

Enhancing Early Childhood Program Quality

Wisdom From the Field





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.

Last year we introduced The Leading for Children Innovative Ideas Award to recognize ideas being implemented in early learning programs across the country.

The focus for this year's awards was on family engagement, literacy, and professional development.

As you read the ideas included in this resource, we hope that you'll be inspired to apply or adapt them to your program.



Congratulations to the Award Winners:

FIRST PRIZE was awarded to Ryan Tauriainen, Director of Early Childhood at the Friendship Public Charter Schools in Washington, DC.

SECOND PRIZE was awarded to Melissa Russell, Preschool Director at the Hundred Acre School at Heritage Museum & Gardens in Sandwich, Massachusetts.

Honorable Mentions Were Awarded to:

- 1 **Shannon Banks**, ReadyKids, Inc.
- 2 **Sarah Chestnut**, Bethesda Child Development Center
- 3 **Wendy Conrad**, Family Enrichment Network
- 4 **Tracy Ehlert**, B2K Learning Center
- 5 **Stephanie Genesco**, All Nestled Inn Family Childcare
- 6 **Chloe Gray**, East Allen County Schools
- 7 **Erica Vernold Miller and Eira Cotto Giron**, Partners in Learning, Inc. MANOS Dual Language Early Childhood Program
- 8 **Carmelina Myers**, The Country Childrens Center
- 9 **Monica Warren**, Crisp County Schools
- 10 **Stephanie Winkel**, Twinkeling Stars Child Care

Special Thanks to Our Judges Who Helped Us with Selection:

- **Laura Ensler**, Early Education Consultant
- **Peter Pizzolongo**, Early Education Consultant
- **Silvia Salcido**, Director, Early Childhood Professional Development, United Way of Tucson & Southern Arizona
- **Katayoun Zadeh**, Program Specialist, Arkansas State University Childhood Services

We look forward to hearing from you when we introduce the 2019 campaign. Watch for it on our website www.leadingforchildren.org.

Warm regards,

JUDY JABLON

*Executive Director
Leading for Children*

Mass Online Sharing to Enhance Literacy Instruction

School network uses Google Docs to widely share new curriculum and resources



Friendship Public Charter School — Washington, DC

Ryan Tauriainen, Director of Early Childhood

When Ryan Tauriainen became Director of Early Childhood at Friendship Public Charter School, his first goal was to close the achievement gap in literacy before kindergarten. The city's kindergarten literacy scores were poor and students slumped in their reading by third grade. All city schools did not follow the same curriculum and classrooms functioned as islands. Mr. Tauriainen, in collaboration with experts and experienced staff, created a research-based early childhood literacy curriculum that could be widely shared over the network for all schools to use.

With the “KinderProgress” curriculum, the Mass Online Sharing to Enhance Literacy Instruction initiative began. The curriculum has small-group lesson plans that address more than 130 literacy objectives. Each lesson takes no more than 10 minutes. The lessons are ordered and shared on Google Docs. An online system was created to collect and track student progress; data is collected daily from the lesson plans’ “exit tickets”. All staff members can access the content from anywhere with an Internet connection. Besides being user-friendly, the curriculum is available as a free resource to any school or center.

Making a Difference

The success of the Mass Online Sharing to Enhance Literacy Instruction project was evident when students’ literacy development reached the highest levels ever seen; for some there were increases of 20 percentage points. Families are thrilled to see improvements in their children’s learning and are helping their children at home with specific objectives. Teachers and principals are pleased that everyone is using the same curriculum. Teachers can focus on teaching and not the materials because they are already prepared. Centers in Georgia and homeschools in several states are using the curriculum.

Make it Yours

1. You can access these curriculum resources in math and literacy online at www.kinderprogress.org.
2. If you want to create your own curriculum, follow these steps:
 - Make sure it is rooted in research and that teachers are included in the process.
 - Create a “road map” of how you want students to progress in early literacy

skills Based on your research, create a scope-and-sequence of literacy objectives.

- Get expert help to integrate the scope and sequences into objective lesson plans. Put lesson plans and materials into a standard format.
 - Organize and share your materials in a shared online space where all staff can access them. Include links in objectives of the online scope-and-sequence document that directs users to corresponding lessons and materials.
3. Whether using “KinderProgress” or your own materials, pilot and instruct your teachers-leaders on using the new curriculum. Make any changes prior to widely distributing the curriculum.

Overcoming Obstacles

Obstacles Mr. Tauriainen faced in creating the “Mass Online Sharing to Enhance Literacy Instruction” initiative included:

1. **Teacher Buy-in** — It was important that veteran teachers understood the research behind the literacy continuum, felt like they were part of the process, and could immediately see the positive

effects. They were included in designing lesson templates and their feedback was continuously used to make changes.

- 2. Distribution of Curriculum** — There was concern as to how to best share the curriculum in a user-friendly, responsible, and widely accessible way. The use of the Google Docs platform was critical for mass sharing, easy upload, and an organized way to access all materials. It is accessible everywhere and made work easier for teachers and principals.
- 3. Staff Computer Skills** — Some staff member's computer skills were limited. Mr. Tauriainen led professional development to help build computer literacy with teachers that struggled with using the Google Docs platform. All teachers were able to master it. ■

“Before these resources were created and provided, teachers followed their own path in teaching reading to young children. The creation of a common curriculum, directly tied to the expectations for rising kindergarteners, was invaluable for our ability to focus on instruction. It gave teachers the power to truly differentiate, to track progress, and to keep parents informed.”

— **Daisha Wise**, Pre-K Teacher, Friendship Public Charter School-Chamberlain

FRIENDSHIP PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL Demonstrates Optimistic Leadership:

We Think Impact to make informed decisions.

Mr. Tauriainen was clear about the ‘why’ of this project:

- To enhance children's literacy learning and ensure cultural and linguistic relevance;
- To support parents as children's first teachers by keeping them up to date on how their children are progressing; and
- To create a system that would be easy to use for teachers to use and make sure they are all on the same page.

We Cultivate Self-Awareness to guide thought, emotion, and behavior.

Although the motivation for this project was Mr. Tauriainen's, he demonstrated openness to the perspectives of others by inviting collaboration. In this way he ensured that the project would reflect the perspectives of many and be culturally and linguistically appropriate.

We Nurture Relationships to support learning and collaboration.

