



Monday, January 30, 2023

Early Childhood Teacher and Leader of the Year Application 2022-2023

Thank you for applying for the Early Childhood Teacher or Leader of the Year Award. You can refer to the guidance documents for 2022-2023 found on the Louisiana Believes Awards page, in the Early Childhood Section. <https://www.louisianabelieves.com/resources/library/awards>. You can also download the guidance documents directly from this application below. The application is due Monday January 30 by 5 p.m.

Applicant's Personal Information

Please share your personal information so that the LDOE may appropriately address you, contact you, and refer you as needed throughout the application review process.

Please upload a professional headshot, if you are able. Save as "Your Name Headshot."

ex: "Devon Camarota Headshot"

Applicant's Name

XX

Applicant's preferred pronouns

she/her/hers

For which award are you applying?

Early Childhood Leader of the Year

Applicant's Date of Birth

Wednesday, May 22, 1991

Applicant's Email XX@gmail.com

Applicant's Home Address XXX Street
Baton Rouge, LA, 70802

Applicant's Personal Phone Number (225)222-2222

Please select the parish in which you work East Baton Rouge

Applicant's Site Type CCAP Certified Type III Center

Name of Applicant's center or site of Employment ABC Preschool

Address of your place of employment XXX Road
Baton Rouge, LA, 70802

Please indicate the name of the person who nominated you for this award Shallan Jones

Please enter the email address for the person who nominated you for this award shallan.jones@la.gov

Please describe briefly your relationship with the person who nominated you for this award.

XX is the Instructional Coordinator for the XX Parish Early Childhood Network. We have worked closely for the past few years since XX Preschool joined the B-3 program in 2021. XX is a strong support to our community and frequently visits our center for coaching visits. In Fall of 2022, XX Preschool partnered with XX Parish Early Childhood Network to create an Instructional Coaching pilot program, and XX has been our point of contact and a wonderful partner in the program. She works closely with our site's coaches to ensure they are comfortable and progressing within the Lastinger Coaching program, and checks in with me regularly to discuss progress, challenges, etc. This program has allowed us to support growth and professional development for two teachers at our site, and has also provided more frequent and intentional coaching across all eleven classrooms at our site. XX and I have regular conversations about our aspirations and hopes for the network and early childhood field overall, and we often brainstorm and plan ways to support other sites. I am so thankful for all of her wonderful support, and for her acknowledgement of my efforts through nominating me for this award.

Please share a quote that embodies your philosophy, or vision, as an educator "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." - Maya Angelou

In 1-2 sentences, what do you think is your most pressing mission as an educator? It is imperative that we support present early childhood leaders in their growth, and that we continue to recruit, cultivate and empower future early childhood leaders to create enriching, intentional programs that encompass all benchmarks of quality including: strong instructional leadership, high-quality curriculum and assessment, equitable access, diverse environments, family involvement and emotionally supportive communities.

Professional History

How many years have you worked in the early childhood education field?

More than 10 years

Do you have your Early Childhood Ancillary Certificate?

Yes, I have already earned this.

Please select your highest level of education

Master's Degree

Please select the age(s) you teach or work with currently at your site.

Infants

1 year olds

2 year olds

3 year olds

4 year olds

5 year olds

School aged children

Please give a brief description of what makes you an excellent early childhood educator or leader.

I am committed to inspiring and empowering other current and future early childhood leaders, and to keep learning and developing individually. I believe in the value of community and prioritize community building with other early educators and other stakeholders, as well as within the center I lead. It is important to me that all families feel involved and trusting, and that our community allows opportunities for parent involvement, parent voice, and parent relationship-building with each other. My hope is that every child feels loved and encouraged, and I work hard to intentionally create a culturally competent, diverse, equitable and inclusive environment to support students with a variety of backgrounds and learning needs. I value my teammates and remain dedicated to ensure they feel valued and empowered. I seek out and create opportunities for teachers to grow and develop, professionally. I frequently reflect on my practices, and seek to understand perspectives of others, mental models that may affect their perspectives, and try to remember the "big picture." I remain mindful of my core value of compassion, and with each challenge or difference in opinion, I try to act with kindness and empathy. I understand that it will take many participants to continue increasing access to high quality early childhood education and I am enthusiastic to be a part of a community that will impact the early childhood landscape!

Essay Responses (Teacher of the Year)

If you are applying for the Teacher of the Year award, choose three of the four essay prompts below. If you would like to answer all four, you may. Applications that answer fewer than 3 will not be accepted. Skip to the next section if you are a Leader of the Year applicant.

Essay Responses (Leader of the Year)

If you are applying for the Leader of the Year Award, choose three of the four essay prompts below. If you would like to answer all four, you may. Applications that answer fewer than 3 will not be accepted.

