



Early Childhood Center Little Falls

Background

The community in Little Falls, MN is tackling the need to provide a solid foundation of early childhood education and working towards innovative solutions to childcare coverage. In 2017, the Early Childhood program moved into a new building, funded by a recently passed referendum. Prior to that, Early Childhood and Family Education (ECFE) programs were scattered around the community in various buildings. There is great support in the belief to give front-end care and education to children to benefit them for the future. The Early Childhood Center covers ECFE classes, preschool, Early Childhood screening, and Early Childhood Special Education.

According to District Early Childhood Director Stacy Gold, their biggest goal is to connect parents with resources, so they feel empowered. Gold has been working in child and parent education for 25 years and is currently serving her fourth year as director. “We are all about building relationships and meeting the learner where they are, as an infant or at age 89”, says Gold. Growth mindset, healthy collaborations and utilizing people’s strengths are the pillars of their success.

Eliminating Barriers

Through a community needs assessment conducted with all incoming kindergartners, Gold discovered the largest barriers to preschool attendance were transportation, cost, and unawareness of a preschool offering. Gold believes that they have removed the barriers to cost and transportation to the best of their abilities. They decreased pricing, offer scholarships through Pathways 1 and Pathways 2, and use a sliding fee based on family income. To address transportation issues, they partnered with TriCAP/MoreTrans to assist in accommodating four-year old children to ride the bus. Preschool children are set up to ride the bus with a designated buddy or sibling so that they are well-cared for during their bus ride.

The community needs assessment also identified the need for full day programming. Little Falls currently has two programs in Little Falls and one in Randall with full day coverage, along with half day options. ECFE classes are also held at the Little Falls Care Center, allowing for healthy and mutually beneficial interactions to occur between children and the elderly population. This is an approach that boosts the vitality of the residents at the care center and benefits the community. They also have a program to help young parents, ages 13-23 years old by partnering teen parents with mentor moms.

Innovative Solutions in Little Falls

Work Environment

The Early Childhood Center employs five full time staff and 35 part time employees. Staff turnover is extremely low here, largely in part to ECFE employees receiving the same pay as teacher's salary in the school district. This results in well-qualified candidates and longevity due to fair pay and a supportive work environment. Most paraprofessionals are graduates of the program themselves. One challenge Gold faces is finding licensed parent educators. Gold also participates on a board working towards county-wide pre-kindergarten to grade 3 alignment, which seeks to align all learning taking place prior to arriving at kindergarten, whether in in-home, private, or school based. This effort is being led by the Initiative Foundation.

The Future

To address the childcare shortage, they are in the planning process of offering wrap around care. This would permit childcare before and after the normal preschool times, allowing parents to have full day coverage while they are at work. Gold plans to approach this new initiative in increments, to ensure that it is implemented successfully. It is the dream of City Administrator Jon Rademacher and Little Falls School Superintendent Stephen Jones for the city and school district to partner in order to offer childcare. This would ideally be located near the high school with community businesses contributing and using a new childcare center as a learning opportunity.

Jones states, "Little Falls Community Schools recognizes that daycare options and availability in Morrison County is a problem that is negatively impacting families, businesses, and schools. As the district continues to grow its partnerships with businesses in our area, the daycare issue remains a key deterrent to businesses failing to fill numerous open positions. Because prospective workers can't find daycare, the positions remain unfilled and families that would have moved to our communities are unable to...and that negatively impacts enrollment in our schools. It is a cycle that stakeholders are hoping to impact as the district seriously considers construction and management of a daycare which would provide current students who have a career interest in Childhood Development an opportunity to 'work' in a daycare setting."

BY THE NUMBERS

110 ECFE Participants

Pre-school Students **168**

5 Full-time **35** Part-time Staff



Keys to Success
Growth mindset
Healthy collaborations
Using strengths

