Enhancing Program Quality

Early Learning Directors Share Their Wisdom
Enhancing Program Quality

At Leading for Children, we know that early childhood educators are always finding new and creative ways to nurture and inspire children — our next generation of critical thinkers and leaders. In March of 2017 we introduced The Leading for Children Innovative Ideas Award as an opportunity to recognize great ideas being implemented by early learning program directors. These ideas support continuous quality improvement, and for this reason we want to share them with you.

We received many outstanding ideas from directors around the country. We selected ideas for awards and hope you’ll feel inspired to try or adapt them or perhaps feel validated when something you read reflects practices you’re using successfully in your program.

Congratulations to the Award Winners:

**FIRST PRIZE** was awarded to Kathy Kourapis, Childcare Director of the Riverview High School Cyesis Teen Parent Program in Sarasota, Florida.

**SECOND PRIZE** was awarded to Kim Mulfinger, President and Executive Director of St. Vincent Center for Children and Families in Evansville, Indiana.

Honorable Mentions Were Awarded to:

1. Faye Dismuke, Ouachita Child Enrichment ABC
2. Debbie Mays, Bright Beginnings
3. Maria Paulino, Busy Bees Preschool Center
4. Dawn Brown, Christ the King Early Education Center
5. Dawn Montecalvo, Guadalupe Center
6. Melissa Russell, The Hundred Acres School
7. Julie Hume, Kind Hearts Day Care
8. Jeana Courson, La Petite Academy #7193
9. Jamie Hartley, Methodist Day School
10. Victoria Damjanovic, University of South Florida Preschool for Creative Learning

Special Thanks to Our Judges Who Helped Us with Selection:

- Jane Fleming, Ph.D., Reading Specialist and Co-Founder of KIDS LIKE US
- Luis Hernandez, Training & Technical Assistance Services (T/TAS) Early Childhood Education Specialist
- Nichole Parks, Quality Rating Improvement System Coordinator, Arkansas State University Childhood Services
- Holly Seplocha, Ed.D., Professor in the Early Childhood concentration, William Paterson University
- Beverly Smith, Assistant Head of School, West Side Montessori School
- Valora Washington, Ph.D., CEO of the Council for Professional Recognition

We look forward to hearing from you when we introduce the 2018 campaign. Watch for it on our website — www.leadingforchildren.org.

Warm regards,

Judy Jablon,
Executive Director
Leading for Children
Riverview High School Cyesis Teen Parent Childcare Program — Sarasota, Florida
Katherine Kourapis, Childcare Director

The Cyesis Program, a Head Start and Early Head Start childcare center connected to Riverview High School, provides services for teen parents who attend high schools in Sarasota County. The center has primarily very young infants and toddlers who, of course, need lots of loving care and attention. The initiative of having a volunteer program began with one individual. Over time, the Lullaby League evolved into a formal program with effective recruitment, screening and training that supports over 60 volunteers each week and affects approximately 60 babies, toddlers and preschoolers. The support of loving volunteers has had a huge influence on the overall feeling of warmth, affection, and support of literacy throughout the program for the children, their teen parents, and all the volunteers involved.

Making a Difference

The Lullaby League has had a tremendous impact on everyone involved including the children, the teens, the larger community and the volunteers themselves. Most volunteers come from the nearby retirement communities. Retirees have the time and energy to provide loving care to the children at the center. With so many loving adults on hand, the babies don’t have to wait to receive responsive care. Additionally, the volunteers bring a wealth of talent and resources into the classroom including; healthy cooking activities, special story times, guitar music for sing-a-longs and much more. Outside of the classrooms, volunteers have taken the children’s teen parents under their wings by mentoring them and providing support. Many of the volunteers are well connected in the larger community. Through active outreach they have developed widespread community support of the program and have solicited many generous donations to the center.

Make it Yours

- Train candidates through an orientation program providing an overview of the program and explanation of the requirements and responsibilities of volunteers.
- Require a minimum hourly commitment per week. Katherine’s (director) program asked for two hours.
- Pair each volunteer with a specific classroom and teacher. Katherine’s center loops teachers and volunteers with children whenever possible to enhance attachment relationships through their time at the center (typically from infancy until preschool age).

• Train candidates through an orientation program providing an overview of the program and explanation of the requirements and responsibilities of volunteers.
• Require a minimum hourly commitment per week. Katherine’s (director) program asked for two hours.
• Pair each volunteer with a specific classroom and teacher. Katherine’s center loops teachers and volunteers with children whenever possible to enhance attachment relationships through their time at the center (typically from infancy until preschool age).

• Begin by recruiting volunteers from a variety of community programs, such as Local Senior Community Centers, www.volunteermatch.org (includes a free service option) as well as collaborating with other organizations who use volunteers such as hospitals.
• Screen and interview each candidate before bringing them onboard. In this case, the program director was able to use the school district system to conduct background checks on all candidates.
• Develop systems to track volunteer hours for reporting and grant writing.
• Provide volunteers with supervision and opportunities to give feedback about their experiences.

Overcoming Obstacles
Obstacles Katherine faced in the creation of the Lullaby League included:

1. Orientation and Training — Initially, training was done individually as each new volunteer was recruited and trained. This became a burden on the director’s time, as she has many other responsibilities. As the program grew, the director organized an orientation program that was held every two weeks.