How do you communicate with your staff on the importance of what they do? How do you motivate them and provide a positive work environment?

We all have a story and we all have a "why." Our "why" is what motivates us and encourages us to continue the work that is important to us despite challenging times. For me, my "why" comes from childhood, and the appreciation I have for the strong supports that helped me overcome adversity. My "why" bridges into my teen years where I naturally loved working with young children at camp every summer, and particularly bonded with children who needed a little "more." My "why" remembers the stories I was told by my father and his siblings of their own childhood experiences in their origin

country where they were subjected to religious persecution. And my “why” story continues when I moved to New Orleans for college and learned more about the education landscape here. These memories and experiences are part of “why” I became compelled to create a landscape where every child feels loved and encouraged.

I communicate with my staff on the importance of what they do, motivate them and provide a positive work environment, partially through sharing my own “why.” I am transparent, I share my experiences and goals, and prompt team members to reflect on their own. With every new team member, I ask, “what is your why?” and I sometimes open training sessions and staff meetings with a giant piece of chart paper with “WHY” written across the middle. I encourage open conversations between team members about the reasons we have each chosen this work, and what motivates us, intrinsically. These conversations encourage team building, and remind each individual of the reasons they chose to work with young children. These are some of the moments that bring us back, and keep us going. This is the rawest form of motivation I can inspire.

Beyond personal intrinsic motivations to do this work, I try to ensure all of my team members have an understanding of how important child development really is, and the impact their work has on children’s lifelong outcomes. I work to build the knowledge of my staff, so that they understand how imperative it is to provide high quality learning environments. I share data, research outcomes, personal experience, and scholarly articles. I support each team member in attending as many professional development sessions as possible, and motivate them to gain an Early Childhood Ancillary Certificate and beyond. I share Louisiana Pathways Scholarship information and motivate team members to continue learning and developing, and support their educational and professional growth in every way.

With each new topic I introduce, each policy I implement, and each decision we make collaboratively, I always share the why. Members of my team understand the intent behind our practices. My center’s teachers understand why it is so important to have positive interactions, and why we utilize the CLASS framework. They understand the connections between positive relationships and long term effects on children’s self confidence. Many of them understand how regard for child perspectives enables independence, and can also improve challenging behaviors. They understand the importance of positive behavior guidance, and why instructional learning should be meaningful, hands-on, and intentional. Our teachers understand why we have selected to use Creative Curriculum, that it is important to implement with fidelity, what it means to implement with fidelity, and that there is purpose behind each activity. Our teachers have an understanding of Louisiana’s Early Learning and Development Standards and how to review them to best support children.

I frequently share resources like articles from Harvard’s Center for Developing Child, NAEYC’s Core Competencies, and other credible resources. I stay up to date and aware of the latest research, and connect staff members to resources and opportunities to learn more on their self-chosen focuses. I meet with teachers, administration, and support staff regularly to set and review professional development plans, discuss long term plans, and set SMART Goals. I often utilize Transformative Coaching techniques to help support adult-growth.

Our intensive onboarding process introduces new teachers to these concepts, and our mentor teachers partner with incoming staff to guide them in adult-learning. Our school leaders support our model of Instructional Leadership and ensure teachers have the support they need, opportunities to be observed and given feedback, and access to Instructional Coaches. These examples reflect some of the things that motivate our team, help them understand the importance of what they do, and also contribute to our positive work environment.

I work intentionally to create a positive, structured organizational climate. Our structure has many opportunities for positive affirmation, such as the “Shout-Out Board” that highlights accomplishments, “XX Fest,” an event that honors our teachers, frequent surprise lunches or treats, and lots of certificates and thank yous. I’ve also created a climate that utilizes the Parallel Process, a process that mimics the CLASS framework we use with our students, with adult learners. We have created a Positive Climate, and focus on relationship building and respectful interactions through simple “good mornings!” frequent meetings, team-building activities and peer learning communities. We avoid negative climate, and handle conflict with sensitivity. I remain aware of what’s going on, and how staff may feel individually, and our team remains responsive. I show regard for others perspectives and teach others to do the same.

I scaffold with teachers to help them build greater understanding, and provide information and

resources in response to their questions. I provide specific affirmation and feedback when they are succeeding, and I take a restorative approach in response to their conflicts and challenges. Everything is a learning opportunity, and I often use probing questions to help support growth. I remain transparent and share my own thinking to help build understanding. I seek out ways to support staff with positive feedback and recognition of their accomplishments and contributions to our community. I prioritize providing a positive and emotionally supportive environment for our teachers, just as they do for our students.