Mr. Tauriainen has fostered partnerships throughout the process and continues to do so. During the development phase of the project, he included teachers in the process and continually elicited feedback for continuous improvement. The program is designed to foster partnerships with families by keeping them informed of their child's progress while offering strategies that families can use to support their child at home. School leaders have been engaged in how to best support their staff and supervise use of the curriculum.

We Refine Communication for mutual clarity and understanding

Mr. Tauriainen fostered conversation and dialogue rather than giving top-down commands so that the project would be a shared and collaborative effort.

We Activate Curiosity to find connections and continue learning.

When we activate curiosity, we are more willing to take risks, experiment, and try things out.



VIPs: Virtual and In-Person Engagement Strategies

Incorporating Technology into Engaging with Today's Families



The Hundred Acre School at Heritage Museums & Gardens —
Sandwich, Massachusetts

Melissa Russell, Preschool Director

Melissa Russell had observed multi-generational families attending Heritage Museum & Gardens programs, exhibits, and events to strengthen family bonds and learn together. When The Hundred Acre School opened on the museum and garden's campus, she became Preschool Director and focused on family engagement. She collaborated with Pre-K-8 educators and they determined that typical family engagement methods did not meet the needs of today's families. Their idea was to enhance family engagement by including families in the school's daily interactions, both physically and virtually. Families were to be an active partner in curriculum extensions.

The VIP experience involves intentional thought and effort and focuses on four ways to engage families: **1)** environment (an inviting and support environment for families; **2)** communication (print, person-to-person conversations, conferences, texts) which includes daily interactions with the parent app to share pictures, videos, questions; **3)** education (student's/teacher's summary of the day with "think time boards"); and, **4)** partnerships (celebrating all families through classroom visits and professional spotlights).

Making a Difference

Ms. Russell realized the success of the VIP experience when families began sharing about all the ways that they were extending the curriculum at home. It was not something that the school required, but something families felt empowered to do. Now the school regularly hears from families about how grateful they are for making them feel part of the schools' daily experiences.

Make it Yours

- 1.** Reflect on your current practice to determine if you are engaging your families in the best ways.
- 2.** Listen to and observe your families' daily routines, actions, needs, and questions to help you determine the best method of engagement.
- 3.** Gather information on engagement strategies from other early childhood educators through articles, books, conversations, or interviews.
- 4.** Brainstorm with teachers on ways to enhance family engagement and incorporate face-to-face and electronic (technology) methods in your approach.

- 5.** Try a few ideas at a time and see how they work. There are free apps that allow schools to create a closed classroom group able to receive information instantly.
- 6.** Remember to balance the VIP experience between technology and face-to-face engagement.

Overcoming Obstacles

Obstacles Ms. Russell faced in creating the VIP experience included:

- 1. Finding the Best Way to Engage Electronically** — E-Newsletters required time to gather information and write and weren't frequent enough for families who wanted to know details about their child's day as it was occurring. The school decided to use an app (rather than newsletters) which allows the school to instantly communicate with families.
- 2. Motivating Staff** — It was a challenge to get some staff, who were less tech savvy than others, to use the app as a communication tool. Ms. Russell demonstrated the use of the

app to staff and followed the class for a day to document the delight families showed when using the app. The feedback from families was shared with all staff. All teachers were able to use the app on their own with initial support. ■

“The way we engage families is not like any other school we have ever worked in. Our parents became close friends within the first month of school; and felt like an extended family member. We wanted to exceed the norm of solely relying on quarterly parent conferences. Instead, we put into place a system that gives parents a virtual window into what their children are inquiring about, investigating, and ultimately learning..”

— Kaitlyn Kilroy, Alicia Raspa, and Heidi Anderson, Preschool Teachers



THE HUNDRED ACRE SCHOOL AT HERITAGE MUSEUMS & GARDENS Demonstrates Optimistic Leadership:

We Think Impact to make informed decisions.

The Hundred Acre team had a clear purpose in setting up the VIP program. Their goal was to establish methods of family engagement that would meet the needs of today's families. They designed their program to address environment, communication, education and partnership.

We Cultivate Self-Awareness to guide thought, emotion, and behavior.

It takes self-awareness to accept that tried and true practices may not be meeting the needs of all families. The team is passionate about intentionality and spent time and effort to figure out how to create an intergenerational culture of learners from babies to grandparents.

We Nurture Relationships to support learning and collaboration.

At the heart of the VIP strategies effort is the goal of strengthening relationships for learning.

We Refine Communication for mutual clarity and understanding.

Communication is a key focus of the program and to meet the diverse needs of families, they are using print, conversations, conferences, and texts. They also use an app to share pictures, videos, questions.

The ReadySteps Program

Mobile Parent Playgroups Provide an Interactive, Family-Centered Approach to School Readiness



ReadyKids, Inc. — Charlottesville, VA

Shannon Banks, Director of Community Education

ReadyKids, Inc. wanted to provide an opportunity for parents and caregivers to strengthen children's readiness for school. They developed the ReadySteps Program, led by Director of Community Education Shannon Banks.

The ReadySteps Program is a free program that travels to designated neighborhood community centers to create warm, welcoming, and educational early learning environments for families and their children four times a week. The playgroups allow children to engage in learning experiences that foster interaction and help develop self-regulation skills. Family members and caregivers participate alongside their children and are encouraged to observe and learn about how children grow and develop. The program offers opportunities for families to strengthen healthy relationships with children and with other families. Program enrollment is ongoing and families may register at any time at any of the program sites.

Making a Difference

Ms. Banks saw the success of the program when current families began encouraging other families and friends to come to playgroups. Many brought new families to their first group and introduced them to other playgroup families. Community organizations refer clients to the ReadySteps program, request to be partners, and ask for resources and support for families. Families are able to form bonds and friendships within and across languages and cultures. The program has become a recognized and valued community partner in preparing children and their families for success.

Make it Yours

1. Identify and select communit(ies) with families with young children not enrolled in early education who face barriers such as isolation, poverty, and language.
2. Establish outcomes for the program that are concrete and measurable.
3. Identify resources to operate the program (space in neighborhoods, funding for program activities, recruiting and hiring qualified staff, and transportation to get staff and materials to program sites).
4. Define a structure for all playgroup sessions based on best practices and supports routines



and consistency across all sites (based on each site's unique composition and needs).

5. Use a curriculum and materials that are relevant to young children and their families, help educators structure programming, and include the interests and abilities of families.
6. Connect with community agencies and individuals passionate about empowering families and supporting young children to succeed.
7. Recruit and register families. Create publicity flyers. Create packets with registration forms, consent forms, and statements of participant rights.