2. Tracking Volunteer Hours — With so many volunteers coming on and off-site throughout the day, a system to track hours was vital. Fortunately, because this program is attached to a high school, the school district provided use of their online tracking system. Volunteers have a dedicated computer to use for signing in and out. Tracking these hours is essential to Head Start learning standards. This data has also helped with grant writing.

3. Security — Each nursery has keycard entry and many volunteers needed the ability to go in and out easily. Security was maintained by adding a number of volunteer key cards that each volunteer can borrow to sign in and out.

4. Supervision — On occasion, there can be challenging situations with volunteers. As this occurs, it is necessary to engage in reflective supervision. This includes having meetings to discuss the issues while attempting to come to a resolution. Most often issues were resolved successfully by providing a specific strategy for improvement. If that did not work, the volunteer was invited to try another volunteer project that might be better suited for the individual.

“...The teens and their children are provided with surrogate grandparents who are well trained and screened. All teens need to feel connected and loved. This is especially true for the teen parent. Life is difficult for some of our students. We try to create a safe, loving environment where they can learn to parent while attending school. The Lullaby League plays an invaluable role in the lives of our teens and their babies. The presence of our wonderful volunteers enriches our program in immeasurable ways.”

— Countney Rees, Teacher

THE LULLABY LEAGUE VOLUNTEER PROGRAM aligns with the Leading for Children mission by involving everyone in the education of young children. The children receive loving and responsive care, the parents are mentored, the volunteers and the larger community are supported and supportive. A system of support is built that serves the community. Everyone is connected and communicating through a dynamic and systematic volunteer program that ultimately keeps both the children and adults they serve in the forefront of the work.
The impact of the new compensation and performance management system was substantial after only several months of implementation. Faculty turnover decreased, the supply of highly-qualified, credentialed teacher applicants dramatically increased, and for the first time in over five years all positions were filled. As information started to spread throughout the local early childhood community, other organizations began to work to address faculty compensation in their agencies. In this way, St. Vincent’s program was a catalyst for change in addressing compensation as a way to attract, retain, recognize and professionalize the early childhood workforce.

**Making a Difference**

The impact of the new compensation and performance management system was substantial after only several months of implementation. Faculty turnover decreased, the supply of highly-qualified, credentialed teacher applicants dramatically increased, and for the first time in over five years all positions were filled. As information started to spread throughout the local early childhood community, other organizations began to work to address faculty compensation in their agencies. In this way, St. Vincent’s program was a catalyst for change in addressing compensation as a way to attract, retain, recognize and professionalize the early childhood workforce.

**Make it Yours**

- Conduct research about the competitive landscape. What do compensation structures look like at other agencies in your local community and beyond?
- Review the mission and values of your organization and use them as guidance for developing a new compensation structure.
- Gather data and information to help inform and develop your organization’s philosophy of compensation based on paying staff competitive wages and having job performance expectations at the same level.
- Invest in developing a performance evaluation system which includes:
  - revision of job descriptions for clarity, consistency, and best practice
  - Alignment of each staff member to appropriate placement in the compensation range based on educational level requirements and performance
  - Development plans to address any lags in education or performance
• Creation of an on-going performance evaluation system and tools for all staff, which include educational and professional development objectives for each staff member

**Overcoming Obstacles**

St. Vincent faced one major obstacle in revising its compensation structure – financial resources. Changing the compensation structure could only happen with additional resources. The blending of funding streams from state subsidies, private pay tuition, United Way, grants and fundraising appeals was not enough. St. Vincent needed an additional major investment.

St. Vincent’s leadership built a case for financial support by conducting research and gathering quantitative and qualitative data. The agency used this information to build its case for an additional major investment from its sponsor, the Daughters of Charity. The case articulated how the organization’s values directly linked to compensation. The Daughters of Charity believed, as St. Vincent did, that when staff members felt valued and supported and were treated fairly, program morale and productivity would increase, which would lead to improved classroom practices and enhanced child outcomes. After discussions and deliberation, the Daughters of Charity decided to make an additional investment in St. Vincent Center for Children and Families, which has helped the organization attract and retain quality personnel and fulfill its mission of providing the highest quality early education programming.

“The impact this structural work has had on our organization, our staff, and most importantly, the children we care for is phenomenal. I am honored to be part of an agency that values the staff and provides tangible proof of that appreciation. I am so excited to share our processes in order to reshape the future community, assist other organizations in achieving similar results, and to work toward a new, professionalized field of early childhood education.”

— Krista Wedding, MBA, PHR Director of Business Operations

Leading for Children advocates that high program quality and exemplary child outcomes happen in environments where educators thrive. The compensation structure project aligns with the Leading for Children mission because it exemplifies the type of systemic change needed to enhance program quality. Fair compensation is a social justice issue that affects staff, families and the overall quality of educational opportunities for children. The director’s systematic approach models Optimistic Leadership as she strategized how to bring her vision to fruition.
Family Night: Deepening Families’ Understanding of Play

Ouachita Child Enrichment Center — Camden, Arkansas

Faye Dismuke, Education Coordinator

Education Coordinator Faye Dismuke had conducted surveys and gathered feedback from parent-teacher conferences that revealed that parents did not understand how children learn through play. Faye wanted the parents to learn what she knew about their children and the value of play so she created a family night activity that focused on deepening families’ understanding of children’s learning in centers.

