

Building Equity Through Family Empowerment And High-Quality Educational Options

The Carole Robertson Center for Learning engages families and creates high-quality educational options for young learners in historically disinvested communities.

In 1976, a group of families in Chicago's disinvested West Side neighborhoods banded together when their only after-school program closed. They founded a high-quality youth development organization with a vision to provide equitable opportunities for systemically marginalized children and families.

The youth participants in the program suggested naming the organization the Carole Robertson Center for Learning, to honor one of the four Black girls slain in the 1963 hate crime bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama.

Nearly 50 years later, the Center continues to uplift and empower children and families. It has grown from a single site serving a few dozen youth to one of the largest early childhood education and youth development organizations in Chicago, serving children from birth to age 17 across 27 Chicago communities. By expanding to serve the city's youngest learners, the Center became a leader in high-quality care at every stage of childhood.

"The research is very clear that the first five years of a child's life are formative," says Bela Moté, president and CEO. "When we invest in and give options for high-quality early childhood programs, there's a socioeconomic return on investment up to nine dollars for every one dollar invested."

Empowering Families

A core philosophy at the Carole Robertson Center is to create bidirectional relationships with families. "We do *with* families, not *to* families," says Moté. "It's about leveling the power dynamic and ensuring caregivers understand that they are their child's first teachers and most effective advocates."

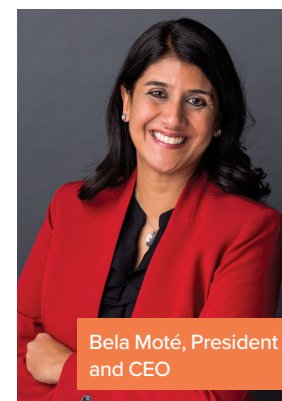
The Center reaches approximately 2,000 children from birth to 5 years old, offering multiple models to suit every family: a traditional, center-based early education setting; in-home programs run by provider-entrepreneurs; and home visiting services to support growing families during pregnancy and throughout the first three years of their child's life. Understanding that children's educational and social-emotional needs are not "one size fits all," the Center takes a more personalized approach by offering a variety of innovative, research-based programs.

Come kindergarten, the Center provides caregivers with resources to support their decisions on selecting the best-fit school for their child's continuing education—including tours of local elementary



schools and workshops on school selection. The Center's high-quality after-school and summer programs then support children and families through their elementary, middle, and high school years, reaching approximately 600 children ages 5 to 17.

"Family engagement is a crucial component of a child's educational success," says Moté. "Every family is assigned a Family Support Specialist who stays with them throughout the duration of the child's experience with us. Together, we build a road map for that child and ensure families have the right tools for success."



Bela Moté, President and CEO

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Over the last five years, the Center's service footprint has more than doubled in size—and its mission to educate, enrich, and empower children and families is more relevant than ever before.

"It's about building healthy ecosystems around our community's kids. Culture matters," says Moté, whose servant leadership has helped grow the Center's budget from \$10 million to \$40 million in her five-year tenure. Moté also helps lead the charge of educational policy change at the city, state, and national levels to champion a more equitable education system.

"We're creating a groundbreaking model for high-quality early childhood education and youth development in Chicago and beyond," Moté says. "We've come a long way, but we're not done yet."



CAROLE ROBERTSON CENTER
for Learning