

Children playing at Next Door, in Milwaukee, WI.



The Kids Next Door

Committed to building “stronger families through education,” Milwaukee-based Next Door gives inner-city children a head start by investing in their greatest asset: their minds.



Contributing to our community

“WE KNOW THE HUMAN BRAIN continues to grow until young adulthood,” says Dr. Tracey Sparrow, “but early childhood development is the most critical. Those first experiences set the course for the rest of a person’s life. As young brains develop networks and pathways, you want to help create connections that support growth, rather than inhibit it. And seeing the positive impact when you get those connections right is incredibly gratifying.”

Tracey is President of Next Door, an early childhood education organization that has been serving Milwaukee’s economically challenged North Side since 1969. Committed to helping families in poor urban neighbourhoods find equal opportunities for success, the not-for-profit

organization focuses on nurturing young minds to grow in positive directions. Its mission: To support the intellectual, physical, spiritual and emotional development of children so they become self-sufficient, contributing members of the community.

Next Door is responsible for delivering the Head Start program, created by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to provide early childhood education, health, nutrition and parent-involvement services to low-income children and their families. The federal program has two streams: Head Start, aimed at children aged 3 to 5, and Early Head Start, which starts before birth and supports children up to age 3.

\$1 million

BMO donated \$1 million to expanding Ryerson University's Tri-Mentoring Program, which helps equip students for success.

“The focus on ages 0 through 5 is really important,” Tracey explains, “because unless you get kids on the right path before first grade, it can be too late.” Many young people raised in poverty experience adversity and trauma at a young age, which can create unhealthy connections in developing brains. Next Door works to ensure that children are in supportive relationships and have the building blocks of a healthy life. “Positive experiences allow kids to develop their potential in the future,” says Tracey, who devoted the first part of her career to working with elementary and high school students before shifting her focus to what she sees as the crucial years of early childhood.

From its original location in Metcalfe Park, one of Milwaukee’s most disadvantaged neighbourhoods, Next Door has grown steadily over the past 47 years to meet the growing needs of an appreciative community. It is a success story built on

partnerships, as the organization’s teaching staff works with parents and other family members, as well as local schools, healthcare providers and university researchers focused on childhood development. Over the years, Next Door has extended its impact through multiple locations and a new network of nine childcare organizations across the community, providing support in everything from teacher training and classroom coaching to consulting on health and safety.

The Next Door team closely monitors children’s progress against key developmental benchmarks. Tracey notes that the latest data shows Head Start participants exceeding national norms for language comprehension, vocabulary, and use of conventional grammar. At the same time, there’s a strong emphasis at Next Door on social and emotional development, as children are shown how to channel their emotions in ways that help rather than impede

Next Door is a lead agency for Head Start, one of two streams in a U.S. early childcare program.





Chad Swalheim of BMO Harris Bank, with Dr. Tracey Sparrow, President of Next Door.



600,000 Students participated in 2016 in Talk With Our Kids About Money Day, an educational program created by the Canadian Foundation for Economic Education in partnership with BMO.

learning. To foster empathy, for instance, Next Door has a therapeutic dog named Maggie who helps children learn to display affection and talk about their feelings.

The success of this holistic approach has earned wide acclaim from community leaders, including Wisconsin’s governor. It’s also won a thumbs-up from Washington: in 2013, Next Door was designated as a lead agency for Head Start. This expanded scope of responsibility brought an immediate spike in enrolments, from about 300 children to more than 1,000. With the rapid growth in demand, there was an urgent need to invest in more staff and additional facilities – and that’s when BMO, already a Next Door partner, stepped forward to play an even larger role.

A strong partnership

“We knew that to gain the kind of impact we wanted to have as a Head Start lead agency,” Tracey recalls, “we had to use our expertise and leadership to reach more

children and families. And at a practical level, that meant we needed more space.”

Unable to afford a brand-new facility, Next Door located an existing building in north-central Milwaukee: a 103,000-square-foot former hospital that had been vacant for several years and could be economically renovated through philanthropy and financing. BMO Harris Bank arranged US\$3.9 million in loans – including US\$1.5 million under the federal government’s New Markets Tax Credit Program – to finance the acquisition and a three-year phased revitalization, which is nearing completion. The result is a state-of-the-art educational centre with 20 classrooms and enough space to accommodate more than 400 children, bringing the total served by Next Door to well over 2,000 children and their families.

“With BMO’s help, we’ve been able to expand and serve all the kids we want to support in a beautiful renovated building,” Tracey says. Consolidating services in the new facility has also made it far easier to maintain the consistent quality of care that’s so important to Next Door. For Tracey and her team, it’s been gratifying to see that the spirit of partnership and collaboration – so vital to their work in the community – also guides their work with BMO to finance Next Door’s vision. “No one can do everything alone,” she says. “We leverage the strength of our partners.”

That thought is echoed by Chad Swalheim of BMO Harris Bank, who specializes in commercial and real estate lending: “Next Door has been a wonderful organization to work with over the past eight years. They have outstanding leadership, both at the staff level and on the board of directors. Thanks to our collaboration, young people and their families have access to the facilities and programs they need and deserve.”

Looking out her office window as children come and go from the new building, Tracey is clear about the positive impact that Next Door continues to deliver after nearly half a century: “This is some of the most important work you can do for a community – because kids are our future.” ☺