

# Brattleboro Reformer

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## Brattleboro's Winston Prouty welcomes public to new campus

**Gala tonight at 5:30 p.m.**

By Chris Mays



A new sign after the name change to Winston Prouty Center for Child and Family Development.  
(Chris Mays — Reformer)

**BRATTLEBORO** — The Winston Prouty Center for Child Development will be changing its name, to better reflect its vision.

It will become the Winston Prouty Center for Child and Family Development.

"It has always been part of what we do. You can't separate children

from their families," said Chloe Learey, executive director of the center.

One sign has already been created for the campus. Another will eventually go up on Maple Street.

The new name will be formally announced at a gala on Thursday, Oct. 27, to celebrate the grand opening of the center at a new site, the former Austine School for the Deaf campus. The event starts at 5:30 p.m.

State Sen. Becca Balint, D-Windham, Brattleboro Town Manager Peter Elwell and Judie Jerald of Save the Children will speak. Food will be provided by VT Dinners, a group that uses kitchen space at Winston Prouty, and there will be a cash bar.

Winston Prouty moved from a location across from Living Memorial Park just up the road in July. Renovations started in April. The new address is 209 Austine Drive in Brattleboro.

"We needed to expand mostly due to the community-based services we provide," Learey said, referring to programming that focuses on things like housing and jobs.

A developer recommended Winston Prouty look into space at the Austine School while construction took place. The campus was for sale, and at \$2.75 million it was only slightly higher than the estimate for an addition to the former facility. The Austine School had an early learning program at the site before closing its doors, said Learey.

Now operating there, Winston Prouty is joined by groups and organizations like itself. And the center welcomes others to come on board.

The ultimate goal, Learey said, is to sell off parts of the campus and have no mortgage.

"We took the leap and rescued this community resource that was bankrupt on the hill. All we need right now is to occupy this floor of the building," she said, referring to the Vermont Hall.

Altogether, the campus takes up 184 acres. Several rooms in the buildings on the property are already taken up.

Winston Prouty spokesman Martin Cohn said the Austine School did "fantastic work" and kept the buildings in "really great shape." The school went bankrupt after deaf and hard-of-hearing students were given the opportunity to become part of the mainstream school system.

"The need for a specialized center went away," Cohn said. "Basically, this is a rebirth of a property with a mission that will take you into the next frontier of child and family development."

He pointed out the potential for the lower level of the Vermont Hall, currently vacant except for one room being used by a band as rehearsal space. Formerly home to Hilltop Montessori School, the space was divided into classrooms.

The original mission at Winston Prouty was to take care of children with special needs. The school was named after Winston Prouty, the United States senator from Vermont who crafted legislation for special needs education in 1968.

The center is now open to all children. It's also trying to help adults learn skills about child rearing.

The need is clear.

"We have 150 plus kids in custody in Windham County," Learey said. "If that many kids can't live with their parents or families, it's not because the parents want to be bad parents. They might not know how to do something or get resources."

"Parent education" is not her favorite phrase for the new programming.

"It's more like, 'Let's help you find out what you know about your kid and what you don't know about your kid,'" Learey said. "One of our nurses says, 'When a kid is born, a parent is born.'"

The opioid crisis is blamed for the current child-custody crisis, but Learey said other cases exist. For instance, a parent may not be familiar with proper methods of caring for a child who cannot stop crying. They might shake a baby, causing head injury.

Learey's group wants to help parents be "competent and confident."

"We're not doing it alone," she said, noting the participation of Health Care and Rehabilitation Services, the Department of Health, and the local obstetrics and gynecology office. "It takes a lot of providers to support a family. We can't have expertise in everything."

Another vision of Learey's involves bringing parents together.

"Kids learn really well from kids. Parents can do the same thing," she said. "Peer support is one of the best models for lots of different issues and I think it's going to be the same for parenting."

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