

# EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHER & LEADER *of the Year*

The Louisiana Department of Education is proud to announce the 2026 Early Childhood Teacher and Leader of the Year. The 10 Teacher and Leader Finalists represent early childhood care and education sites across the state. This is the fourth year the LDOE has presented these awards, which are designed to honor the early education teachers and administrators who care for and educate infants, toddlers, and preschoolers.

All Early Childhood Teacher and Leader of the Year finalists will be honored at the 19<sup>th</sup> Annual Cecil. J. Picard Educator Excellence Gala Celebration, which will be held at the World War II Museum in New Orleans. This exciting event is co-sponsored by [Dream Teachers](#).

*Congratulations to these outstanding educators and leaders!*

## 2026 EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHER OF THE YEAR



**Brooklynn Johnson-Botley** has over 10 years of experience and believes that her "most pressing mission as an educator is to nurture a love of learning in students, equipping them with the critical thinking skills and knowledge necessary to navigate their future!" Brooklynn works in Early Childhood Education because she "loves to be one of the first teachers a child has. It has always been my passion to help children build that love for learning and to help each child in my care reach their full personal goals." She states that the Early Childhood work is important to her "because I find it deeply rewarding to be a part of shaping young minds and fostering a love for learning; witnessing their daily growth and milestones is incredibly fulfilling, and I feel like I'm making a significant impact on their future potential!"

*Brooklynn Johnson-Botley*  
Kinder Head Start, Allen Parish

## 2026 EARLY CHILDHOOD LEADER OF THE YEAR



**Devonda Whittington-Warren** has over 10 years of experience. Devonda believes that her "most pressing mission is to ensure all children have access to quality education in a welcoming and safe environment as well as providing valuable resources for children and families." Devonda has dedicated over 30 years to this field because she firmly believes that the early years, from birth to age five, are the foundation of a child's future. During these formative years, she states that "the most rapid brain development occurs, laying the groundwork for learning, interpersonal growth, and problem-solving skills. I have witnessed the transformative power of high-quality care and education during this period, which shapes children's potential and paves the way for their future success. My commitment to Early Childhood Education is unwavering. This work is not just about teaching; it involves nurturing children's confidence, curiosity, and resilience while providing them with the tools they need to thrive."

*Devonda  
Whittington-Warren*  
Explore and Learn Early Learning Center,  
Tangipahoa Parish

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## 2026 EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHER OF THE YEAR FINALISTS



**Demika Gilmore**  
East Baton Rouge Parish



**Shannon Catanzaro**  
Jefferson Parish



**Ana Qassem**  
Plaquemines Parish



**Sharekia Winn**  
Red River Parish

## 2026 EARLY CHILDHOOD LEADER OF THE YEAR FINALISTS



**Dr. Sondra Washington**  
Iberville Parish



**Shannon Johns**  
Rapides Parish



**Delishia Wilson**  
Tangipahoa Parish



**Jennifer Stevenson**  
Washington Parish