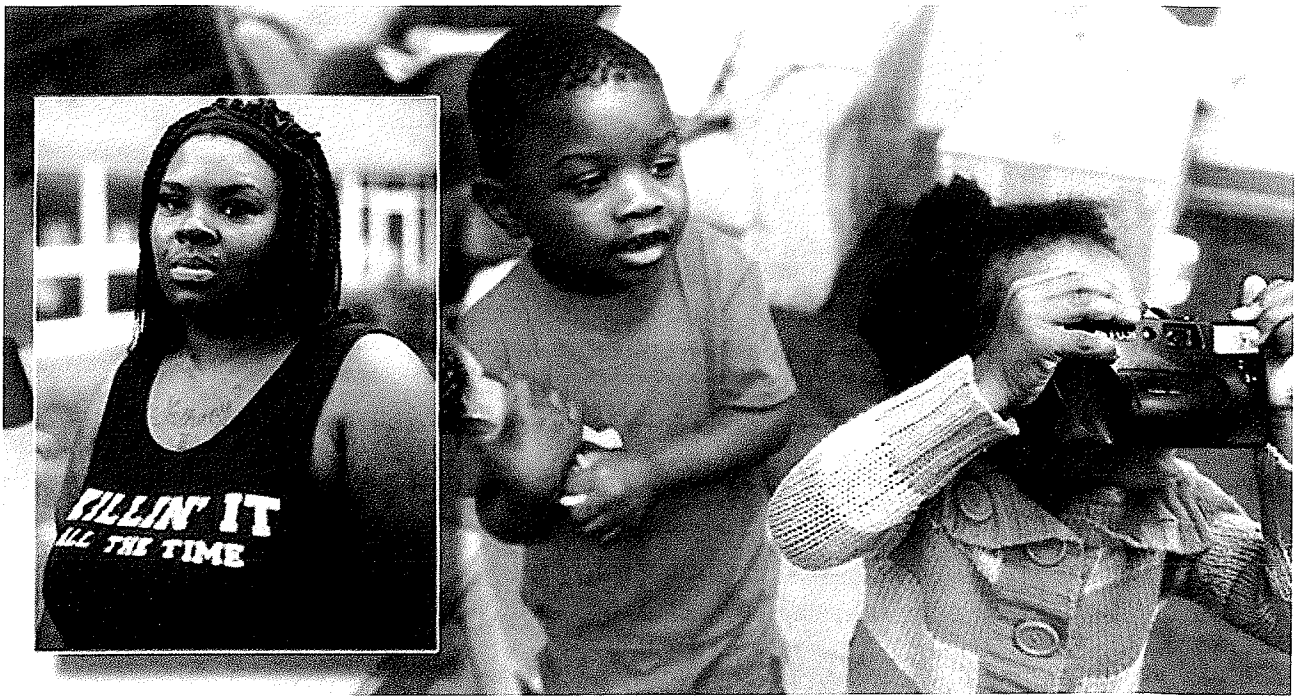
"Class" with teacher Muentner starts as soon as 3-year-old Rikyla, and the other children, board the bus for the ride to school.

Like any skilled child care professional, Muentner seems endlessly patient, and every moment is teachable; more subtle, but clearly deliberate, is the constant reframing of language around safety and connection. When Ezra takes his glasses off, instead of simply telling him to put them back on, Muentner reminds Ezra that when he can see, his body is safe. Every song on the Conscious Discipline CD playing overhead retools its lyrics around this same message; the old woman still lives in the shoe with lots of kids, but now she knows exactly what to do: hold them, rock them and tuck them in bed. Humpty Dumpty still has a great fall, but this time the queen's horses and king's men have no problem putting him together again.

It's not like safety is a given for these kids. The six children riding the Early Head Start-funded bus today all have housing but, over the past year since the center's opening, Petit has collected kids camped out in cars, hotels and homeless shelters. They're all sweet kids, but several acted out at first. "I'm sure it was just the shock of what they were going through," she says. Homelessness and poverty are stressful, compounding traumas, and, of the 3,500 people experiencing homelessness in Dane County this year, nearly half are children. When Petit first started picking up 3-year-old Armoni last year from a hotel parking lot, he regularly bit his friends and teachers. But within weeks, he was as friendly, empathetic and engaged as you can imagine.

