

Schulze Family Foundation grants \$750,000 to Bonita Springs YMCA for on-site early education center

[Thaddeus Mast](#), Naples Daily News Published 7:00 a.m. ET Dec. 25, 2018

(Below Photo: Srijita Chattopadhyay/Naples Daily News)



A \$750,000 grant pushed the Bonita Springs YMCA over \$2.1 million raised to build an on-site early education center.

The Richard M. Schulze Family Foundation donated \$750,000 to the SKY Family YMCA in Bonita Springs as the center works to expand into pre-K care.

“We are strong proponents of early education, and the YMCA align with our values,” said Mary Beth Geier, Florida

director of the Schulze Family Foundation. “It seems like a perfect fit for the ‘Y’ and the community.”

The YMCA needs \$2.5 million to finish the new facility. It aims to raise another \$200,000 as a stretch goal for an endowment.

Sunshine Education Academy would accept children between 6 weeks and 5 years old.

The YMCA is close to its fundraising figure, said Michelle Butler, chief development officer. She expects architectural design work to begin in January and have shovels in the dirt by late spring.

The facility is meant as an alternative to day care, Butler said.

“I think our facility offers a lot of things a lot of other centers don’t offer,” she said. “We have a state-of-the-art curriculum, a beautiful facility with natural wood furnishings and brand-new toys. We want to prepare children for kindergarten.”



Left: Children enrolled in the YMCA after school program in Bonita Springs play the sharks and lifeguard game while counselor, Brooke Horgan watches over them in the background at the gym on Wednesday, Dec. 19, 2018. (Photo: Srijita Chattopadhyay/Naples Daily News)

The facility will be in a brand-new building on the YMCA property off Terry Street east of Interstate 75. The southernmost parking lot will be removed as the building's footprint.

"There will still be plenty of parking on site,"

Butler said.

A toddler playground is planned to accompany the building. The current YMCA facilities also will be open to the young children, Butler said.

The organization raised more than \$850,000 before the public announcement of the large donation.

"We're excited," Butler said, "We've been partnered (with the Schulze Foundation) for years doing after-school programs."



Richard M. Schulze
(Photo: Submitted)

After-school programs offer a place for elementary and middle school students to hang out after the school day ends.

"We do a lot of wellness programs with sports and activities to get their bodies moving," said Ivan Torres, program director. "We have a homework time."



Left: Julian Mejia, 7, gets pulled under the parachute by a shark while Dylan Wright, 7, tries to save him as they play the shark and lifeguard game during Bonita Springs YMCA after school program on Wednesday, Dec. 19, 2018. (Photo: Srijita Chattopadhyay/Naples Daily News)

The program keeps students until 6 p.m., ensuring children have a place to stay until parents get off work. SKY Family YMCA has similar young childhood programs at five other facilities in the area.

Scholarships from organizations like Schulze Family Foundation let lower-income families use the service.

That same model will transfer to the younger Sunshine Education Academy, Butler said.

"The YMCA scholarship model will offer financial assistance if needed," she said.

The government offers financial assistance but doesn't encompass everyone in need of low-cost daycare service, Butler said.

The Schulze Family Foundation is putting faith in the YMCA's model with the large \$750,000 donation, Geier said.

“(The grant) is on the larger side for us,” she said. “We typically don't support capital campaigns, but when there is a significant need or a worthwhile cause, we're willing to do that.”

Right: Josie Robinson, 7, plays the shark and lifeguard game during the Bonita Springs YMCA after school program on Wednesday, Dec, 19, 2018. (Photo: Srijita Chattopadhyay/Naples Daily News)



The Foundation also supports the Greater Naples YMCA, the Harry Chapin Food Bank and more than 100 other organizations. Founder Richard Schulze created the Best Buy electronics store retailer.

“The Foundation is an organization supporting working- and middle-class families in areas around Minnesota and Florida in health care, human services and education that benefit the community,” Geier said.

Schulze was raised and started Best Buy in Minnesota before moving to Southwest Florida, which is why the organization splits its resources between the two states.