



RAUL RUBIERA / Miami Herald Staff

LETTER PERFECT: Three-year-old Omayra Almaraz matches cards with letters imprinted on the carpet at Le Jardin in Homestead.

Le Jardin expands kids' worlds

By **JON O'NEILL**
Herald Staff Writer

Le Jardin provides a safe haven for kids who have nowhere else to go during the day.

The Homestead school, part of the county's Head Start program since 1985, caters to preschool youngsters from low-income families and tries to get them ready for the leap into kindergarten.

"It makes the transition into public school easier for them," said Olga Bzdyk, executive director of Le Jardin. "If it weren't for this program, many of these kids would be out on the street because their parents are all working."

About 180 children, ages three to five, are enrolled.

Le Jardin boasts the highest attendance rates among Head Start programs in Dade, with nearly 98 percent of the kids showing up every day, said Beatriz Rivera-Galego, a family service

School tends them as parents work

worker at Le Jardin. Twenty percent of the students are children of migrant workers.

The high attendance is attributed to parental involvement.

"Although nearly 97 percent of our parents are working all day, we still have a lot of volunteers," Rivera-Galego said. "Those working also want a safe place to leave their children."

"This is not a day-care center," she said. "We go beyond just watching the kids."

Monday, Ami Passmore, 4, sang *The Alphabet Song* and spelled her name in the air. Hypolito Hernandez sported a blue sticker on his forehead, showing that he had been extra good that day.

Arkina Dawson, 5, who will attend kindergarten next year, talked about a recent class trip to

the Museum of Science.

"We got to see snakes," she said. "And we got to see lots of stars, too."

Kids attend the school from 7:30 a.m. until 5 p.m. weekdays. The staff keeps them busy with art, drawing and music. The students also are taught health and nutrition. They eat vegetables during one of their three daily meals. Monday, collard greens — not a favorite among most kids — were on the lunch menu.

Because the day is so long, part of the afternoon is set aside for a nap. The kids bed down on little cots and snooze while the staff relaxes and enjoys the quiet. When the kids get up, the center can get fairly busy.

Bzdyk feels the program is spe-

cial because it spans several cultures. Kids are taught in English, Spanish and Creole. Night meetings with parents also are in the three languages.

Le Jardin offers social services for the parents, from evening English lessons and literacy classes to help with job referrals. Medical and dental care is provided for the children through the Community Health Institute.

The program also helps parents and children overcome language barriers, one of the biggest problems many families face, Bzdyk said.

From September through May, Le Jardin is funded by Dade's Community Action Agency. During the summer, the United Way pays for the center, which occupies three buildings in Homestead and Florida City. Eligibility for the program is based on family size and income.