In recent years, I am seeing more centers adopt positive environments and strong organizational climates, which I absolutely love to see! These are practices I have been implementing from the beginning of my leadership. I seek every opportunity to create an environment where teachers want to stay. Our retention rates are very high, our teachers stay for years at a time, and when asked why they choose to stay at XX, they express that they feel appreciated, supported, and believe they have opportunity for growth. These responses fulfill me, as it is truly part of my mission to ensure all staff feel empowered, supported and appreciated.

I seek every opportunity to help our teachers grow both professionally, and financially. I provide financial incentives such as bonuses or meaningful gifts to reward high level performance and spread a little "happy." I have engaged in opportunities for LaCap and ARPA grants, Teacher Supplemental Grant, PPP loan, EIDL loans, and the Workforce Development Program. Despite guidance from accountants, financial consultants, and other seasoned early childhood leaders, I have never once looked at cutting labor costs or staff salaries. Opportunities have arisen for personal financial success, but I have always and will always prioritize our teachers and our students. For me, this work has always been about giving back to the teachers as much as is possible. I am known to be generous and try to help our teachers and their families as much as I possibly can. They are doing this incredibly challenging, important work and deserve to be compensated appropriately. I am thankful to say that with effective financial planning, our teachers are able to have salaries/pay rates significantly higher than the industry average, and now have decent benefits packages. I will continue to advocate for them and seek ways to increase their compensation and benefits to ensure it is at a level worthy of their hard work.

I am also very committed to empowerment. I strongly believe in empowering other early childhood educators and leaders, regularly providing opportunities for growth and development for our staff inside and outside the center. One of my teachers recently wrote, "XX has not only led us to be great teachers, but she is also leading us to become great leaders." Hearing this statement gave me the chills, because I am so incredibly proud of the growth and development of the teachers on our team, and I hope to see them make waves in the early childhood industry in whichever roles they are most passionate about. I believe that cultivating and supporting current and future early childhood leaders is how we will truly grow this field to serve all children in need of high quality early childhood education. Our team of approximately forty staff members is comprised of many different roles, many of which have been created to support areas of interest. On our team, we have another Director besides myself, who years ago was a teacher in one of the classrooms at XX Preschool, and has grown into one of the most admirable early childhood leaders I've encountered. We also have an Assistant Director who prior to starting at XX, only had classroom teaching experience, and has grown and continuously learned and is now one of the strongest supporters in our center. We have two teachers who are currently going through Coaching credentialing with Lastinger Center alongside XX Parish Early Childhood Coaches and provide a minimum of three hours of coaching per week to each of our classrooms. We have a teacher who serves as our Assessment Specialist; she works to support other teachers in ensuring TSGOLD documentation is timely and accurate, and we have a teacher who is available to support other teachers going through the CDA or ECAC programs. We have a teacher who supports Onboarding and Welcoming new employees, several teachers who act as Mentor Teachers, a group of teachers committed to diversity and planning cultural events, a staff member who supports celebrations like birthdays and anniversaries and two teachers who act as "Ambassadors" for our family communication app. These roles are ever changing as team members have new ideas or express interest in different areas, and we have created an environment where everyone truly has a valuable role. At XX preschool, input from all stakeholders contribute to our program's success. I also share opportunities with teachers and staff that extend beyond site walls. I have brought teachers and administrators to major events like Early Ed Day at the Capitol, and invite them to networking events and opportunities. This past year, I invested in all staff having the opportunity to attend the

Department's Early Childhood Conference, and rented hotel rooms for our team members to stay downtown and continue team building and networking. I share advocacy information and forward emails to our team, to help them understand the big picture in our field and gain awareness of opportunities to be involved in whatever level they feel inspired to. At no point do I want any teacher or staff member to feel limited in their knowledge or abilities, and I expose them to as many opportunities as I can find.

My personal core value is Compassion, and I try to act with kindness and empathy always. This includes seeing the perspectives of others. When our teachers have setbacks or failures, I empathize with them, try to understand, and help them switch gears; and if necessary, I provide resources to help them refocus. When staff members accomplish their goals, I celebrate with them, and encourage them to set new goals, to continue motivating growth. Celebrating accomplishments with teammates has truly become some of my favorite moments. I have supported and celebrated teachers and staff becoming certified CLASS Observers, becoming Credentialed Coaches, participating in Campfire Coaching and MTP Coaching, completing their degrees in early childhood, beginning new degree programs, earning Autism Certifications, completing ECAC programs, scoring exemplary on CLASS observations, successfully gaining the attention of classrooms full of toddlers, and even simply keeping smiles on for the day. Currently, my leadership team is enrolled in a peer learning community studying McCormick Center for Early Childhood's "Whole Leadership Framework" with Learning Matters Consulting so they can all continue learning the important qualities to spread our positivity and growth even further

At XX, our team often uses the hashtag #XXCares. We all strive to live up to this tagline, as we truly do all care. In hiring practices, I seek out prospective teachers that reflect the same core values that we believe in. Our core values at XX Preschool are "compassion, community, consideration, commitment and creativity." Each year we host core value awards, and take a peer vote and recognize the staff members that embody these values. Clearly defining and establishing these values, implementing them and immersing them within our culture, has truly helped us create such a wonderful, positive, and supportive environment, helping our staff understand the importance of what they do.