"He did a complete turnaround," says Armoni's mom, Mary Gray, whose son Anthony also attended the Playing Field. She and her boys experienced homelessness for two months after leaving a domestic violence situation — and nearly all of their belongings — in another state. The three slept in her car, on a park bench and at the Salvation Army before a child care subsidy connected her with the Playing Field so that Mary could find work and, within two months, an apartment. It was a full week before she even had the chance to go inside the school her boys were already gushing about; once there, she couldn't believe how nice it was, or how frequently the teachers texted cute pictures or called to check in on how she was doing. Most unexpected of all, she's connecting deeper with her boys through the Conscious Discipline practices her kids insist on doing at home.

- See more at: http://isthmus.com/news/cover-story/the-playing-field-promises-quality-child-care-for-all/#sthash.RPOIKmay.dpuf



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Parent Mary Gray says her son, Armoni, "did a complete turnaround" after attending the Playing Field.

"I'm not gonna lie; I never would do parental time, I guess. I was spending lots of time with them but I would never do the itsy bitsy spider or the little tickle thing. I'm not an emotional person," she says. "I come here to the family fun nights, and it's a big change for me because I'm learning more things about parenting."

Parents included

These changes in parents (specifically, "social emotional competency changes," according to its website) are precisely what Conscious Discipline proponents aim for — and it goes for kids and teachers, too. The idea is to infuse a whole school climate with behavioral changes that promote empathy and resiliency, and emphasize problem-solving skills over rewards and punishments.

The Playing Field is the only center in the area pursuing full implementation of Conscious Discipline (a three-year process involving full staff training in Florida, where Dr. Becky Bailey developed it in 1996), but other centers may incorporate parts of it, says Kruse. She's the only certified Conscious Discipline instructor in Madison (one of only three in Wisconsin) and she's held trainings for Preschool of the Arts, University Avenue Discovery Center, all UW early childhood programs, Early Head Start and Head Start sites in Dane and other counties, Madison College and more. The Conscious Discipline website is peppered with peer-reviewed academic articles both directly and indirectly related to its practices.

Day to day, the Playing Field classroom might not look much different from any other quality child care center. But it's as if the staff wears Conscious Discipline glasses through which they view and respond to every normal interaction. When conflict arises — as it does with any group of toddlers, but especially those under stress — those moments are used to help kids and caregivers respond better.

"It's not like you get out the lesson and you're like okay, today we're gonna learn about blah blah blah," says Kruse. "You put kids in a classroom with different points of view and different perspectives and different needs, and then you use those moments of conflict or upset to teach new skills, and those skills include compassion and empathy."

Take this morning, for example. After the bus arrives and the toddlers enter their classroom, they'll each put a photo of themselves in a box while taking a pledge, out loud, to be safe. Throughout the day, if somebody isn't — say they stand up on a table, or hit another child — their classmates or teacher will remind them they "forgot to be safe" and ask if they'd like to go back to the box and promise again. It's like hitting a do-over button, says Kruse, instead of receiving a consequence that could set a negative tone for the whole day.

"We have kids that I know would have been kicked out of other programs," says Kruse, and she's thinking about Armoni, whose teacher texted Kruse a photo of him pouring his own water into another child's bucket because she had spilled hers. Just yesterday, he'd given his Bye-Bye Bear, unprompted, to a little boy who'd forgotten his. He's just so sweet and he's come so far, she says. "This is a kid who, six months ago, couldn't even be within two feet of anybody without biting them."

Making it work

It's been a long ride. The bus rolls on, past the "ascushkin" workers building a "lellow" house and — the ride's most anticipated crescendo — a line of superheroes pasted on the Mallatt's Pharmacy building's windows on Monroe Street. Everybody asks about the empty rear-facing car seat up front, usually occupied by baby Naomi, who's home sick today; after the kids get to school and make their safety pledges, they'll pin her picture to the Wish Well board and send deep breaths and floating hearts to her with their minds. Deep breathing is a frequent practice at the Playing Field, and this school is like one big exhale for Kruse.