8. Regularly assess the program using appropriate screening tools, observations, family feedback, and check-in meetings with staff and community partners.

Overcoming Obstacles

Obstacles Ms. Banks faced in running the ReadySteps program included:

- 1. Language and Literacy** — Many of the families lacked basic literacy skills, even in their home language. Telephone language translation services were arranged to ensure that families speaking other languages are served. Community partners also help provide face-to-face translations and materials in English and Spanish (and other languages, when possible).
- 2. Community Relationships** — The program's success is based on the program's relationships with community partners and families. Ms. Banks and program staff wanted to strengthen and maintain relationships with community partners. Program staff now participate in community events, and interact with partners via community committees, task forces, and quarterly check-in meetings. The program connects with families through text messaging, Facebook, home visits, child birthday cards, and a toy lending library.

“One of the most valuable assets of the playgroups is the community that is formed. All of our groups are culturally diverse, which fosters an environment of acceptance and community bonding across cultural groups. For our non-English speaking families, playgroup is an opportunity for children, parents, and caregivers alike to practice speaking English.”

— Margaret Pleasants, Educator at ReadySteps Program



- 3. Staffing** — When staff leave, programs may be without a playgroup educator for weeks. Illness or vacations can also reduce available staff. To address staff shortages, all staff, including the Program Manager, are cross-trained to facilitate playgroups. Staff from other agencies are trained to serve as substitutes and program policies and procedures address staff coverages. ■



READYKIDS, INC. Demonstrates Optimistic Leadership:

We Think Impact to make informed decisions.

Ms. Banks began the program with the goals of ensuring that all children have the skills needed to be successful in school and to strengthen family-child relationships.

We Nurture Relationships to support learning and collaboration.

The ReadySteps program aims to develop relationships with families

to help them build relationships with each other. The program takes a culturally humble approach towards design and implementation. It includes learning about best practices and being invested in and dedicated to learning about different cultural contexts, current events, future expectations, and how people interact with each other.

STEAM University

Full STEAM Ahead! Children Engage in Hands-on Learning in Day Long Events



Bethesda Child Development Center — Fort Worth, Texas

Sarah Chestnut, Curriculum Coordinator

Inspired by a trip to a local museum with play activities for children, the Bethesda Child Development Center wanted families to be more engaged in the learning process and understand how important it is that children learn through play. Curriculum Coordinator Sarah Chestnut and her team developed one-day events where children and their families engage in hands-on learning experiences.

STEAM University is a theme-based event based on the STEM principles (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) with the addition of Art. They are held several times a year and each University has its own unique centers which differ from the those at previous events. Activities include a doctor's office, sensory tables, building stations, water funnels, outdoor exploration, and more. These events are child-led and go at their own pace. Parents are able to engage with them as well. Teachers are allowed to check out any of the STEAM University stations for a week at a time and take them back to their classrooms for children to explore further.

Making a Difference

The success of STEAM University was evident from the start. Children were inspired! They kept asking if and when they could come back to STEAM University and took ideas of building and “tinkering” with things back to their classrooms. Families wanted to help with STEAM so that the program could expand. Teachers were excited because the events allow children to lead their own learning experiences. It also broadened the teaching resources since the centers of Steam University could be used in the classroom

Make it Yours

1. Think creatively to make STEAM University specific to your program. It is an ongoing, adaptable, program.
2. Start with research. Look at local museums that offer hands-on learning experiences and draw from their ideas. Do internet searches for ideas to fill in the gaps for each STEAM University.
3. Write your plan down. Consider space needs and availability. Determine the amount of time each child can spend in the centers to ensure so that they can experience all of it. Diagram all of your ideas into that space.

4. Based on the budget, try to design and create your own activities. Make sure all activities are durable and safe enough to let all children enjoy and play without it falling apart.
5. Ask families for help. Ask for donations or other assistance.
6. Set it up and let the children take over! The project is powered by children. Once set up, the children will take their places and get to work playing. Adults can help by asking questions, such as “what would happen if...” and let the children think about cause and effect.

Overcoming Obstacles

Obstacles Ms. Chestnut faced in implementing STEAM included:

1. **Activities** — Finding enough activities for children ages 2-5 years in one room and considering different levels of learning was challenging. On days that the 2- and 3-year-olds were participating, the skill set of items was slightly adjusted from the days that the 4- and 5-year-olds were exploring.
2. **Roles for adults** — Adults (school staff and families) needed coaching on how to support children with activities without doing it for them.

“STEAM University gave our children new opportunities to grow in imagination, thinking and reasoning, promoting self-confidence, building, and measuring with blocks, to name a few. I watched as they moved with confidence from center to center with looks of anticipation to learn a new skill.”

— Nandra Sherman, *Toddler Curriculum Coordinator*



Teachers and families were instructed to let the children guide themselves in this experience. They were given question prompts to ask the children as they were exploring the different areas of STEAM.

3. Storage space — Activities need to be stored for continuous use throughout the year. The center had limited storage space. Activities had to be chosen and designed to be taken down, collapsed and stored, or repurposed for another event or classroom use. ■

BETHESDA CHILD DEVELOPMENT CENTER Demonstrates Optimistic Leadership:

We Think Impact to make informed decisions.

Ms. Chestnut designed the program with the goal of increasing family engagement with children’s learning and understanding how children learn through play.

We Cultivate Self-Awareness to guide thought, emotion, and behavior.

The program focuses on having teachers be aware of how they approach children so that they will do so in a way to empower children (and their families) to thrive through play and problem-solving through hands-on activities.

We Activate Curiosity to find connections and continue learning.

Giving children the freedom to explore things their own way excites curiosity. They naturally thrive in environments that let them explore the world on their own terms.



The Nutrition Literacy Project

Combining Literacy and Nutrition Can Transform Children's Minds and Bodies



Family Enrichment Network — Johnson City, NY

Wendy Conrad, Food Services Coordinator

Family Enrichment Network partners with family and community agencies to develop and provide programs to achieve the best results for children and families. Wendy Conrad, Food Services Coordinator, knew that if children prepare food, they are more likely to try it. She decided to create a project to engage children in nutrition education and to encourage them to eat new foods.

