

Birnbaum visits First Environments Early Learning Center

By Allison Ashley

NIEHS and NTP Director Linda Birnbaum, Ph.D., toured the First Environments Early Learning Center July 30. Executive director Beth Lake, science teacher Jane Allen, and parents Erin Hines and Sania Tong Argao led Birnbaum around the cheerful building and grounds, discussing the sustainable operations and creative use of resources. NIEHS and the daycare share a commitment to [children's health and wellbeing](http://www.niehs.nih.gov/health/assets/docs_f_o/niehsepa_childrens_environmental_health_and_disease_prevention_research_centers_508.pdf) (http://www.niehs.nih.gov/health/assets/docs_f_o/niehsepa_childrens_environmental_health_and_disease_prevention_research_centers_508.pdf) and [environmental sustainability](http://www.niehs.nih.gov/about/stewardship/) (<http://www.niehs.nih.gov/about/stewardship/>).

Located on the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) campus in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina, the nonprofit serves the families of federal employees and contractors at NIEHS and EPA.

Nature as teacher

Learning Center administrators believe that nature is an important teacher and they ensure students get plenty of instruction within the natural environment. Sustainability, outdoor safety, and stewardship of the soil, air, plants, and animals are just some the lessons children learn at the Center. "This is phenomenal. I didn't realize the [garden] space was so big," Birnbaum said.

The Seed to Table program imparts its lessons through a responsible hands-on-learning experience. The older children help plant the gardens and weed the beds, and the younger children water the plants using watering cans. Crops grown by the children are incorporated into school time meals. By exposing children to fresh tastes during the early developmental years, the center hopes to increase the chances that children will make healthier food choices as adults.

In an effort to further increase students' connection with nature, the outdoor environment is brought inside the classrooms in numerous ways, including large windows for natural lighting, small plants, and bug containers.

After touring the center, Birnbaum read students a short story, "Knuffle Bunny: A Cautionary Tale," written by Mo Willems. The adventurous tale is a 2005 Caldecott Honor book.

Birnbaum's visit ended with the children singing songs, followed by a healthy lunch fresh from the garden planted, cared for, and harvested by the children and staff.

The center enjoys a five-star rating and a full enrollment largely due to its ability to keep highly-skilled staff long term, its emphasis on parent involvement, and its environmentally-conscious curriculum.

(Allison Ashley is a program specialist in the NIEHS Office of Communications and Public Liaison.)



From left, Lake, Hines, Allen, and Birnbaum greet one another on Birnbaum's arrival (Photo courtesy of Michael Garske)



Birnbaum, left, listens intently, as science teacher Allen discusses creatures of the garden. (Photo courtesy of Michael Garske)



Fresh vegetables grown at FEELC made for a delicious lunch. (Photo courtesy of Michael Garske)



1/8

Meeting with teachers and children was a rare opportunity for Birnbaum, pictured left with middle teacher and program director, Marsha Daniels. (Photo courtesy of Michael Garske)



2/8

Beth Lake noted the hard work of the center's staff. (Photo courtesy of Michael Garske)



3/8

This cistern, decorated with the children's artwork, collects rain water for reuse in the gardens. (Photo courtesy of Michael Garske)



4/8

With organic food growing near play areas, children can acquire a taste for healthy snacks, such as these banana peppers. (Photo courtesy of Michael Garske)



5/8

Birnbaum called herself a mystery grandma, as she read out loud to the children during story time. (Photo courtesy of Michael Garske)



6/8

The children sang some of their favorite songs for Birnbaum, right, and parent Hines. (Photo courtesy of Michael Garske)



7/8

Music and puppetry teacher Pamela Alberda, standing, led the children in a musical chorus, while Birnbaum, center, and Hines listened in. (Photo courtesy of Michael Garske)



8/8

Students learn how the garden feeds people and wildlife, and how the greenery provides safe haven for a variety of critters. (Photo courtesy of Michael Garske)

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