



From Home Economics to Human Ecology: A One-Hundred Year History at the University of Wisconsin-Madison



Dorothy Roberts Nursery School and Pre-School Laboratory

Begun in 1926 in response to a request from neighborhood mothers, the Dorothy Roberts Nursery School has moved numerous times throughout its existence. It spent a year in the basement of Luther Memorial Church before moving into a porch added on to the [Practice Cottage](#). When the [Home Management House](#) was built in 1941, the nursery school took over the entire Practice Cottage. After a few years in a temporary building and in an addition built onto the Home Economics Building during the 1950s, the Pre-School Laboratory finally got its own building in 1957.



Playground of the Dorothy Roberts Nursery School when it was located in the Practice Cottage, c. 1930

The nursery school was initially cooperative, and mothers (and sometimes fathers) of the children were required to volunteer on a regular basis. In 1937, the fee was 50 cents per day per child, or 25 cents on days when a child's parent assisted. Soon after being taken over by the Home Economics Department, it began to be used for educational purposes. Students in [Abby Marlatt's](#) humanics course visited the nursery school regularly; dietetics students helped to prepare the children's meals and then watched them eat; students in [Helen Cleveland Dawe's](#) childhood development classes observed the children playing from behind screens and wrote reports on what they learned; and students in nursing, education, psychology, and occupational therapy also paid visits.

After the move in 1927 to the Practice Cottage, the number of children that could be accommodated dropped to five boys and five girls, but as the nursery school gained more space, additional spots were opened. In the early 1940s, the nursery school expanded to both a morning and an afternoon program; previously children had come only in the mornings. The reputation of the school for quality child care made it very popular among neighborhood parents, especially faculty members. By 1948 there were spots for 32 children. The waiting list for positions often included more than one hundred children, and some parents placed a child on the waiting list even before the child was born.



Interior of current Pre-School Laboratory

In later years, under the directorship of [Joseph Lawton](#) and [Betty Black](#), the research function of the nursery school, by then renamed the Pre-School Laboratory, expanded, while the tradition of excellent child care remained strong. In 2000 a second site was opened; the Bethany Pre-School Center enrolls infants as well as toddlers.