Imagine you're meeting parents with their first toddler, unsure about starting child care. What would you say to them?

When meeting parents with their first toddler, unsure about starting child care, I would respond with compassion and seek to understand the parent's concerns. I would first ask questions like, "what are your hesitations?" or "what would you like to know?" to better understand their hesitations so that I can respond in a way that best supports the family. If the parents feel comfortable opening up and sharing their uncertainties, I will validate their concerns, empathize where I can, and may even share my own personal experiences with my child.

If the parents are unsure about starting child care because they are hesitant to leave their child for the first time, I will empathize with compassion. I do understand how incredibly hard it is to leave a child in someone else's care, and I will reassure them of the positive, emotionally supportive environments that exist, as well as the social-emotional benefits for children who build bonds with other caregivers. I will reassure them of required teacher credentials and training, (ECAC, CPR and First Aid, Mandated Reporter, Health and Safety) and will suggest questions they may ask or things they may look for when touring early childhood sites. If the parents are interested in my program, I will invite them to meet the teachers and encourage them to ask any questions they may have. If there is an indication that resources or mental health supports are needed, I will ask if they would like me to share any community resources. I will relationship-build, tailor my responses to their needs, and reassure the parents that everything will be okay.

If the parents express hesitations due to fear of negative connotations of child care centers, I would acknowledge this feeling, and again, reassure them that a few negative experiences that have gone viral on the Internet are not representative of the industry as a whole. I would share resources on how to find a safe, quality early child care center such as Louisiana School Finder. I would share Bulletin 137 and Department of Health guidelines, and would show the family where to find deficiencies. I will share things to look for, questions to ask, and will help them understand the ways in which child care sites are highly regulated to ensure the health and safety of students. In this scenario, I will also share

Louisiana's credential and training requirements, as well as the federal criminal background check requirements, and will explain how these measures support safe environments. If the family is interested in my center, I would share our safety features like video-monitoring, training protocols for new staff, our relationship with the local police department, etc. I will offer to be a support for the parents and invite them to reach out as they are touring other centers with any additional questions they may have.

If the parents express that they simply do not think it's necessary to enroll in child care and they will attend school in Kindergarten, I will share the data. Toddlers and young children develop at an incredibly rapid rate; 90% of brain development occurs before age five, and the experiences they have in early childhood years significantly impacts life-long outcomes. I will share the most recent data on Kindergarten Readiness and show them that children who attend high quality early childhood programs enter elementary school with strong Kindergarten readiness skills. I will reassure them that although we are focusing on certain skills, Louisiana's Early Learning and Development Standards focus on a whole-child approach which includes social-emotional development and skills such as socialization, sharing, etc. I will share that high quality programs focus on high quality interactions and ask intriguing questions designed to build language skills, enhance cognitive development, and improve critical thinking skills - all of which are life long skills. I will explain that although there is an intentional focus on skill building, learning occurs during intentional, meaningful, play-based experiences; and learning at early childhood centers is fun!

If the parents are interested in continuing the dialogue, I will share that in quality early childhood programs, emotional support is a primary focus. In addition to academics and cognitive development, children learn how to form positive, trusting relationships with peers and adults, learn self-regulation skills, and build independence; all things that lead to high levels of self-confidence. I will share examples of children creating sweet little friendships with peers, and note that there is not much that is cuter than witnessing these interactions. Depending on the age of the child, the child will learn important social skills such as "turn taking," empathy, and other important life-long skills.

If the family is interested in my site, I will share with them examples of the intentional hands-on learning activities we facilitate. I will show them the classroom environments; structured, yet fun and flexible. In each classroom they will see children engaging in different tactile, creative, sensory experiences all with intention and purpose. I will share research behind the high quality curriculum we use, and will share the importance of developmental assessments.

I will also share with the family that at my site, and at many other sites, our community is one big family. Myself and my team are easily accessible, and we often become part of our students' extended family. It takes a village, and a child care center can be a part of that family's village. Families and teachers are connected, and joining a child care center is sometimes gaining a whole new network of support. I will offer to share the contact information of other families if that is helpful, and will invite them to reach out with any other questions they may have. I will wish them the best of luck and will reassure them that no matter what, it will all work out.

