As a good coat of paint, a good education depends on beginning
with a properly formed foundation. "I was always one of those
parents who felt no one can take care of my kids as well as I
can," said Tates Ward, who has two children in Heritage Community
Initiatives' early learning center, Heritage 4 Kids. Ward has a son in
Heritage's Pre-K Count program and a daughter in the Head Start pro-
gram. "Now my son is bringing home homework, and he wants to do it.
I'm amazed. I appreciate what they are doing with my kids."
That solid foundation begins with a simple, but crucially important
philosophy.
"I believe passionately that every child needs to learn at his or her
own speed, in his or her own way, and in a nurturing environment," said
Michele R. Atkins, president and CEO of Heritage Community
Initiatives.
That philosophy was sorely tested when Atkins first arrived at the
Braddock nonprofit nearly two years ago. She walked into a center
with walls of battle-grey and
carpentry and flooring that had
't been replaced in years. The
problems were more than a
cost of paint and new carpeting
could cover, however.
"Most early learning centers lose
money, but when I came here we were bleeding money," she
recalls. "Heritage was bankrupt.
We owed one vendor a million
dollars. We had new pages of
audit findings from the
Pennsylvania Department of
Education. Now we are out of
debt and we have no audit findings." The transformation looks as
remarkable as it sounds. Step
through the front doors of the center and you will be greeted
with smiles from staff, and brightly colored walls that comple-
ment the maritime theme of each classroom.
"The Hillman Foundation first gave us a grant for a planning
study which allowed us to think thoughtfully about what to do," Atkins
said. "Room size is critically important for an early learn-
ing center. The Hillman grant allowed us to reconfigure rooms for
best efficiency."
As a recent open house for the center, Atkins credits the
Heritage board and staff with doing amazing work in the past two years.
work they are matched, at times, by outside vendors.
"To accommodate our need to keep the Center open,
Massaro Corporation did the renovation on weekends and
evenings, and they finished the project on time and on budget," she
said.
There has also been support
from local foundations. The Grable
Foundation provided funding for a
literacy program and then a pro-
gram for first steps in math and
science. The Massy Charitable
Trusts provided funding for schol-
arships, as did Heritage Board
Chair Stanley Herman, PhD. In
addition, board member George
Hendelman, Esq., provided fund-
ing to construct a comfort room, where children who are having a
bad day or transition can receive a little one-on-one care.
"PNC Foundation made a commitment to match the Grable
Foundation's funding," said Atkins. "And we have an anonymous
individual who provided the remainder of the funding. The
 total
funding for this program is $100,000 per year for two years."
Mary Ellen Sullivan, a vice president with PNC, presented a
check for $50,000 to Atkins at the open house.
"I just can't say enough about the gem that is 4 Kids," said
Sullivan. "PNC is so proud to be a partner."
Community partners have also played an important part in
Heritage's success. Carlow University is at almost 60% of its stu-
dents to Heritage in September for Mercy Service Day,
where the students helped with filing, general cleanup, and,
yes, painting.
"I felt like we really accomplished something," said
Rachel Hill, a first-year student from Cleveland, Ohio. "I had
never painted before, so it was something new for me."
It was also a new experience for Hill to visit an area like
Braddock, where buildings with boarded up windows give testi-
mony to the depressed state the town has been in for decades.
"I thought it was amazing that they are trying to revitalize
this town," she said. "I was very exhausted when we were finished,
but I felt good. And it made me feel really great when Miles
[Loevy, the volunteer manager for Heritage] complimented us for
doing a really good job of painting. Everyone was very thank-
ful that we were there."
Atkins, a Carlow alumna herself, has appreciated the support
from her alma mater. Martina Ezeza, PhD, a Carlow professor
emerts, is a Heritage board member, as is Giant Eagle's Jackie
Dixon, who also is a trustee at Carlow. In addition, Heritage staff
members Becki Raherty, the director of development, Roy
Aguas, the director of programs, Amanda Gea, the development
assistant, and Deanna Dugan, the math and science coach, are all
Carlow alumni.
As it seeks to transform its community, Heritage focuses
on three primary areas: transportation for people looking to get to
work, job training, and education and other vital services; job training
that prepares unemployed or under-employed people to work in
sustainable jobs, and education. It's this last area where Atkins
has a special affinity.

Carlow student E. DeSantis painting

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