Making a Difference

The experience of holding a family night that focused on helping parents to understand how their children learn through play at centers was very impactful for everyone. Giving parents an opportunity to observe, record and later reflect on their children’s play experiences at centers within the school opened doors for parents to think of themselves as teachers for their children at home. The experience of sharing what they learned about their children during discussions with teachers at the family night created a connection and real partnership between parents and staff that was supportive of the children’s learning. Teacher-family relationships were forged. Through this family night activity, authentic observations both at home and at school were used to develop rich and meaningful assessments of children and their development throughout the year. Finally, Parent-Teacher conferences became more productive as parents came in with their own observation notes and could speak with the teachers in a common language about their children’s growth and learning.

Make it Yours

- Publicize the event in newsletter, through email and other school communication tools.
- On the night of the event:
  - Welcome families to the center and explain the purpose and steps to the evening:
    1) play with your child at centers
    2) step aside and observe and record child at play
    3) engage in a discussion about their observations
  - Provide a posted written explanation of the learning happening at each center based on developmental guidelines as well as examples of how to observe and record for parents to review.

- Find a night (or two) on the calendar to schedule a family night event.
- Work with staff to design an activity that allows parents to play alongside their children, observe and record how they engage in play-based learning at a center.
— Have teachers available during the play and observation periods to answer questions and assist parents as they engage in the observation process.
— For step 3, recruit non-family volunteers to care for the children when the parents and teachers have a discussion.

- Engage parents in the assessment process by requesting observations of their children at home and having regular conversation and contact with parents about what children are learning through play at school and home.

**Overcoming Obstacles**

Obstacles Faye faced in the creation of a family night included:

1. **Travel Distance** — The center serves families from several adjoining counties. For many it was necessary to travel more than 15 miles for the family night. They assessed when was the most convenient time for families to attend and were able to find a convenient time for all.

2. **Transportation** — Some families did not have a means of transportation to attend. In each individual case where transportation was an obstacle, the center provided transportation for them to attend.

3. **Space** — Attendance was good, but that meant the space was very crowded and it was necessary for some families to wait for time to play in the classroom. There is a plan to schedule two evenings for this event and have half of the school attend each night so everyone has time and space to play and observe.

4. **Support Staff** — It was necessary for teachers to be in the classroom talking and observing with parents which meant that they would need other individuals to help with childcare for the last portion of the night as well as food preparation. They accomplished this by calling on other non-family volunteers who assist at the school.

“The knowledge was an enlightenment that opened a clear pathway of understanding with the parents and helped to patch a void in the bridge between home and school. After, I received feedback from the parents in my class including letters about play at home. The letters stated how they were able to ask their children specific questions about their day and receive more information from them. This experience helped me to connect with the parents better and it gave them a better understanding of their child's school experience.” — Ashley Beard, Teacher

**THE FAMILY NIGHT EVENT'S EFFECT OF DEEPENING FAMILIES' UNDERSTANDING OF PLAY**

During centers at school aligns with the Leading for Children mission because it creates connections between home and school and builds and strengthens relationships. Relationships are the foundation for learning. These events put children and families at the forefront of the work. Parents are valued as educators along with teachers, thereby forming learning partnerships that build authentic bridges between home and school.
Family Field Trips

Bright Beginnings Preschool — Siloam Springs, Arkansas
Debbie Mays, Director

Director Debbie Mays noted that parents were reluctant or unable to take time away from work to spend time in the classroom. Attendance at planned workshops was minimal. To increase parent engagement, Debbie initiated Bright Beginning’s Family Field Trip program. This program engages the entire family (parents, siblings, grandparents and more) outside of the regular school day, thereby igniting more enthusiasm than previous efforts.

Making a Difference

Debbie worked hard to change her own thinking about what it means to create meaningful programming to deepen family engagement at Bright Beginnings. She shifted her thinking beyond the school’s walls and regular hours to give each child’s entire family opportunities to learn, grow and have “Powerful Interactions” together through family field trips. After the trips began, Debbie could tell that this new strategy was having an impact as she observed families on field trips laughing and walking together hand-in-hand, enjoying each other and learning together. It was especially meaningful to give everyone opportunities to experience the curriculum when trips included ideas children were studying in their classrooms. Debbie noticed that on the days following family field trips, families began lingering a little longer at drop-off or pick-up to share stories and chat with one another. Knowing that relationships are the foundation for learning at Bright Beginnings, Debbie felt family field trips and the connections they were forging were a successful way of strengthening and building her overall school community.

Make it Yours

• Brainstorm ideas in your community that would be of interest to your families and ideally connect with what children are learning in the classroom (for example: libraries, airports, recycle centers, nature trails, pizza places and more)
• Contact the destination about 1-2 months in advance to schedule a visit with an agreed upon date and time.
• Publicize the event by including on school calendars, social media, etc.
• Talk with families at drop-off and pick-up to encourage attendance.
• Organize and coordinate transportation between families either using public transportation or their own vehicles.
• Spend anywhere from 15–60 minutes at the site and watch families have new experiences together in authentic, hands-on ways.
• Be amazed at the connections families make with their child, school staff and other families.
• Follow up on trips with conversations with families at drop-off and pick-up.
• Invite children and families to create thank you notes and pictures to send to the hosts of their trip.