What makes you an excellent early childhood educator?

What makes me an excellent early childhood educator is the many wonderful communities I have the opportunity to be a part of. As a System's Thinker, I seek to understand the different ways systems and/or communities interact with each other, and how they interact within. I have come to realize that interactions within my various communities as well as the interactions between them have truly enabled me to be the excellent early childhood educator I've always hoped to and continue to strive to be.

"Community" is one of my personal Core Values, and because of that I have made it one of XX Preschool's Core Values. It is important to me to create a strong sense of community within our community, both within the direct XX community as well as within our larger community. We work intentionally to provide a diverse, equitable and inclusive environment for our students, their families and our staff, and we intentionally act to create a positive, connected culture where everyone has the opportunity to be involved.

XX Preschool is a Type III center in XX Parish, licensed for 161 students including CCAP students, B-3 students and private pay students. We have students with a variety of developmental

needs and socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds. We intentionally place students into classrooms based on a variety of factors, including age, developmental level and cultural or socio-economic background. We believe a true equitable environment will allow plenty of opportunities for students from different environments to interact with one another.

We are committed to ensuring our teachers are knowledgeable and equipped to support our families and their children. All staff have participated in Cultural Competency professional development with Advancing Communities for Equity / which has advanced the relationships and inclusivity between our staff's community, and has also made our teachers more aware of supporting families' differences. We were recently approved to participate in a Two-Generational Pilot Project with Jeffers Parish to advance outcomes for Latino children and families, and our team members are so excited to embrace this in our center. Sometimes, conversations around Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, can be challenging, and we have created a network where we can openly discuss, share scholarly resources and address areas of concern. In my coaching work with the Louisiana Early Leaders Academy, I have also had the opportunity to support Leaders in other centers in understanding this content, including NAEYC's Anti-Racist Framework, and implementing proactive strategies in their own centers.

Diversity, equity and inclusion is very important to us and is well displayed by our diverse student body and team members. We embrace the cultures represented in our school community and celebrate and learn about cultural celebrations together. For Hispanic Heritage month, we invited members of the Hispanic Heritage Club from our partner High School to perform for our students. They danced, played cultural music, and shared traditional clothing for our students who absolutely loved this experience. For Ramadan and Eid, families shared favorite music while students danced together and supported their classmates' celebrations. For Lunar New Year, several families have volunteered to contribute to the program helping students learn about lucky practices, including making paper lanterns and dragon puppets. Every year we celebrate Black History Month all month long learning about incredible leaders and inventors, while celebrating and embracing our differences. Last summer, we had a fabulous Juneteenth celebration; children wore black, red, green and yellow, and a parent from the school came and played music while we all enjoyed snowballs. We celebrate special dates and holidays all year long in these ways, and always invite our families to contribute. Activities like these are based on developmentally appropriate practice and are all heavily researched prior to hosting. These events have truly contributed to the wonderful, family environment we have. It's so very important to me that all of our students, their families, and our teachers feel celebrated and valued.

Within our focus on providing a diverse, equitable, and inclusive environment, my passion for supporting students with exceptionalities has increased and spread amongst my team. In the past several years, I have been inspired to learn more about students with various learning needs, and have inspired others on my team to learn more. We all work together to support families, each other, and other staff members in learning to have inclusive environments and provide accommodations and support. Multiple team members have earned Autism Certifications, and one staff member has completed her Bachelor's degree in Differentiated Instruction. Our team members and myself have been exposed to a wide variety of professional development opportunities including various frameworks and strategies to best support students with differentiated learning needs.

School-wide, we implement several tools and strategies from Conscious Discipline, and we also utilize the Pyramid Model Framework to ensure our environments and practices best support all students. All classrooms are equipped with visual supports, timers, and other resources and all teachers are trained on implementing these tools. In addition to using TS GOLD data to identify developmental levels and tailor curriculum objectives, we also administer Ages and Stages Questionnaires and other screeners on all students, and share insight and results with families. In 2022, XX Parish Early Childhood Collaborative created a Developmental Screening Initiative to increase developmental screenings in all early childhood sites, and I joined the Advisory Council to help begin the project. In my work, I frequently find myself building close relationships with families to help support them through the processes of evaluations and services. There have been many occasions I've taken after-hours phone calls to support stressed parents of children and helped guide them through advocating for their own child. This work truly inspires me, as I honestly believe every child deserves to feel loved, confident and supported, and sometimes all it takes is a little adjustment in the environment or teaching style.