The Nutrition Literacy Project pairs books with a nutritional theme of the month. Children create snacks with fresh ingredients related to the theme and also discuss the related book. Teachers are given a resource packet with links to related lessons and materials to extend the nutritional project with their classroom lessons. Families receive a monthly menu of the snack projects children will make before the month begins and are encouraged to engage with their children about the project and new foods they are trying. Children's work on their nutritional projects are documented with photos and displayed for all to see.

Making a Difference

Ms. Conrad knew the project was a success when she saw children having conversations about what they were doing. They discussed the books they were reading with the snacks they were creating. Children were also consistently developing their fine motor skills. Children who once had trouble using a butter knife, or placing berries on a celery stalk, become increasingly able to do so. Families became consistently more engaged. Teachers were sharing their packets, discussing how they used the additional resources in the packet and incorporating them into lessons.

Make it Yours

1. Be patient and keep moving forward. Often new endeavors are met with resistance, especially when it might involve creating messes.
2. Choose an author who has age-appropriate book titles and enough of them to use throughout the year. (Or you could use books by different authors, but with the same theme.) Consider titles that are related to the month, for example, *Dream Snow* in December.

3. Look for easy-to-make snack projects related to the titles. For example, for the book *The Very Busy Spider*, the selected project was "Spiderwiches" (peanut butter and jelly sandwiches on whole grain bread — using a round cutter to make a circle, pretzel sticks for spider legs and raisins for eyes).
4. Create a packet with a page for each month. Include a photo of the project, the list of



ingredients, and links that related to the title. For example, for *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, include a link to a site about raising monarch caterpillars in classrooms.

5. Order the books to distribute to the classes monthly with directions on making the projects.
6. Encourage the staff to take pictures of the activity, the process, and the completed projects. Display the photographs so that each class and the rest of the school can see the projects.

Addressing Challenges

Obstacles Ms. Conrad faced in implementing the Nutrition Literacy Project included:

1. **Staff engagement** — The first month showed modest staff engagement. To increase their participation, teachers were asked to photograph the children working on their projects. Pictures were placed in cases for students, staff, and family to see. The documentation of their children's work increased staff interest and involvement.
2. **Preparation time** — Some of the snacks had several steps to making them, which took additional preparation time. A designated staff

“The project has a great impact on our program. It allows the children to learn, explore, create, engage, discover, and strengthen their skills. It has inspired the children to try new nutritious foods or even eat foods they have seen many times—just in a different way. Children are making connections to the real world when engaged in the activities.”

—**Jessie M. Daglio**, Program Operations Coordinator

member was put in charge of snack preparation. When snack preparation was consistently one person's job, it increased their investment in the project and the project's success.

3. **Family involvement** — To engage parents in the project, the snack projects are on the menu and incorporated into the monthly parent newsletter. Families have a standing invitation to come in on project days. ■



FAMILY ENRICHMENT NETWORK Demonstrates Optimistic Leadership:

We Think Impact to make informed decisions.

Ms. Conrad wanted to promote nutrition education and recognized that if children prepared food, they would be more likely to try it and learn. She also paired books with foods so that children would also be strengthening their interest and skills with literacy.

We Activate Curiosity to find connections and continue learning.

The Nutrition Literacy project encourages children to create projects that are their own, visualize them, and talk with their classmates about their creations.

We Nurture Relationships to support learning and collaboration.

Working on the nutrition projects facilitates children's relationships with one another. They learn acceptance

and appreciation for each other's creations. The projects nurture relationships between staff and children and allows adults to let children be creative without stipulations. By engaging families this initiative fosters a sense of community.

Summer Literacy Boxes

Keep Children Reading in the Summer and Avoid the Summer Slip



B2K Learning Center (early learning, preschool, and before and after school) — Cedar Rapids, Iowa

Tracy Ehlert, Owner and Early Childhood Educator

At the B2K Learning Center, Owner and Early Childhood Educator Tracy Ehlert saw that most families lacked time for daily reading with children, especially in the summer. Many children fall behind in their reading skills during the summer when school is out (also known as “the summer slip”). Ms. Ehlert decided to create a summertime home literacy program that is child-led but includes family support.

Summer Literacy Boxes are theme-based boxes filled with books, activities (with all the materials included to complete them), and a parent handout. Families check out one box per week for 12 weeks. When families return the box, they can check out a new box. The returned boxes are refilled for another family. For every box returned, the child earns points and receives a new book to keep. Children use their earned points to trade in for prizes at a special “store” set up for them. Extra book prizes are given for completing entire themes and all 12 boxes.