Overcoming Obstacles
The obstacles of implementing family field trips at Bright Beginnings were minimal. Here are two:

1. Attendance — Getting busy families to be a part of school events is always a challenge. Publicity is not enough. In order to really interest families in participating, Debbie found that it was necessary to have face-to-face conversations about the trips with families during the days and weeks leading up to trips.

2. Behavior — Children were prepared for and reminded of rules and boundaries around what they could touch and how loud they should talk wherever they were going. Involving parents and other family members meant that Debbie had to release some control. She quickly realized that the benefits of gathering entire families together for field trips far outweighed the potential that something might go ‘wrong’ on the trip. She learned that there was nothing that could happen on a trip in terms of child behavior that a simple gesture such as sending a follow-up thank you note or a plate of cookies couldn’t fix.

“Not only do our children engage in meaningful learning activities, but the parents are able to get to know each other in a fun, relaxed and loving environment. Debbie is intentional about finding things that engage the whole family.” — Bright Beginning parent and teacher

DEBBIE’S FAMILY FIELD TRIP IDEA is aligned with Leading for Children’s mission as it embraces our core value that relationships are the foundation for learning. Family Field Trips build relationships with both families and community members and embody the idea that everyone (parents, siblings, pizza shop owners, librarians, etc.) is vital to the education of our young children. In addition, Debbie modeled Optimistic Leadership by cultivating self-awareness and reflecting on her own attitudes about how to engage families.
Outdoor Classroom

Busy Bees Preschool Center — Fitchburgh, Massachusetts

Maria Paulino, Director

Director Maria Paulino found that not all children in her community were able to spend much time outside. The purpose of creating an outdoor classroom was to provide meaningful outdoor play opportunities.

Making a Difference

Maria’s outdoor classroom offers all of the same learning opportunities for children that you might find in an indoor setting with the added benefit of being outside. Word quickly spread throughout Maria’s early-childhood community about this new thinking around utilizing outdoor classroom space. Teachers and administrators came to visit and soon began investing in the creation of their own outdoor classrooms based on Maria’s example.

Make it Yours

Maria also provided professional development workshops to highlight the benefits of creating an outdoor play space as well as the logistics of establishing such a space.

• Find a safe outdoor space that is available for use.
• Plan and create meaningful play areas based around specific learning standards:
— Water activity area with water table for sensory or science activities
— Reading space with comfortable seating and a bookshelf for literacy activities
— Animal cage, such as a rabbit hutch, for a school pet to provide science opportunities with living things
— Open lawn/space for group games and activities that promote social and motor skills
— Climbing equipment such as monkey bars and other simple playsets for motor skills
— House corner (cardboard boxes or wooden structures) for dramatic play
— Garden for planting and digging for motor and cognitive skills
— Sandbox or table for sensory play

• Carefully consider the learning style and developmental needs of the children who will be using the space by collaborating with teachers and others who know the children.
• Search for donated items from homes and solicit donations from local businesses for necessary materials to create a variety of areas.
• When the space is complete interact with children utilizing this outdoor classroom as an opportunity to expand learning experiences from the inside classrooms for extended periods of time each day (as weather allows).

“From children’s rain boots used as flower pots adorning the entrance to defined learning centers around the area, every child is embraced with an enjoyable approach to learning, even while being outdoors. This playground screams to me opportunity, the opportunity to play and be exposed to a grand variety of activities presented in diverse forms.”
— Florence Torres, Blue Classroom Teacher

Overcoming Obstacles
1. Time — The process of planning, finding materials and communicating the purpose of the outdoor play area was time-consuming.
2. Scheduling: It was important to plan the space along with the teachers at the site, which meant careful coordination of time. In addition, much of the physical labor to prepare the space needed to be done on weekends and during hours when school was not in session.

Maria’s Outdoor Playground is aligned with Leading for Children’s mission in that it highlights collaboration with educators to improve outcomes. Embracing the wisdom and resources of the entire community was essential for the development of the creation of this space. As the needs of the children and families at each site change, the outdoor playground is continuously examined and refreshed to support appropriate learning goals.
**Book Parties**

**Christ the King Early Education Center** — Topeka, Kansas

**Dawn Brown**, Director

Director Dawn Brown saw a need for families to become more involved in the center as well as in their children’s lives. She decided to host events at pick-up time throughout the year with book-inspired themes. She involved parents, teachers, and community organizations in these events with the ultimate goal of supporting positive outcomes for children.

---

### Making a Difference

The book parties have helped parents to discover interesting new ways to connect with their children through the use of books and activities. In addition, book parties provide teachers with the time and space to connect with parents to talk about the progress their children are making in the classroom. The party-planning process also allows teachers to spend quality time working as a team. Finally, the use of community resources connects and introduces families to community services.