Our Core Value of Community also focuses on building a collaborative community with our families. Partnering with families is one of the most joyful parts of my role at XX Preschool. From the

moments before registration, we really focus on relationship building with our prospective families. While of course our tours share information about us, we intentionally ask a lot of questions to get to know the families better too. We send a digital form to all families that ask a variety of questions about the child/family background including sleeping and eating habits, preferences, and religious/cultural traditions they'd like to share. This information gives us an opportunity to be inclusive of the family's traditions in the classroom environment and shares data on which holidays and events are most celebrated within our community.

While the years of the Covid-19 pandemic presented me with many challenges in communication between families and teachers, I also think this increased my relationships with families. I focused heavily on communication during this scary time. I proactively communicated every change and decision, taking phone calls during quarantines, and learned as much as I could about the illness and pandemic. I remained in communication with our local Office of Public Health to consistently share information with families, and surveyed families on their thoughts about major decisions so we could create new policies together. Overall, I received lots of positive feedback about the healthy environment and positive communications strategies during the pandemic.

At the time of the pandemic is when we introduced our parent communication application. This allowed teachers and families to remain in contact with each other, even when families were unable to come into the classrooms. We held regular Zoom conferences, so families and children could work together to identify and plan children's goals. Teachers make an effort to post all lesson plans and activities, as well as suggested home activities to ensure families are connected with what's going on in the classroom. There are so many sweet photos and messages shared on the app from the teachers to families, highlighting the learning standards within the activities the children are engaging in. We have two formal conferences with each family annually, where we use TSGold or other assessments to go through children's progress and create goals together. Of course, there are many informal meetings within as well; we communicate to all families our open door policy, so they know they can count on us to work through the tough stuff with them. I truly try to be a support for families, within their children's development and also often supporting families in parenting challenges, and sharing referrals or resources.

In the time since Covid-19 restrictions have relaxed, we have been able to focus even more so on our community and the family type environment we have. In addition to the natural relationships that form between families and teachers, we try to also help facilitate relationship building between parents and families through introductions and events. We have three large festivals (Fall Fest, Winter Fest and Spring Fest) each year which give families an opportunity to come together and enjoy spending time with each other. These events are so much fun and are completely free of charge for families, although we often host fundraisers within. Each festival has a different type of animal enrichment, such as petting zoo or pony rides; plenty of sensory opportunities like fake snow in Winter, pumpkin patch and hay in the Fall; face painting, crafts, snacks, treats, music and more! These events really give us all the opportunity to relax and enjoy and relationship-build in a positive setting. Many families and parents volunteer to help us set up and operate stations. We also host other seasonal events such as "Muffins in the Morning," "Donut Dates" and "Open House" that also keep our families involved and allow opportunities for networking.

Within this larger school community, I am so lucky to have an incredible team of support within our leadership team. My administration team supports me side by side in all my work, and several teachers in our center have taken on leadership roles to contribute to a beautiful environment and provide excellence. These opportunities for leadership and empowerment have improved the peer community between our teachers and support staff. We take several initiatives to team build and provide space for community building, teamwork and partnership between our team members. This has resulted in them creating strong professional relationships and working together to ensure our students receive the best possible early care and education.

Amongst our internal teaching team and support staff, we take many opportunities to identify each others' value. We enroll in professional development opportunities offered by our network and our lead agency, and I also seek out opportunities from other professional organizations I've been impressed with. I always try to be captivating and motivating to my staff, I try to make sure everyone feels good inside and always try to find connections and common goals to connect teachers. I genuinely care about our environment, having a strong organizational culture, a positive environment, and specifically

what is happening in the classroom. I have high expectations, but remain understanding of other's perspectives and ensure students are exposed to intentional, high quality experiences. I have hosted training sessions to help teachers better understand the research behind curriculum implementation and have used anticipatory sets to captivate their interest as adult learners. We have many, many systems to ensure Instructional Leadership is a priority within our onboarding, professional development plans, goal setting and follow up. Additionally, I always ensure our team has access to any materials that might help our students create and explore.

Within the center's community, we acknowledge and include all the important components of a high quality early learning environment. In 2021, we participated in the Early Education Essentials program by Start Early, surveyed parents, created focus groups, and implemented changes in our center. Start Early defines the Early Education Essentials as effective instructional leaders, parent voice, collaborative teachers, involved families, supportive environment and ambitious instruction. We collected data on these areas, made adjustments to our procedures and regularly revisit these areas to ensure we have strong student outcomes. We regularly review NAEYC's core competencies, utilize ECTA checklists, and Head Start frameworks as well.

