Kevin McCarville had it all — a stable career, a solid salary and an inspiring group of co-workers and employees.

As the longtime principal of Regis High School in Cedar Rapids, Mr. McCarville found himself surrounded by all the working conditions he’d envisioned while working his way up through the education system.

Yet, in addition to all he possessed, he held on to one more thing: A dream that he shared with his wife, Rebecca.

“We wanted to be in business for ourselves,” Mr. McCarville said.

So, the established educator walked away from his principal’s position and entered the unknown.

“My last day was June 30, 1993, when I came home with no job, and we sat at the kitchen table and founded our business right then and there,” he said.

Since that day, the couple has taken its original organization, EduCare, to a place of success previously unimagined.

“(Starting our own company) was just such a different experience from being a principal,” Mr. McCarville said. “I was used to producing results quickly, and here I was in this new (role) with a business plan that I thought people were going to just absolutely jump on, and instead, we got turned down by the first three banks we (presented it to.) In fact, there were a couple of banks that didn’t even call us back to tell us they weren’t interested.”

Eventually, one banker expressed excitement about the concept of an independently-owned learning center, and EduCare sprang into being in Iowa City in September 1993.

The learning center

EduCare started with a simple goal — to improve students’ successes.

To do this, Ms. McCarville said, several services had to be offered at the learning center.

“What we do is offer programs for kindergarteners through 12th graders,” she said.

Students can come in after school and on weekends to get the extra help they need. Services start with an assessment to determine the students’ needs and skill levels. Then the students are set up with individualized learning programs.

The learning center, which is serving anywhere from 50 to 100 kids at any one point throughout the year, also offers ACT and SAT preparation classes, as well as study skill classes to help students become better organized.

Additionally, the learning center provides homework support, the need for...
which increases as the year progresses, particularly in math and sciences, the McCarvilles said.

EduCare started nearly 20 years ago with just one student and one tutor.

“For me, the emotions (associated with opening the learning center) were a mixture of confidence and trepidation,” Mr. McCarville said. “I put on a brave face every day, but I didn’t realize how hard it really would be to start from scratch. I think I underestimated how difficult that would be.”

By choosing to operate independently instead of as a franchise, the McCarvilles found themselves with no set guidelines for moving forward.

“We had no operation manuals, no corporate instructions as to how to start up and get to a solid place,” Mr. McCarville said. “But we have an independent streak in us by nature, and half of the fun of growing the business has been designing our own teaching programs and coming up with a model that was uniquely our own.”

The two Company of Northern Iowa graduates put their education degrees to good use and created an operating manual for their workers that focuses on individualized attention.

“Every single student we work with, we try to give (him or her) a special blend of caring attention and individualized support,” Mr. McCarville said. “I think that’s distinctive to our company.”

Once the couple perfected this business approach, they found an additional avenue to success.

**Breaking new ground**

Mr. McCarville was walking through the halls of a local school to talk with one of his student’s regular teachers when he strolled by a scene that struck him with a new idea.

“There was a Title I teacher with a lot of her students, and I thought, ‘We could do that for these schools,’” he said. “But the notion of a school contracting with an outside agency was completely unheard of at the time.”

He set about calling every single school within a 20-mile radius, asking if they would be interested in contracting out their Title I teaching services.

“About 90 percent of what we heard back was ‘no,’” Mr. McCarville said. But three institutions said yes, which opened the door for EduCare.

“It was one of those ideas that really helped us turn a corner,” Mr. McCarville said.

One of the institutions that agreed to contract with EduCare was Tanager Place. From that relationship grew trust, and eventually Tanager Place asked the McCarvilles to take over the management and operation of the onsite special education school.

“That was absolutely huge,” Ms. McCarville said.

Since then, EduCare has continued to offer customized educational programs throughout the state, and the company now contracts with schools and institutions statewide. This requires 17 full-time employees and 66 part-time workers at nine various locations across Iowa.

Additionally, EduCare received a nod from the Iowa Department of Education as one of the approved providers of supplemental education services under No Child Left Behind. Schools that do not make adequate yearly progress become eligible for tutorial support from companies like EduCare. As of now, EduCare contracts out these tutorial services with five area schools, and eight new schools will start receiving EduCare’s services later this year.

“It’s been interesting to see other aspects of our company grow to play such large roles,” Ms. McCarville said. “Our learning center is playing a smaller role than we originally thought, but (the learning center) is still the foundation of our company.”

Still, the McCarvilles found yet another opportunity to expand their offerings.

**Creating software**

Five years ago, the McCarvilles opted to use their experience with special education as a means to revolutionizing it.

“One of the things that became obvious while working with special education is the huge amount of time teachers in the classroom are having to devote to paper/pencil recording for these kids,” Mr. McCarville said. “In some cases, the teachers were spending more time with the documentation than they were the kids, simply because the documentation does have to be done.”

So the McCarvilles hired a full-time employee dedicated to improving the documentation process, and EduCare partnered with a local programming company, Fast Tech and then Communications Engineering Co., to create documentation software for teachers that reduced the time spent charting the students’ progress and allowed the instructors more classroom time while still having an improved charting system.

“We were able, in some cases, to cut 90 percent of the old paper-pencil time from their responsibilities,” Mr. McCarville said.

The software, which is called Kew Up!, originally was offered as a download on a laptop or computer, and it has since generated into a Web version.

“That was yet another big step for our company,” Ms. McCarville said.

With the special education and Title I roles of the company taking up more of EduCare’s resources, the McCarvilles sold their Iowa City location and instead focused on their Cedar Rapids facility, in addition to dedicating to grow and improve services at the schools where its services are contracted.

“The dream just continued to grow,” Ms. McCarville said. “We like it that way.” CBJ