### Make it Yours

- Meet with teachers to decide which books/authors to highlight throughout the year. Decide which dates (quarterly, monthly, etc.) to hold the parties.
- Post parties in the annual calendar, monthly newsletter and daily parent reports.
- Collaborate with teaching staff to come up with activities related to the books for each party.
- Invite community agencies to present or do activities. For example:
  - Local Cat Association for Pete the Cat
  - Zoo for Curious George
  - Petting Zoo for Down on the Farm

---

— Community agencies such as the local resource and referrals service or YMCA

- Plan specific activities together and decide who will be in charge of organizing each one.
- Involve a few parents in organizing and running the party (to fulfill volunteer hours if required).
- Create flyers and signs to post and give to parents.
- Send reminder emails and texts about one week before the party.
- Reflect after each party to discuss what worked well and what you might change for the next one.
Overcoming Obstacles

Obstacles faced in the creation of book parties included:

1. **Time** — Finding time to get families to participate in school events is always a challenge. Shifting the time of the party to 5-6pm allowed parents to stay on at pick-up rather than asking them to come back later in the evening.
   
   a) **Teacher Time** — Teachers struggled to find time to plan. When teachers worked together on events during quiet or rest time, they got a lot accomplished. Holding the events during regular business hours made it possible for all teachers to participate.

   b) **Parent Volunteer Time** — All parents at Dawn’s center are required to give five hours of volunteer time each year. Parents are often challenged to fulfill this time. Allowing parents to accrue volunteer hours during book parties has reduced stress that parents might feel when trying to accomplish this requirement. An additional benefit included parents becoming more involved and interested in their child’s school day.

2. **Communication** — Getting the word out ahead of time to families is essential. It was important for staff members to remember to distribute flyers, post signs, send emails and send text message alerts to families.

   “Parents and children now look forward to this event each quarter because it is a free and fun event that is during the time they are picking up. Several parents have talked to teachers after the event about how the information and activities have helped them with things they do at home.” — Melissa Mosher, Assistant Director

THE EARLY EDUCATION CENTER’S BOOK PARTIES align with Leading for Children’s mission because she enlisted people from multiple roles — teachers, parents and community members — in order to have an impact on child outcomes. Involving everyone at the center in book parties exemplifies the idea that relationships are the foundation for learning.
SmartStart Program

Guadalupe Center — Immokalee, Florida
Dawn Montecalvo, President and CEO

There were more than 400 children on the wait list at the Guadalupe Center. There was a real need for quality early-childhood education for families in the surrounding communities. President and CEO Dawn Montecalvo created the SmartStart Program as a way for families on the wait list to access early learning opportunities for their children and themselves. It began with one on-site group with plans to create four additional groups at a variety of sites throughout the surrounding area.

Making a Difference

After only one year of implementing this pilot program, the Guadalupe Center had identified several positive impacts for children and families. First, parents were encouraged to be their child’s first teacher through the modeling of effective practices that use simple activities parents could do at home to enhance interactions with their children. Second, through exploration and play, children learned important social-emotional and early learning skills in an environment that prepared them for their future educational experiences. The group structure and later home-based activities gave children opportunities to practice school routines and to support smooth transitions into a classroom setting. Finally, the Guadalupe Center was able to meet additional needs of the families by connecting with outside social service organizations.

Make it Yours

• Identify a community of parents and caregivers interested in taking part in a group to help prepare their young children for their future education.
• Find a space to accommodate 8-12 caregiver-child dyads.
• Build a program that is reflective of the community you are serving. Aspects might include some of the following:
  — Thematic units that are reflective of the seasons
  — A curriculum framework such as the Creative Curriculum
  — Lessons based on objectives for development and learning.
  — Materials in Spanish and English or other languages spoken in the home (including books and activities for families to bring home)
• Recruit families from a variety of sources including program wait lists as well as other community programs that serve families and young children.
• Create clear expectations with families around participation. For example, if they miss more than two classes their seat will be offered to another family.
• Develop connections with other community services to help meet family needs.
• Assess the program with informal observations as well as with tools to measure how the children are doing at the beginning, middle and end of their experience.
Overcoming Obstacles

Obstacles the Guadalupe Center faced in the creation of the Smart Start Program included:

1. **Space** — The only available on-site space was the art room—when it was not being used for art. For this reason, the program started with just one class that enrolled 10 children and their caregivers. The intent is to open additional classrooms by partnering with other community programs and organizations that have available space.

2. **Enrollment/Attendance** — It was challenging to maintain a full class because many of the families needed to work full-time and did not have anyone who could bring the child to the group. Also, many families had trouble finding transportation. The Guadalupe Center intends to open the program up to families that are not on the center’s wait list and to partner with sites throughout the community (such as libraries, home visiting programs and schools) to make it easier for families to access various community locations.

3. **Language/Communication** — Spanish and Creole are the primary languages within the community. The initial instructor spoke Spanish conversationally; however, it will be necessary to hire a Director who speaks and writes either Spanish or Creole fluently in order to advance the program.

“Mothers and Fathers are coming to us and building their confidence. They are realizing that while they may not have the educational reference point themselves, that they are their child’s first teacher. They can help their child break the cycle of poverty. The SmartStart Program sends a powerful message to the community. We are empowering families to be the change they desire, and giving them the tools to effect change for their children.”

— Bob Spano, Vice President of Programs

**THE SMARTSTART PROGRAM** aligns with the Leading for Children mission in that it is a creative, family-based program that brings early childhood education to a community where this type of programming is not readily available. The program is grounded in relationships, creating community connections and meeting families where they are. It values the entire family as learning partners in the education of their young children.
Enhancing Program Quality

Making a difference
The implementation of these short meetings has further developed the collaborative community of the school. The discussions around educational practices and the opportunities for reflection have helped to strengthen the school culture and helped teachers to become aware of the intentionality of their teaching. These meetings give teachers the chance to talk freely about individual practice and to share strategies that work for them. The meetings have also instilled a new sense of feeling valued and respected in their profession. Staff friendships have been strengthened, and a community of adult learners who are respectful and supportive of one another has been created. The meetings have also allowed administrators to be viewed as educational collaborators rather than evaluators. Ultimately, the meetings have fostered continual improvement, professional growth and collaboration among the staff at the Hundred Acre School.