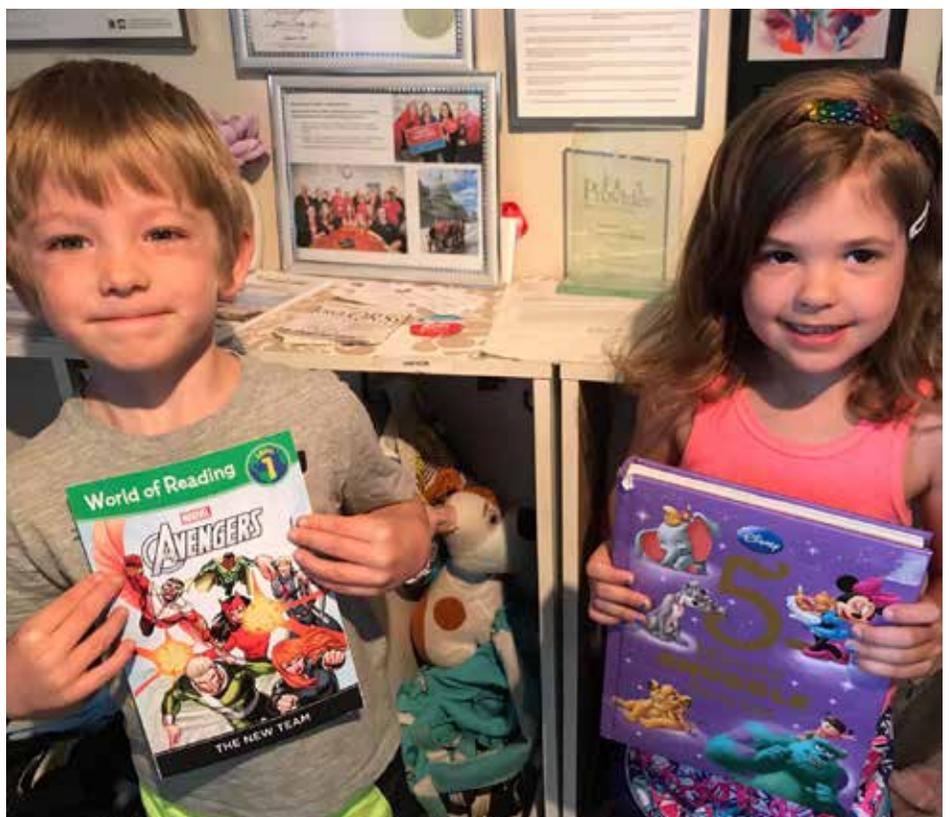
Making a Difference

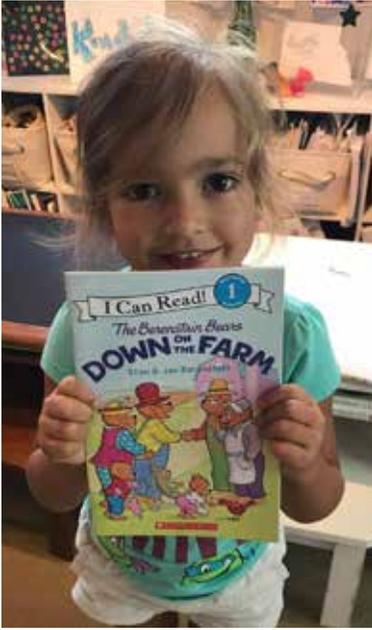
Ms. Ehlert knew the Summer Literacy Boxes were a success when there was 100% participation from families—the highest for any of the center’s activities. Many children completed their boxes in less than a week and checked out more than one box per week. Children enjoy sharing about their boxes with each other. Parents enjoy them too.

Make it Yours

1. Think big, but scale down as needed. Decide on three themes that can easily be paired with books (e.g., farm animals, community helpers, nursery rhymes) for the boxes.
2. Get enough books that are appropriate for your age groups. Find activities to include that match the chosen themes. Use free online resources to avoid creating all new activities.

3. List items needed to complete each box activity. Save all printed materials (directions, parent handouts, and checklists) on the computer to easily reproduce and share. Print everything.





“Every single family in the preschool program participated. That was a huge success not only for the children who were then receiving more literacy in their home environments, but a win for the program as well, as getting families engaged can be hard to do sometimes.”

— Laciee O’Brine-Clinton, Early Childhood Education Assistant/Substitute

4. Purchase all supplies for each literacy box and assemble the boxes. Purchase prizes for when children use their points.

5. Announce the program to families. Have them sign up to participate. Begin implementing the summer program. Make sure to evaluate the program throughout, asking families and children about their experiences and make changes as needed.

Overcoming Obstacles

Obstacles Ms. Ehlert faced in creating the Summer Literacy Boxes program included:

1. **Time** — There were competing priorities and responsibilities in Ms. Ehlert’s busy schedule. By

focusing on the potential impact for children and families, she adjusted her schedule to set aside time to research, print, shop, and prepare everything to make the project a success.

2. **Funding** — The original idea was bigger than what could be funded—to have each child keep a book in each theme (along with having the weekly prizes) and to keep the full box (instead of turning back in for a new one). This idea was changed so that boxes could be checked out instead of kept, and with relatively low cost.

3. **Unknown Interest of Families** — Families are busier in the summer. The project needed to be one that families would participate in, not take a lot of time, and keep children engaged. Families were initially surveyed for their interest in participating and then asked for ideas on how to make the boxes more appealing. ■

B2K LEARNING CENTER Demonstrates Optimistic Leadership:

We Think Impact to make informed decisions.

Ms. Ehlert designed the summertime home literacy program to be active, creative, and engaging for children and families as a way to encourage reading experiences as part of families’ summer routine.

We Nurture Relationships to support learning and collaboration.

The summer literacy box program promotes peer-to-peer relationships, teacher to student relationships, and family child and family-teacher relationships, while at the same time enhancing children’s relationships with books and learning.



BABEE Bags (Building A Better Engagement Through Early Education)

Promoting Family Engagement and Literacy Learning in Early Education



All Nestled Inn Family Childcare — Chesapeake, Ohio

Stephanie Geneseo, Owner, Trainer, Advocate

Each day at All Nestled Inn Family Childcare teachers select a book to feature that connects with the class topic of study. Owner Stephanie Geneseo was looking for a way to support families in being their child's first teacher and to more deeply engage them in the child care program. She developed BABEE Bags so that children and families could extend the book-of-the-day experiences at home.

BABEE Bags (Building a Better Engagement Through Early Childhood Education) introduce early literacy to children ages birth to four and promote learning extensions from the classroom to home. Families receive a monthly take-home bag related to topics discussed in the classroom. In each of the 12 monthly bags, there are two age-appropriate books, a manipulative activity that has been introduced in the classroom, and a parent guide with simple instructions for using the resources in the bag. The bag also includes a Summary Parent Questionnaire to document family participation and feedback.

Making a Difference

Ms. Geneseo knew that BABEE Bags was a success by the excitement of the children and their families. There was so much participation! Many of the program's three- and four-year-olds can now identify sight words, read words around the classroom, and read and understand simple repetitive books. Ms. Geneseo also received the Terri Lynne Lokoff award for this idea.

Make it Yours

1. Believe in your idea and stay committed to the work you do for children and families.
2. As you develop goals for your program and topics of study, be sure to incorporate literacy in EVERYTHING you do!
3. Research grants and opportunities to fund your project.

4. Research literacy websites for books and activities that are interesting and related to what you are doing in the classroom.



5. Order books for the bags. Find ways get extra copies of books at a discount (e.g., Scholastic Book Club for teachers) and research follow-up activities to share with children.
6. Make early literacy BABEE Bags a priority with infants through the kindergarten transition.

Overcoming Obstacles

Obstacles Ms. Geneseo faced in implementing the BABEE Bags program included:

1. **Engaging Family with Literacy** — Families don't always understand the importance of literacy for young children. To get families to continue literacy activities at home, Ms. Geneseo modeled her love for reading, shared videos and photos with families showing the children's reading activities while in care, and also provided handouts and articles on the importance of reading with children.
2. **Responsive Families** — Families are busy and don't always respond to requests. The survey for family's feedback on the BABEE Bags was

“Stephanie’s concept of the BABEE Bags has been well received by families and by many early child education professionals. Stephanie’s concept is built on The Very Ready Reader, a curriculum developed for libraries that shares with parents the seven ways children learn literacy skills: Share Books, Share Sounds, Share Words, Share Rhymes, Share Songs, Share Stories, and Share Playtime.”