Outside of the center, I have built wonderful relationships with community members. We often partner with our neighboring high school to plan events and support one another. Several staff members at Grace King High School send their children to XX Preschool. We often have high school students who work with our children under the supervision of Lead teachers after school and on school breaks which has inspired many of them to become interested in early childhood education after their graduation. Several of the high school's clubs have visited our campus to interact with our students, for example, the Mickey Mouse Book Club came this Fall to read to our students, Cheerleaders performed for our students during our New Orleans Saints Pep Rally, and the school band performs during Mardi Gras season. This school year, we have our first high school intern, who comes to our campus during her school day. She is learning so much about early childhood education as she supports us with office tasks, and supports teachers with classroom tasks. I am heavily interested in expanding this internship program and have been speaking with colleagues about strategies to implement the Human Services Jump Start 2.0 Pathway on a larger scale, to attract high school aged students to the early childhood field.

I have also had the wonderful opportunity to work closely with the early childhood network and the greater community, including advocacy work. As a member of Jefferson Chambers, I'm able to connect with leaders in various fields in our parish. I am actively involved in the XX Parish Early Childhood community, am involved in all pilots and communicate frequently with several members of the early childhood network team about the state of early childhood in our parish and neighboring parishes. This Fall, along with XX Parish School Board and The Louisiana Policy Institute for Children, I had the opportunity to tour and showcase our early childhood center to members from Senator Cassidy's office and highlight the importance of early childhood education in our state. I joined a XX Parish Council meeting to accept a check on behalf of the XX Ready Start Network, and I have also had opportunities to sit in round-table discussions with Dr. Cade Brumley, and attended several events at the Louisiana State Capitol. Through my membership in the Childcare Association of Louisiana, I was able to advocate for early childhood funding at Louisiana's Early Ed day at the capitol. I am also a member of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, a member of Louisiana Association for the Education of Young Children, a member of 4 Providers by Providers, a member of the Child Care Coalition and a Level III Approved Pathways Trainer. All of these communities offer me the opportunity to network and be more involved in this field.

I am also involved in my local community outside of just childcare. I belong to local parenting groups, and often communicate with new parents in our area. I sponsor and attend local events and fundraisers, such as Audubon Zoo and Children's Hospital's Boo at the Zoo and local parenting exhibits. I answer questions and share information about Child Care Assistance Program, Preschool Development Grant, TIKES Mental Health Programs and other publicly funded programs. I support many other Type III learning centers in these groups, and also share the benefits of early childhood education with families in the community. I make an effort to connect with many families of young children in the XX area.

Lastly, one of the most important communities that have supported me in being an excellent early childhood educator has been the Louisiana Early Leaders Academy (LELA) and the team at AnLar. In

2019, I had the wonderful opportunity of being a LELA fellow, which introduced me to a network of early childhood leaders with the same passion that I have. I was so inspired by this program that I decided to apply for a Leadership Coaching position for Cohorts 2 and 3, and I was given the opportunity to participate in LELA all over again. This experience has been transformative for me; I saw how the connections we make can truly make a difference and how much more powerful we are when we're all in it together. This opportunity sparked my interest in a variety of avenues and provided me with more opportunities to advocate for the child care industry and to be involved in the early childhood network on a bigger level. It inspired me to continue improving my own center, striving for the best, and to continue focusing on building the same sense of community I felt with my peers amongst my own staff. I have remained involved with LELA and still actively communicate with my coachees and other fellows from the past few years- who I tried to inspire and support to reach their own goals and dreams. I have also taken the initiative to be the LELA Alumni Coordinator and admin social media pages, regularly plan communications and events for LELA Alumni to ensure we can maintain the relationships we've built with one another, because together we are stronger! Overall, there are so many areas I focus on and continuously strive to be the best early childhood educator and leader I can be. I remain humble, and continuously ask for feedback from my team and families. I remain involved in the industry, and am constantly seeking out the latest research in our field so I can implement and share it. The various communities I'm involved in and have supported are what empower me to be a strong early childhood leader. At XX Preschool, I've tried to create an environment that ensures every child feels loved and supported, every family feels trusting and supported, and staff feel empowered and valued. I try to emulate the same values in my relationships within the other communities I'm involved in, and have worked to coach and inspire other early childhood leaders state wide to create similar environments for the students they serve, within their individual visions. In all this work, I try to serve with and bring a bit of compassion to each of these wonderful communities.

In national discussions around early childhood, there is a lot of energy around its importance, and increased funding for early childhood. What do policy makers need to know about the work that you do as they make decisions about policy and funding?

“Healthy development in the early years (particularly birth to three) provides the building blocks for educational achievement, economic productivity, responsible citizenship, lifelong health, strong communities, and successful parenting of the next generation.” (Harvard University’s Center on the Developing Child.) High quality early childhood programs are critical for a strong future workforce. Early childhood educators are trained to provide intentional learning experiences designed to support neural connections in the brain. High quality sites expose eager children to the proper interactions necessary for their development and significantly improve future outcomes. There are many child care sites currently investing resources and time in the brain architecture of our future leaders, but our industry also faces a multitude of challenges. Two current major issues in our field are the lack of equitable access to high quality child care, and the insufficient resources to recruit and retain high quality early childhood educators.

