

The logo for LISC (Local Initiatives Support Corporation) features the letters 'LISC' in a large, white, serif font with a decorative flourish underneath.

Twin Cities

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COMMUNITY TRANSFORMATIONS

Hopkins' Blake Road

Diversity and community

By Jay Walljasper



It's no secret that America's suburbs are changing. Long gone are the days of "The Brady Bunch" and "E.T." when everyone living there was white, middle-class, and spoke only English.

Fifty-six percent of poor people in the Twin Cities now live in the suburbs, according to a 2011 census analysis. Racial diversity not only characterizes Minneapolis and St. Paul, but also suburbs like Brooklyn Center and Brooklyn Park.

You can even see evidence of this change in the traditionally upscale suburbs near Lake Minnetonka. In Hopkins, for example the Harley Hopkins Family Center, run by the local school district and serving the western suburbs, now conducts special Somali and Latino early education classes and welcomes many East Indian, African-American, and lower-income families in other classes along with the middle-class white families you typically expect to find.

Somali and Latino families with children under five get advance preparation for elementary school, learn more about American culture, and receive advice on typical child-raising questions. Somali immigrant Nimo Ibrahim enrolled in the class in 2010, and now works at Harley Hopkins as a teacher's assistant and para-education assistant. "It was an eye-opening experience," she says about attending the Somali class as a parent. "I had not seen anything like it when I lived in St. Louis and Atlanta. It was like Wow!—to be part of a group of people from your own culture talking and learning about raising children in America."

The classes, like all those at the Family Center, begin with 20 minutes of child/parent interaction, with kids taking the lead in choosing activities. Parents then move to another classroom while children stay with early childhood educators to play, do art projects, hear stories, or begin reading lessons, depending on their age. Parents meanwhile discuss perennial issues such as sleep, nutrition, discipline, sibling rivalry, and communications with each another and parent educators, as well as learn about family resources available in the area.

"One of our main goals in all of our classes is that parents pay attention to their ways of parenting," explains Parent Educator Kathryn Moore. "It's the most important job in the world! And these classes are an opportunity for support in this important job."

Because many Somali families do not have access to a car, we partnered with the Blake Road Corridor Collaborative (BRCC) and Blue Cross/Blue Shield's Growing Up Healthy initiative to provide bus service to classes at the Family Center from apartment complexes in the Blake Road neighborhood that house many Somali families. The buses doubled participation in the classes, notes Christine Fehst, coordinator of the Early Childhood and Family Education programs for the Hopkins School District. "Many families would not be able to come here without the buses."

Hopkins' Blake Road is a clear example of the new face of suburbia. Just a few blocks north of the Edina city line, a 1950s-style shopping plaza reflects the rich diversity of ethnic communities that populate the area. It sports a halal meat market right next to a pawn shop. Around the corner is Sambusa King, specializing in spicy Somali meat pies, and down the street is Blake Grocery, which advertises "African American and Mexican Food" as well as the fact they accept food stamps and sell moneygrams. The blend of Somali, East Asian, Latino, African-American, and white families, all living within this small section of Hopkins, recalibrates stereotypical images of the West suburbs.

It's also place where transportation and access is a significant challenge. The community celebrated a victory in 2009 when sidewalks were installed along Blake Road. "Before that there were only beaten paths where kids tried to ride bikes and parents push strollers," Ann Beuch, community coordinator for the BRCC, explains. But transportation remains a challenge for the area, according to a survey BRCC did with the University of Minnesota's Center for Urban and Regional Affairs. Many residents rely on public transportation but existing service is not fully meeting residents' needs, she notes.



Blake Road resident enjoying the area's restored park

The Blake Road Corridor Collaborative—which includes the city of Hopkins, the police department, school district, recreation services, Hennepin County, a local food shelf, a basketball academy, a Lutheran church, several West Metro social service agencies, and Twin Cities LISC—spearheads programs to improve life in the area. Beuch notes that residents have initiated many of the Collaborative's projects such as a community garden, a fitness challenge, after-school activities, and a tutoring program for elementary school children.

LISC aids BRCC's work in Hopkins—along with projects in North Minneapolis, St. Paul's East Side, the Central Corridor and South Minneapolis—through its Building Sustainable Communities Program. The Twin Cities is one of 30 areas nationally where LISC supports communities working in collaboration toward transformative change that helps people and places prosper.

LISC has invested \$284,000 in the Blake Road Corridor area.

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