— Karen J. Baldwin, *Early Care and Education, Training Coach*

designed to be easy and quick to complete. Clear instructions and expectations for the BABEE Bags were created to parents to make it easy for them to work on the activities at home. ■

ALL NESTLED INN FAMILY CHILDCARE Demonstrates Optimistic Leadership:

We Think Impact to make informed decisions.

The BABEE bags program focused on learning about the impact by collecting feedback from parent surveys and conversations. This data was used to evaluate child participation, learning outcomes, and program goals. The evaluation data is part of the program's quality rating system for professional and program engagement indicators.

We Nurture Relationships to support learning and collaboration.

The BABEE Bags provide an opportunity to support learning and collaboration by sharing classroom experiences with home and community connections.



Stay-Trips

Bringing Field Trips to Children When Funds Are Low



East Allen County Schools — New Haven, Indiana

Chloe Gray, Special Education Preschool Teacher

Chloe Gray, an East Allen County School Special Education Preschool Teacher, knows preschoolers enjoy hands-on activities and going on field trips, and that these are valuable opportunities for learning. When budget cuts made field trips impossible for the school, she and other teachers brainstormed ways to bring field trips directly to their students.

Stay-trips are curriculum-centered visits from invited guests. These visits reinforce the ideas and concepts being taught in the classroom. Farmers, firefighters, and even reindeer have visited school gyms for children during stay-trips. These visits provide different types of hands-on experiences for the children to improve communication, motor skills, academics, and behavior. Parents are also invited to participate in the events.

Making a Difference

The success of stay-trips was confirmed by the children's enthusiastic reactions—the smile of a visually impaired child who touched a reindeer, and the giggles of a boy repeatedly pushing the nozzle of an air compressor. Stay-trips have re-energized the curriculum for students and given teachers a new focus.

Make it Yours

1. Have regular brainstorming sessions. Ask yourselves, “How do we bring the community to our classroom or program?”
2. Align the activities or guests brought to your program with the curriculum.
3. Seek out programs already established in the



community and work to creatively cover the expenses of your program.

4. Look for online resources, such as virtual tours for children.
5. presentation to the children (e.g., asking a floor installer to “show and tell” about the tools he uses.)
6. Think creatively and have as many of your staff involved in the process as possible.

Overcoming Obstacles

Obstacles Ms. Gray faced in creating the Stay-Trips included:

Funding. Ms. Gray had to find ways to pay for the goods, people, and services to bring into the school for Stay-Trips. She looked to the community and businesses for financial support. Some community partners waived or greatly reduced

“Since we could not take them out, we would bring the activities, people and services, as much as humanly possible to our students. For the Let’s Move unit, a Jungle Gym bus provided all sorts of physical activities while being parked in our parking lot. We feel satisfied with the outcomes, but are ever eager to increase the possibilities, as well as the frequency and length of these Stay-Trips.”

— Elizabeth A. Bixby, *Special Education Teacher*

their fees because the school served a special needs population. ■

EAST ALLEN COUNTY SCHOOLS Demonstrates Optimistic Leadership

We Think Impact to make informed decisions

Ms. Gray was motivated to develop the idea of stay-trips because she wanted to spark children’s curiosity and learning by creating opportunities for them to ask questions and learn directly from first hand experiences.

We Nurture Relationships to support learning and collaboration.

Ms. Gray was inventive in generating ideas for stay-trips. By talking with staff, enlisting families, and welcoming people from the community, stay-trips strengthened relationships for learning.

We Refine Communication for mutual clarity and understanding.

Ms. Gray was motivated to support children’s communication skills. Many of the students in the program have significant speech and language challenges. Stay-trips stimulate brain activity and language development which helps all children develop communication skills.

We Activate Curiosity to find connections and continue learning.

By having children interact with interesting guests and engage in hands-on experiences, such as having a snake slither up their arms, hammering in a nail, or following a treasure map for the first time, stay-trips open up a child’s learning and curiosity.



Family Engagement Circles Program

How to Support Children's Learning at Home with Family-Centered Engagement



Partners in Learning, Inc., MANOS Dual Language Early Childhood Program — Syracuse, NY

Erica Vernold Miller, Ed.D., Executive Director and **Eira Cotto Giron, MA**, Program Coordinator

Bilingual families in the MANOS Dual Language Early Childhood Program at Partners in Learning, Inc. wanted to support their children's academic development. However, they often lacked the skills and resources. Executive Director Erica Vernold Miller and Program Coordinator Eira Cotto Giron worked with the program's instructional coaches and professional development staff to design a series of activities to help families support their children's learning at home.

The Family Engagement Circle Program invites families to participate in 45-minute long, monthly family engagement circle activities. Staff and relevant community members/experts share their expertise on how families can support their children's academic learning at home. Information and resources are provided in the families' language whenever possible. Families also receive "take-away" activities to use at home. Topics of these family engagement circles include the importance of school attendance, reading at home, and stress management.

Making a Difference

Ms. Vernold Miller and Ms. Giron saw the success of the Family Engagement Circle Program when an average of 15 families were attending the family engagement circles. Family feedback indicated that the majority enjoyed the events and planned to use what they learned at home. Family involvement in the program has increased each year since it began.

Make it Yours

1. Start by forming an internal family engagement circle committee. Include the executive director, program coordinator, family liaison, and instructional coaches.
2. Gather suggestions from both staff and families to identify areas of interest and design your family engagement activities.
3. Have the family engagement circle committee create a yearly schedule with at least one family activity per month.
4. Get speakers/experts and resources for each scheduled event.
5. Notify families about the date/time/and topics being covered in each engagement circle.
6. Get feedback after each event to learn the strengths and weakness. Use the feedback to improve future events.



“Our Family Engagement Circle program has positively impacted our dual language, early childhood program by increasing family involvement, expanding families’ skills sets, and giving families valuable resources to support academic development at home.”

— Erica Vernold Miller, Ed.D., Executive Director

Overcoming Obstacles

Obstacles Ms. Vernold Miller faced in creating the Family Engagement Circles events included:

- 1. Identifying family interests** — The events needed to be aligned with interests of the families in the program to get them to attend. The family engagement committee was formed and asked families for input to ensure that the topics covered were relevant and of interest.
- 2. Attendance** — Attendance at previous events had been low. The timing of the events was changed from evenings to right after morning drop-off. This worked better for families and allowed staff to give reminders about the family engagement events and encourage their participation. ■



PARTNERS IN LEARNING, INC., MANOS DUAL LANGUAGE EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAM Demonstrates Optimistic Leadership:

We Think Impact to make informed decisions.

