

LEADERS' *Cagniappe*



ISSUE:
MARCH
2019

With centers around the state gearing up for the Early Childhood Ancillary Certificate requirement that takes effect in July,

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IS A HOT TOPIC.

But for Darnester Nora, center director and owner of Spring Ridge Academy, or “Ms. Dee” as she is known by her staff, investing in teacher quality is a top priority. When asked what was the “secret” behind her program’s Excellent rating, she didn’t hesitate. “Without a doubt, my teachers make Spring Ridge Academy a special program for children and their families.” Driving excellence in a center that serves 100 children and has a staff size of 26 is no small feat, but Nora and her teachers deliver.



Darnester Nora
**CENTER DIRECTOR & OWNER,
SPRING RIDGE ACADEMY**

Spring Ridge promotes a culture of learning by setting high expectations for every teacher while providing them with multiple layers of support and ongoing professional development.

“Much of my success is a direct result of others investing in me, to develop me as a leader,” said Nora. “For this reason, I make it a priority to pay it forward by investing in others. A guiding principle in my business is to take notice of the leadership potential in each teacher and cultivate it by providing them with training, resources, and opportunities for further development.”

Leadership development begins by investing in teachers’ professional growth. Entry-level teachers must possess a Child Development Associates, and each teacher must be willing to become CLASS reliable. Teachers have all completed Making the Most of Child Interactions training as well, with some teachers participating in My Teaching Partner, two intensive professional development experiences that zeroes in on teacher-child interactions. The additional trainings and resources are no small investment of time or money, but Nora partnered with the Jefferson Parish community network to bring these opportunities to her teachers. “Working at Spring Ridge for the last 8 years, I have grown beyond what I ever could have imagined,” said PreK teacher Nirenza Taylor. “Under the direction of Ms. Dee, I’ve earned my associates degree and furthered my college education. With her persistence, I’m not only a great teacher, but a better person.”

EXPERIENCES
THAT ZERO
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Credentials and training are a starting point. Nora also provides job embedded professional development through co-teaching and modeling best practices in the classroom, and conducting walk-throughs with her teachers, imparting knowledge and skills on how to improve. She also encourages teachers to engage in peer-to-peer or group conversations about their work to further their practice.

Spring Ridge’s focus on teacher quality has attracted the attention of local higher education institutions recently. When several of the center’s teachers were in school earning credentials, their professors took notice of their knowledge and engagement. Now, Unitech, Delgado Community College, and Southern and Xavier Universities collaborate with Spring Ridge as a student teaching site for their teacher certification programs. **This experience provides Nora with the opportunity to develop aspiring educators and with a readily accessible pool of potential teachers should the need arise.**

Realizing that developing excellent educators must extend beyond her center, Nora, in partnership with other center directors, has created The Child Care Coalition to equip all centers with the tools they need to provide excellent early learning. Helping each other and supporting others in the community is a priority for Nora and Spring Ridge Academy. “When we see other centers that are in need, we go to those centers and ask, ‘What can we do to help you?’ How can we help you achieve a level of excellence? That’s what we all want for our children.”