Make it Yours
• Adjust schedules to be sure to involve and account for the entire staff before the regular program begins each day.
• Create meaningful play spaces and activities for children in the before-school program to engage in independently while the meeting takes place (if necessary).
• Plan ahead of time to develop useful and meaningful meetings that are reflective of the needs of the teachers and school community.

• Provide topics of interest and opportunities for reflection such as:
  — Ask teachers to share successes in the classroom.
  — Collaborate to set goals around curriculum and academic inquiry (i.e. math, outdoor play, etc.).
  — Provide light reading or videos that are connected to the discussion topic.
  — Share classroom experiences and child interactions that connect to topics.
  — Notice one another’s intentionality.
  — Address challenges and learning opportunities as they arise.
• Facilitate conversations appropriately for both depth of impact and time.
• Respect members of the staff as learners as they evolve their practices and approaches.
• Share the meeting idea and its impacts with your local community of early childhood education sites.

Overcoming Obstacles
Obstacles Melissa faced in the creation of the 15-Minute Morning Meeting included:
1. Scheduling — Holding the meetings required that teachers arrive to school a little earlier than previously expected, but because the teachers knew the value of the school’s meetings they were willing.
2. **Budgeting** — Some teachers needed to work longer days to attend the meetings. In these situations, a new budget line was necessary to compensate teachers for additional work time.

3. **Time** — The allotted 15-minute timeframe was often insufficient. It was necessary to develop an agenda and stick to this agenda in order to accomplish the daily morning meeting goals.

4. **Attendance** — Despite planning, there were always times when some teachers were not present because of conflicting needs (meeting with a parent, supporting a child at early drop-off, etc.). The fact that the meeting is a regular part of the school day and that teachers work in teams made it easy to communicate the conversations later in the day.

5. **Addressing Staff Concerns** — Teachers would often bring up specific concerns about their role, children in their classrooms, etc. If there was time during the meeting to discuss, they would. If time did not allow, they were sure to address the concerns at another time. Following-up on these concerns later in the day was critical to maintaining a sense of trust and collaboration with the teachers.

"These essential meetings make us feel like we are valued members of the school. We share ideas and problem solve issues with each other. Melissa gives us the opportunity to do this while adding support, assistance and sound advice when needed. Many other teachers, in different programs, only have a few minutes to connect on the playground, which can deter them from watching the children. Our daily morning meetings help us keep all of our attention on the students."

— Alicia, Kaitlyn, Heidi & Arianne, Hundred Acre School Teachers

---

**THE 15-MINUTE MORNING MEETING**

aligns with the Leading for Children mission because it provides opportunities for the entire staff to think collaboratively about their intentionality in their work and supports on-going reflection. The meeting creates a peer-driven community that nurtures curiosity, problem-solving and program planning. The regularity of this short but impactful meeting touches on and embraces all of the ideas behind optimistic leadership.
STEAM area for Infants and Toddlers

Kind Hearts Day Care — Princeton, Minnesota

Julie Hume, Owner

Through her own professional development opportunities, Owner Julie Hume learned about the importance of STEAM (science, technology, engineering, art/design and math) and how to integrate it in her home-based center. She spent the time and money necessary to create a specific area that was dedicated to STEAM activities for infants and toddlers. The new area also invited opportunities for parents and caregivers to discover ways of continuing STEAM learning at home with their children.

Making a Difference

The STEAM area of Julie’s home-based center has had a meaningful impact on everyone who enters, including children, parents/caregivers and staff. The children are learning by using STEAM-based materials that were carefully selected for their age and purpose. Parents are noticing this new engaging environment and taking the time to sit and work with their children at drop-off and pick-up. Parents and caregivers are also noticing how the play their children are engaged with at school is building a strong understanding of science at home. Children are also making connections in play that will promote future experiences at school. Finally, staff are able to use the STEAM materials to engage and guide the children through new age-appropriate opportunities to learn with and about the world around them in a safe environment.

Make it Yours

- Learn about STEAM and the benefits of integrating it into the curriculum for infants and toddlers through professional development. Check out this info from the University of Washington and the US Department of Education.
- Designate a space in your classroom environment dedicated to STEAM.
- Collaborate with staff to plan how the areas should look and what materials will be used.
- Raise funds through grants, garage sales, donations, etc. to purchase materials such as a room divider, gears, variety of blocks, shape sorters, toys with moving parts, magnetic toys, light table, art supplies, etc.
- Find time without children in the space to set it up appropriately.

STEAM area for Infants and Toddlers

STEAM area for Infants and Toddlers

STEAM area for Infants and Toddlers
• Explore the new space along with the children to experiment with the materials together.
• Invite parents and caregivers to join their children in the area to give them a sense of how their children actively engage in learning.
• Discover new ways to use the space as you observe the children in action.

**Overcoming Obstacles**

Obstacles Julie faced in the creation of the STEAM area included:

1. **Funding** — It was important to create a well-defined space including purposeful materials and toys for the STEAM area. Julie needed to raise over $1000 for a room divider as well as some additional materials. To do this she applied for multiple child care grants and held garage sales.