Ms. Vernold Miller and Ms. Giron collected information from and included different stakeholders in the planning process. Each stakeholder’s wisdom and insights was valued.

We Nurture Relationships to support learning and collaboration.

The program is adaptable to multiple participants, locations, and settings that foster diversity, cultural humility, and personal and social identity. The family engagement circles are provided in both

English and Spanish and are attuned to the diversity of the bilingual students and families they serve. Preferences of the families were considered when designing the schedule and delivery of the bilingual family engagement circle activities.

Monthly Team Meetings

Use Meetings to Create a Community of Leaders, Teachers, and Learners



The Country Children's Center (infant through Pre-K) — Katonah, NY
Carmelina Myers, Director of Educational Programs

When Carmelina Myers was hired as Director of Educational Programs at The Country Children's Center, she saw a need for consistent communication across the five center locations. She knew that teachers need to be well supported, be able to grow professionally, and have the resources to create high-quality environments. Outside professional development was too costly and teacher absences couldn't be covered. Ms. Myers' solution was to hold Monthly Team Meetings.

Monthly Team Meetings are an opportunity for teachers to come together to learn about topics in early childhood to further their professional development. Meetings are held on a rotating basis at each of centers. The meetings facilitate teachers getting to know each other, other center locations, and to bond as a team. Ms. Myers uses the meetings to communicate new ideas and changes to the program and ensure all program locations are operating with the same program standards and goals.

Making a Difference

Ms. Myers knew the team meetings were a success as she saw a tremendous change in how teachers from different locations communicate and work with each other. All the teachers on the teams have developed a bond and openly welcome each other, give advice, and share ideas. They reach out to each other for support and plan ways to attend conferences together. These meetings have also produced more consistency for families and

children who move from one program location to another, since teachers at all locations are following the same standards and approaches.

Make it Yours

1. Create a professional development plan that inspires teachers to see themselves as professionals/leaders in the early education field. The plan should support them in providing high-quality, consistent care of children.

Choose meeting topics related to early care and education. Include topics based on teacher observations or teacher requests.

2. Give teachers consistent support to maintain a high-quality program. Include opportunities for both learning and collaborating with colleagues. Implement ways to keep communication flowing with teachers.
3. Structure the meetings to meet your program's organization and needs. Decide on a time, place (if more than one program location), and regularity. Meetings can be monthly or more often.
4. Be consistent. Hold meetings regularly. Try not to cancel meetings—have a rescheduled date if needed.



Overcoming Obstacles

Obstacles Ms. Myers faced in implementing the Monthly Team Meetings included:

- 1. Scheduling** — Meetings had to be held when the centers were open and could not interfere with the care of children. The directors made the meeting part of the weekly staffing schedule. The meetings are held during naptime when there are no transitions, meals, or activities involved. Anyone is able to cover for staff during time, including the director or office staff.
- 2. Accountability** — Teachers needed to attend the meetings and be on time. Attendance for teachers was a requirement. If a teacher didn't show up, the director was contacted to find out why. If a teacher wasn't able to attend, the meeting lead/organizer was informed in advance.
- 3. Communication** — Teachers were not consistently getting meeting information. This issue was solved by communicating

“This has been an extremely effective way to overcome the problem of unequal programming throughout the Center. Our program has flourished and the quality of the program we deliver remains consistent. The same high-quality program can be experienced no matter which of our sites a family enrolls in. This has helped us to maintain our brand and to continue our reputation in the community.”

— Polly Peace, Executive Director

directly with everyone through group emails. Communication was consistent and there was a meeting reminder sent the day before every meeting with meeting place and assignments. ■

THE COUNTRY CHILDREN'S CENTER Demonstrates Optimistic Leadership

We Think Impact to make informed decisions.

Ms. Myers was motivated by a clear sense of purpose: to facilitate teachers getting to know each other across center locations so that they could bond as a team. Research shows that strong teams influence positive program climate which in turns enhances program quality.

We Activate Curiosity to find connections and continue learning.

The team meetings fulfill teachers' desires to try new things and provide continuous professional development.

We Nurture Relationships to support learning and collaboration.

Meetings allow teachers to make connections with each other and spend time with like minds. In turn, staff feel supported and relationships are created and strengthened. The meetings provide a collaborative learning environment, allowing teachers to learn to listen to and ask for feedback from each other.

We Cultivate Self-Awareness to guide thought, emotion, and behavior.

Teachers leave the meetings with more clarity on how they lead their classroom because they had the opportunity to reflect on their practices. We refine communication.



Parents Are Wonderful (PAW) Literacy Initiative

Engaging Parents in Literacy at School and in Their Neighborhoods



Crisp County Schools — Cordele, Georgia

Monica Warren, Director of Early Learning

In response to reports that children were lagging in school readiness and had poor literacy scores, Crisp County Schools developed a comprehensive plan to engage families in their children's literacy development. Monica Warren, Director of Early Learning, led the creation of the "PAW" or Parents Are Wonderful initiative.

Parents Are Wonderful is a family engagement approach that includes three parts: a Mobile Literacy Center, school-time parent involvement activities, and a Parent Advocate Certificate. The Mobile Literacy Center is a library on wheels that brings books and resources to parents at PAW workshops and activities held in their neighborhoods. Family activities are held monthly during the school day and focus on teaching basic parenting skills linked to literacy and math (along with a social-emotional component). Teachers use scripted activities during PAW time. Families are given scripted activities to complete at home. Families who attend specific PAW activities earn a Parent Advocate Certificate and help run the Mobile Literacy Center and recruit other families.

Making a Difference

Ms. Warren knew PAW was a success when children's scores increased on literacy assessments. Children with the lowest scores on the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-4 gained an average of 11 points. Their scores on the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills increased from 48% to 64%. Part of this gain is from teaching families how to support language and literacy instruction in the home. Children and their families are excited to attend the meetings and complete the projects.

Make it Yours

1. Involve all staff members in every aspect of the planning, implementation, and review of program. Ask families to help with topic ideas. Include

a staff review after each meeting to consider successes and needed improvements.

