

LEADERS' *Lagniappe*



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**IT IS MY MISSION
TO PROVIDE
HIGH-QUALITY
CARE AND EDUCATION
TO ALL FAMILIES.**

Paula Polito is a passionate early childhood leader in Louisiana who wears a lot of hats. From her start in her family's early learning center, Bear-y Cherry Tree in Ready Start Jefferson, or as chair of the Early Childhood Care and Education Advisory Council, Paula has made it her life's work to increase access to quality education for Louisiana's children and families at all levels of the system.

She purchased the center from her mother in 1999 and is the third generation in her family to run it. Paula knew when she took it over that she wanted to be the best center in the city and began learning how to approach implementation of the highest quality standards.

"It's been my responsibility to pursue excellence for my families," said Paula. "Our system is focused on quality teacher-child interactions, so children can have a strong foundation. We have shifted our focus, and it has transformed our centers."

ON ACCESS

In her center, Paula offers a variety of public programs that benefit in-need and military families. Her center serves many different kinds of families, with a diversity that is as noticeable as it is rare. This daily touchpoint with many different children and teachers is a source of continuous inspiration for her.

**WE CAN
TRANSFORM
LOUISIANA
IN ONE DECADE.**

"I feel this sense of passion when I train teachers. I get overwhelmed with this sense, wanting them to understand the impact they have on children," said Paula. "I explain to teachers that every time they hold an infant or sing to an infant they are making an impact. I try to make them understand that their work has meaning, and they have the ability to change lives when they create intentional interactions in the classroom."

With a long wait list, Paula could easily raise tuition. However, she offers high-quality care at a discounted rate so that all families can access her program.

"It is my mission to provide high-quality care and education to all families," said Paula.

This passion has prompted Paula to be a champion for this work in her community. Paula has served as the chair of the Education Committee on the Jefferson Chamber of Commerce for the last four years. As such, she has shared the importance of early childhood and its workforce with a different audience, including business people, architects, doctors, and nurses. Paula trains Leadership Jefferson members on early childhood education's importance and challenges. Her commitment to the field earned her the 2017 Jefferson Parish Woman Owned Business of the Year award, and she was then nominated for the national competition.

Paula plays this role with Ready Louisiana as well, engaging government officials about the early years. She often invites them to her center to observe high-quality, teacher-child interactions in action. Paula uses these visits to explain the needs and opportunities in Louisiana and across the country.

ON QUALITY

Paula's expertise extends to the classroom. She is a national trainer of quality teacher-child interactions through the CLASS[®] tool. In this role, she has enjoyed working with directors of early learning centers.

"I use the training opportunity to discuss the importance of this work in a different light. I emphasize that their teachers are professionals and should be valued as such. Try closing for a day to offer professional development," said Paula.

Teachstone's Chief Impact Officer Bridget Hamre has this to say about Paula: "Paula is one of the amazing leaders who is deeply grounded in the daily work of early childhood classrooms and also highly engaged in the state and federal policies that influence those classrooms. As an author of CLASS[®], it is inspiring to see the impact it is having on teachers and children throughout the state. But that wouldn't happen without leaders like Paula. I recently visited her program and was inspired to see how her teachers make the most of every opportunity to support children's learning and development through their daily interactions. It made me wish my own children could have gone there!"

Paula credits the Department for supporting her leadership.

"Overall, our state leaders from State Superintendent John White, to Assistant Superintendents Jenna Conway and Jessica Baghian, believe our work is valuable and want to see the best for children and families," said Paula. "I have appreciated that. And it inspired me to get involved, be vulnerable, and participate. I trust their leadership and they trusted mine."

Serving on the Early Childhood Care and Education Commission is the culmination of Paula's work to raise the profile of early childhood.

"After years of knocking on doors, and sharing the importance of child care, we can increase funding and offer access to high-quality education for those children and families. I believe in the Commission's recommendation to increase investment over a ten year period. We can transform Louisiana in one decade."



Paula Polito
**DIRECTOR & OWNER,
BEAR-Y CHERRY TREE**

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