2. **Time** — It was necessary to shut down the program for a few days to set-up the new STEAM area. She gave families enough notice as to when the program would be closed, so that families could make alternate care arrangements while they transformed the new STEAM learning space. Parents understood and were excited about the new learning environment for their children.

"The children have benefited in many ways. They have opportunities to learn in a space that isn’t overwhelming or overstimulating. The toys are all designed for their age. The STEM/STEAM toys include gears, blocks, ramps, balls, beads, magnets, art supplies (with help from staff) and display areas."

— Meri Reidl, Kind Hearts Daycare Staff Member

---

*THE STEAM AREA FOR INFANTS AND TODDLERS*

aligns with the Leading for Children mission in that it attends to the developmental needs of young infants and toddlers while providing a rich environment for them to learn. Julie worked collaboratively with her staff and the parents and caregivers that are a part of her community. She was able to effectively integrate a new idea and invest in an area that is intended to have a positive effect on outcomes (specifically STEAM learning) on children.
Growing their very own garden has had a lasting impact on everyone from within the school (teachers and children) to the larger community (families and local businesses). It took some time and patience for the children to actually see the garden grow, but once the strawberries ripened and the sugar snap peas were full grown the teachers couldn’t stop the children from eating them. The learning opportunities were numerous. Jeana forged a wonderful relationship with a Master Gardener from the Los Angeles County University of California to assist with getting the garden started and supporting the education of the whole staff. Children are learning how plants grow and that it takes time, water and sunshine to see results. They are also engaged with the science of bugs and worms and how they help the plants to grow. After three years of growing, their playground space is filled with lush greenery of flowers, fruits and vegetables.

Make it Yours

• Think about what the children know about the food that they eat and consider this when starting your own school garden.
• Research with the children about gardening by reading books, searching the internet, visiting garden centers or farms to begin to plan for a school garden.
• Plan and think with teachers how to start the garden with the children and develop connected lessons and activities.
• Work with a Master Gardener (from a program or a parent volunteer) to set-up your garden:
  • Find space designated for the garden.
  • Purchase materials (soil, planters, tools, seeds, watering cans, etc.)
  • Prepare the soil to plant appropriate seeds.
  • Water and care for the garden daily.
  • Explore the garden every day to watch the seeds grow, talk about the bugs and worms, etc.
• Involve parents and caregivers by sending seeds home for them to create their own home garden.
• Invite families to a school community picnic to eat the fruits and vegetables grown in the gardens.

**Overcoming Obstacles**

Obstacles Jeana faced in the creation of the garden included:

1. **Funding** — Money is needed to purchase gardening supplies such as soil, tools, hose, watering cans, seeds, etc. as well as support from a Master Gardener. There are grant programs that can assist in securing money to run a garden program such as the Farm to School Program. It’s also possible to reach out to local gardening stores such as Home Depot and Walmart to obtain donations of supplies. Parents or other community members with an interest in gardening may have time to volunteer. You might also explore websites such as CraigsList to obtain free items like soil.

2. **Space** — Jeana was lucky to have space in her school playground to place planters made out of an old sandbox, a discarded shelving unit, etc. Any quiet corner of an outdoor play area can be used to grow a garden. Even if you only have a small area, put a small planter there and grow some beans or flowers with the children.

3. **Teacher Education** — Initially, the teachers were not very interested in participating in the regular upkeep of the garden. Jeana soon realized this was in part because they did not know how to integrate gardening into their daily routines with the children. The teachers agreed to participate in a professional development course called “Outdoor Classroom Training” where they learned to think about how to use the garden space more intentionally in their teaching.

> “In a few short years, the students of La Petite Academy in Palmdale have gone from having no clue where their food comes from, to growing their own food and eating it straight from the garden. It has been an honor and a pleasure to be on this journey with Jeana, her staff and the students.”
> — Marti Lindsey, *The Garden Lady*

---

**THE GARDEN PROGRAM** with the Leading for Children mission in that it nurtures the entire community. Jeana worked alongside her staff and individuals from the larger community to grow a thriving program that everyone is learning from, especially the children. Children are learning about where food comes from and proper nutrition. Teachers are making connections to the garden in the classroom work. Families are receiving seedlings from their children to begin their own gardens at home.
Making a Difference

The (e)Mpower group has been a wonderful success since it was formed. In the first year 10-12 parents would gather each week to share the many successes, challenges and ideas they have about parenting. In the second year of its implementation, a parent stepped up to facilitate the group. The members of the group take turns providing snacks and have made the group their own. Overall, the group was successful because it provided a comfortable space for parents to congregate for support in a safe environment. One mother from the group wrote about the positive impacts: “I learned so much!! I soon found that this group helped me gain new friendships with other moms who shared the same struggles as I did with my young children. This was a place I could learn, share my feelings and frustrations, and gain encouragement and helpful hints—all without the fear of guilt or judgment.”

An unforeseen positive impact of the program was a huge increase in the number of school events that this group of volunteers created and ran together. Some of these events included a “Book-a-palooza” to promote reading, a school-wide “Fall Festival” and a “Multicultural Celebration.”