2. Schedule PAW activities. Choose a day and time each month (or whatever time period you choose) that is consistent.
3. Brainstorm and create monthly PAW topics and activities. Prepare scripts for teacher instructions and the parent handouts they will use.



4. Create monthly parent home activities. Plan engaging activities that allow parents and children to spend time together and for parents to “teach” and model for their children.
5. If you want to have a Mobile Literacy Center: Plan for retrofitting a school bus/vehicle to be a Mobile Literacy Center. Space inside the vehicle should accommodate different uses, including “mobile” workshops on developmental topics. Share plans throughout the community to get funding for the Mobile Literacy Center.
6. Partner with local technical schools/colleges to design the Parent Advocate Certificate. Parents need to meet a specific requirement(s) to earn the certificate.
7. Evaluate the effectiveness/success of each component in your family engagement plan. Make changes as needed.

Overcoming Obstacles

Obstacles Ms. Warren faced in creating PAW included:

1. **Low parent attendance** — Many families could not attend meetings held at night. Adjustments were made to consistently schedule monthly meetings throughout the year during school time. Family attendance has increased to having more than 1/3 of all families each month.

“We consistently have at least a third of our parents in attendance at monthly PAW time activities. Families often ask if they will still conduct monthly PAW time activities when their child enters kindergarten. Due to the success of the program, the county has begun incorporating quarterly PAW Time programs for kindergarten families with equal success”

Toni Lanneau, *Crisp County Pre-K Teacher*



2. **Transportation for families** — Some families had difficulty getting to meetings. Funding was secured through grants to offer transportation to parent meetings (PAW) and to create a Mobile Literacy Center to go to neighborhoods and deliver PAW meetings in the community ■

CRISP COUNTY SCHOOLS Demonstrates Optimistic Leadership

We Think Impact to make informed decisions.

At the core of Ms. Warren’s thinking and planning was her purpose: to enhance children’s school readiness and literacy learning while also strengthening family engagement. Moreover, throughout the program, Ms. Warren engages in ongoing evaluation of the program’s effectiveness and success and makes changes as needed.

We Nurture Relationships to support learning and collaboration.

The PAW program provides time for families and teachers to work together and facilitate families and children to create something together while practicing a skill. The program shows families that they and their children matter. Moreover, Ms. Warren strengthened relationships by involving all staff members in every aspect of the planning, implementation, and review of the program.



Literacy Bags: Connecting Literacy with Families

Lending Library Bags Promote Literacy and Family Connections in Child Care Centers



Twinkeling Stars Child Care — Neenah, Wisconsin
Stephanie Winkel, Owner and Child Care Provider

Owner and Provider of Twinkeling Stars Child Care Stephanie Winkel wanted to increase parents' understanding of the importance of early literacy without making them feel judged or criticized. Her goal was to help parents become advocates for their children's literacy. Literacy Bags for families are book bags with three to five books in each and two to three literacy activities to accompany the books. Each activity has information on the developmental skills targeted and instructions on how to implement the activities at home. All of the literacy activities correspond to what is taught in the child care program. Families can check out the literacy bags free of charge. There is also a lending library at the center's entrance where families can check out and return bags. Bags are rotated quarterly.

Making a Difference

Ms. Winkel knew that the Literacy Bags were a success when families began taking their children to the library more often. Children started talking about their trips to the library and the books they were reading. It was obvious that parents were understanding the importance of early literacy and having a variety of reading materials. Some parents began noticing children's early literacy skills and could describe with pride what their children were able to do. One mother shared how excited she was that her child knew the letters of the alphabet.

Make it Yours

1. Collect books and curriculum ideas first. Shop for books at thrift or bargain stores. Choose 2-3 activities that can be duplicated to include in the literacy bags. Collect 3-5 books and 1-3 literacy activities for each bag.
2. Create descriptions of bag items. Make a list of the books and activities that go in each bag so parents can easily find all the items that need to be returned. Write short descriptions on how to complete each activity. Include developmental skills to be gained through the activities.

3. Put the bags together. Decide on the type of bags for the books and literacy activities. Use backpacks, reusable shopping bags, pillowcases, or canvas bags. Label the bags. A photo of the literacy theme on the label will draw children's attention.
4. Set up a lending library center. Find an area that is easy for families to access. Place a sign-in/out sheet and pen in the library center, along with a sign introducing the literacy bags.
5. Introduce the bags to children and families. Send families a newsletter to introduce the new lending library and literacy bags. Encourage families to check them out. Explain to the children how they can take the bags home and read with their families. Introduce new bags to both families and children each time the bags are changed.





6. Monitor the bags when they are changed quarterly. Check for any missing or broken items. Replace them as needed. If a family doesn't check out bags often, ask why and try to help them to do so.

Overcoming Obstacles

Obstacles Ms. Winkel faced in creating the Literacy Bags included:

1. **Time** — Ms. Winkel found there wasn't enough time to create all the bags at once. She began

“The children at Twinkling Stars have a greater love of learning because of the literacy bags. The bags are an opportunity for parents to continue the love of literacy at home. Children learn that it's not only at school that reading is exciting; home is also a place for books.”

— **Natalie Schmidt**, *student teacher*

creating the bags in increments. After a month, four bags were created. Then, the lending library was set up. The next season, four more bags were created and by the end of the year, 16 bags had been created. The bags were easily monitored and rotated.

2. **Cost** — The cost of creating 16 literacy bags was high. In order to reduce costs, she purchased used books in excellent condition. Families were asked to purchase books through Scholastic book orders. Points earned through Scholastic orders were used to get free books for the bags.
3. **Unused Bags** — Some literacy bags weren't being checked out. Families were asked about what worked and what didn't work. Based on family feedback the bags were paired down to three books and one literacy activity. ■

TWINKLING STARS CHILD CARE Demonstrates Optimistic Leadership

We Think Impact to make informed decisions.

The decision to create literacy bags were based on research about early literacy and family engagement. Ms. Winkel's goal was to make parents advocates for their children's love of literature and learning.

We Cultivate Self-Awareness to guide thought, emotion, and behavior.

At the core of Ms. Winkel's thinking and planning, she was careful to develop and implement a strategy that would be respectful and inclusive of families rather than judgmental or critical.

We Nurture Relationships to support learning and collaboration.

Spending time reading with their parents at home strengthens children's interest in and love for books and reading. The Literacy Bag program created bonding experiences for families, children, and staff. Families gained tools to help educate their children. The Literacy Bags provided a method to strengthen communication between the child care providers and families.