To continue increasing and sustaining our economy, families need child care to engage in the workforce. A 2021 article, “Childcare is a Business Issue” published by Harvard Business Review referenced a national panel survey that indicated 20% of working parents who left the workforce during the pandemic left simply due to lack of child care. Without an increase in child care access we will be unable to sustain an increase in the workforce. Currently, at my center, we have over 900 families on our waitlist and a licensed capacity of only 161. To maintain low child to teacher ratios, we max out around 140 students. Each year we graduate approximately thirty students, so only about thirty new spots open up annually. Those approximately thirty seats will only serve 3% of the families on our waitlist, most of whom have waited for a spot at our site for over a year.

Long waitlists and lack of seats is common amongst high quality child care centers. There are fewer seats for infants and young toddlers due to the additional expenses associated with caring for younger children. Infant and Toddler classrooms require lower teacher to child ratios and these programs are difficult to sustain financially. This creates a burden for families looking to enroll in child care to return to the workforce, especially new parents with young infants who must join waiting lists as soon as they are pregnant and hope to get lucky. Parents want nothing more than to see their children succeed in

proper learning environments, but without access, the progression of both our economy and future generations is significantly hindered.

For families who do secure a spot in a center, there are limited seats for subsidized programs, and a current waitlist for Childcare Assistance Program. At our center alone, there are over ten currently enrolled families who qualify for these benefits, but cannot utilize them because they simply are not available. Thankfully, our administrative team works closely with families to streamline application processes as the number of families who qualify for subsidy programs and are not enrolled are even higher at other child care sites. The cost of quality child care can be astronomical for a middle income family's budget, and child care centers are making concessions to be able to offer access to more families.

We significantly impact the children we do serve, but we are not serving enough children due to lack of allowable funding to expand, and also lack of funding to attract and retain high quality educators. At our site, we focus heavily on a strong organizational climate to retain employees; however, there is a limit on what we can provide. As we need early childhood educators to undergo the same education and credentialing processes as K-12 educators, we need to be able to compensate accordingly and offer the same benefits packages. A January 2023 article published by CNBC referenced a recent report indicating that 96% of workers are looking for a new position in 2023 in search of better pay. This puts our industry at even greater risk. Unfortunately, even with the finest financial planning, child care centers will be unable to support increased pay rates or match benefits of K-12 educators without investment and additional funding streams.

"Understanding teacher turnover in early childhood education" by the Yale School of Medicine indicated that some child care centers have turnover rates as high as 25-30%. In my personal experience working with child care centers across Louisiana and networking with child care Directors across the country, turnover rates at many centers are even higher than that. It can be very frustrating to invest time and effort educating and training early educators only to see them leave. Teacher turnover also negatively impacts children who have built close bonds with adult caregivers and need to build new bonds and learn new routines. The interruption affects the overall system; this is a challenge all child care centers are faced with at some point or another. That is, when we are even able to recruit qualified educators because sometimes that in itself is a challenge. Also stated by the Yale School of Medicine, "If higher wages are the strongest predictor of educator retention, one clear strategy for improving workforce stability is to increase wages for early childhood educators." Child care centers cannot do this alone, but together we can solve this, and we will begin to take steps toward increasing access.

My center participates in the Child Care Assistance Program as well as the B-3 program, and we are able to provide high quality seats to children from low income families. Although this is not representative of every case, we do see significant differences in development of children who have been in our program since birth and children who recently gained access due to funding and other constraints. These children are scoring differently on assessments, and many of the children who enter into high quality programs even at age two or three already show significant delays in multiple areas based on assessment. There's a remarkable difference when comparing a child who has been in a quality early learning environment to a child who was not.

Thankfully, the children who are enrolled in high quality sites will have access to early intervention, and with increased exposure, will graduate programs with necessary Kindergarten readiness skills. Children who are not exposed to strong environments during formative years may have life-long challenges that could have been prevented if the child care industry had access to proper funding. It is incredibly important that we increase awareness and funding to provide equitable access to high quality early childhood environments for all deserving young children.

Our incredible teachers are undeniably doing phenomenal work, but we need to recruit and inspire more educators to join our field. We are making significant changes in the lives of the children we serve, but unfortunately we are not able to serve as many children as we need to. It is essential that we continue investing in early childhood education to allow centers to attract and retain qualified, educated teachers, leading to opportunities to expand access. In early childhood programs we have the opportunity to cultivate potential future leaders, doctors, lawyers, educators, small business owners, politicians and more, but without high quality early childhood education, how many children will fall through the cracks?

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