Make it Yours

- Think with a group of individuals at the school (parents, teachers, administrators, etc) to discuss the type of group that would best meet the needs of the families at the school.
- Find a regular weekly space to accommodate the number of people who will attend and the technology (tv, computer, audio, etc) needs.
- Organize and budget child care for older or younger siblings who are not enrolled at the school.
- Decide on purchasing a curriculum or developing your own for each group session. This decision...
should be made with the interest of the individuals who will be in attendance in mind.

- Purchase or request donations of coffee and snacks to have available for each group.
- Recruit parents to attend by sending out flyers, emails, newsletters and by word-of-mouth.
- Build leadership within the group by using former participants as facilitators.
- Assess the strengths and challenges of running the group for improvements and changes in future years.

**Overcoming Obstacles**

1. **Funding** — The Methodist Day School charges very low rates for tuition to provide quality care for all families. They needed to find money in the budget to pay for child care, food and a parenting curriculum. Parents donated money to purchase a curriculum in the second year and they shared the responsibility of providing snacks. The cost of child care for the group was later added to the overall school budget.

2. **Space** — Adequate space with appropriate technology is difficult to find at the church because there are a large number of activities held daily. It was necessary to secure a room an entire year ahead of time. Thoughtful advanced planning is necessary to locate group space to ensure a consistent meeting time each week throughout the year.

“\[I have personally witnessed how the ladies in (e)Mpower support each other and the other moms at the school. When one of my students was diagnosed with some specific food allergies, his mom was trying to find allergen free recipes. Soon enough, another mom offered her phone number, expertise, and support. It was very moving to see these two families come together.\]”

— Caitlyn Homesley, PreK Teacher

**THE (E)MPoWER PARENT GROUP** aligns with the Leading for Children mission in its focus on the needs of children and their families. The group was created with thoughtful insight from the community of families. School leaders took the time to consider needs of families and involved them in creation of the group. The group became sustainable over time because of its positive impact and interest of the community. When families feel supported, their children will do well both in school and at home.
Enhancing Program Quality

Making a Difference

Through the use of a digital documentation application, teachers began capturing work samples, anecdotal records, and artifacts of the children in their classrooms. Everything that was collected was used for reflection within the center’s weekly professional learning community. The application provided a space for children to see their own work and progress; for teachers to authentically assess children in their classrooms; and for teachers to share children’s learning with families and community stakeholders. It opened two-way communication with everyone involved at the school. The communication fostered strengthened relationships and provided opportunities for sharing insights into children’s learning. They were also able to use the analytic data from the application to track usage and calculate message views and responses. It was their belief that the implementation of the application and the communication it cultivated had a direct impact on the increase of parent participation in the everyday activities of the classroom.

Make it Yours

• Create a culture of inquiry that uses the documentation of children’s work for authentic assessment.

Research applications and tablet technology that is most useful for the center and provides some or all of the following:

— Take photographs of children’s work, lessons, and words.
— Tag individual children in photos to automatically go into each child’s portfolio.
— Add standards and proficiency measures to the photos that align with the curriculum
— Create “storyboards” that could be shared with teachers, families and other stakeholders in the community.

Pilot the application with one teacher and ask her to share what she learns over a few weeks.
• Purchase the necessary tablet-based technology and application for all the teachers to use. Victoria was able to obtain the technology for free from the developer; however, it may be necessary to write a grant, adjust the budget or engage in fundraising to get the money for the purchase of these items.
• Use the technology to create a storyboard of their children’s work to share with families with a goal of increasing family participation in the classroom and parent’s understanding of their children’s learning.
• Analyze children’s portfolios to gain a deeper understanding and use the findings to inform instruction from week to week.

Overcoming Obstacles
1. Buy-in — Teachers have many different responsibilities in their day-to-day work. They initially saw the use of the application as “another thing they had to do.” After many frustrating moments and lost data, teachers finally became proficient with the application. They realized it actually created less overall work. A photo and some notes created and stored in the application gathered what they needed for inquiries, authentic assessments and something to share with families.

2. Pilot Teacher — Finding one teacher to initially try the application was critical. She took a lot of time to explore and learn about the application. Finally, she became excited about it when she realized how it could simplify the work. She wanted to share the opportunities it presented and made herself available to support her fellow teachers.

3. Time — A lot of time was necessary to create authentic opportunities for all with the application. Teachers needed out of classroom time to meet for weekly inquiry, learn how to use the application and to create storyboards. It was necessary to increase the number of staff at the center to accommodate the need for teacher time out of the classroom.

4. Cost — The tablets and applications were expensive. Victoria was able to partner with the application developer to pilot it for free in exchange for research data for its development.

“’The app has completely changed the way we do things as a school. The app allows us to authentically assess the children in our classrooms, create portfolios, make documentation panels for our walls, and share our storyboards of children’s classroom learning. The storyboard feature has opened continuous communication for our families as well as our partners at the university. We also use this data as a part of our practitioner research. It has streamlined everything we do while increasing our family involvement and engagement in the school.” — Stefanie Lynch, Teacher

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THIS DIGITAL APPLICATION aligns with the Leading for Children mission because it strengthens communication and relationships that are the foundation if learning for everyone involved at the center. Using the tool encouraged reflection and made teachers think deeply about children’s work and how to articulate what they learned with families. Families felt more connected to what their children were doing and learning in school. The implementation of a simple application enhanced and transformed the entire school community.