Kruse is not on the bus today, but she rides twice a week to stay connected with parents she might not see otherwise. When she walked into her first child care job 13 years ago, she was struck by how dirty and gloomy it was. A former kindergarten teacher and curriculum designer, she'd never worked in early education. "The staff was really crabby, they didn't want to be there, and I saw a staff person put an 8-month-old in time out because he wanted to be held all the time," she says. Kruse started speaking out and taking over; hauling garbage, scrubbing floors, painting walls. Within two months, she was the director. Over the next two years, she turned over more than half the staff and began the process for city of Madison accreditation. But then something unfortunate happened: The solution became part of a new problem."Once they got that city accreditation and the five stars, and privately funded families noticed," says Kruse, "all of the low-income kids were displaced out of that center."

After six years in two different preschools, Kruse took a job at Dane County Parent Council (now called Reach Dane), the Early Head Start and Head Start grantee for Dane County, conducting professional development for 300 teachers countywide. In 2014, she went to work for the UW School of Human Ecology's Preschool Laboratory, a decades-old research project with a mission to develop and provide high-quality early education programming.

"I really saw the best. The best teachers, the best resources," she says. "What was really sad to me was that it was all the kids who had the best of everything anyway. There weren't any kids who were in generational poverty."

In 2014, Reach Dane approached Kruse with a $150,000 Early Head Start project grant to place 16 kids (ages zero to 3) experiencing homelessness at the Preschool Lab, where they flourished. But mid-school year, just before Christmas, Kruse learned that budget restructuring meant the Lab would expand its UW campus facility and close its Mineral Point Road doors in August 2015. Although the Lab offered her a position in the new site, she couldn't shake the idea that this was her opportunity to build an early child care center that combined Conscious Discipline (which she'd learned about during a 2011 training stint in an Oklahoma state pilot program to raise quality in centers serving low-income residents) with the evidence-based practices of the Preschool Lab, and also made it accessible to those who couldn't afford it — especially if she could keep the Head Start grant.

"We had like 21 days between when the Preschool Lab left and when the Playing Field had to open," says Kruse, because the grant required a specific start date. "I don't know how we did it, but we did it."

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Child care veteran Abbi Kruse founded the center, which emphasizes safety, connection and conflict management in its curriculum.

They did it with the help of the church, who is not officially affiliated but whose members couldn't help but notice the cool thing happening downstairs. They've provided all kinds of support, from generous rent terms (as low as $1 per month for the first four months) to organizing scholarship money and donating gift cards and supplies. The Preschool Lab also donated left-behind equipment, and Kruse secured grants and donations from Madison Community Foundation, the city of Madison, Trek Bicycles and the School of Human Ecology. A family specialist with Reach Dane works with local agencies such as the Road Home and Salvation Army to connect Kruse with potential students. Tuition also supports the center: Private-pay families pay monthly rates ranging from $1,040 to $1,700, depending on the age of the child.

This fall for the first time, in the interest of preserving continuity for the kids, the Playing Field is enrolling 4- and 5-year-olds, although they're not eligible for the Early Head Start funding. All the kids that turned 3 before July 31 lost their Early Head Start transportation funding and aged out of the Playing Field; for now, at least two are returning with the help of scholarship funds, cab and city bus service, and teachers volunteering to give rides. Because one of the Playing Field's core practices is to keep kids with the same teacher through the years, their fundraising efforts will now focus on this age group. It's not a perfect system, and Kruse is still figuring it out as she goes along — but the momentum is definitely behind her.

Morning ritual

When the bus finally rolls into the Playing Field just before 8:30 a.m., the kids rush in. All of the teachers and the rest of the waiting students come out of the classrooms to greet their friends. The school is decorated to look as homelike as possible — no bulletin boards allowed — with framed family photos scattered everywhere, curtains hung with care, and throw pillows (all sewn by church volunteers) tucked into plush couches and cozy rockers. The kids and teachers gather together in the hallway and begin clapping and singing along to the "Brain Smart Start" song, where they stretch, shake hands, high-five and hug before sharing three deep, quiet, slow breaths together.

"Who's gonna have a great day?" shouts Kruse, breaking the silence brought on by the breathing exercise. She grins as the kids huddle up, place their tiny hands in the center like forming a single, crackling firework and wait for her cue. "Ready?" she asks, and then, together — "Greaaaaaat day!" — they shoot their little arms into the sky before shuffling off to different classrooms, each a shiny little spark, gently settling.