



PUTTING KIDS FIRST

How an Early Childhood Educator Achieves Excellence for Young Learners



high quality early childhood education is essential for lifelong learning. For this reason, Louisiana began reporting performance data for all publicly funded early childhood programs, including early childhood centers, Head Start programs, and prekindergarten sites.

The unified system has two components: ratings that relate to positive child outcomes, such as teacher-child interactions and instruction, and information on classroom best practices, like credentialing teachers and using top-tier curriculum. Those two components are featured on each site's performance profile on Louisianaschools.com. The overall performance rating, which is based on observations, is reported in four categories: Excellent, Proficient, Approaching Proficient, and Unsatisfactory.

What does it take to achieve "Excellent" performance and why is that determination important for Louisiana's youngest learners? We asked Nadene Harrison, a 24-year educator who currently serves as the lead teacher for the toddler and 2-year-old classes at the top-rated University of Louisiana at Lafayette Child Development Center, to share her thoughts.

Q: What inspired you to pursue a career in early childhood education, and after 24 years, what motivates you to continue in this career?

A: I have always loved being around kids, so it seemed like a natural fit. But I've stayed in early childhood education because it's incredible to see young children learn and grow. I am motivated by the smile on a child's face when they are faced with a challenge in their learning and they overcome that challenge.

Q: How has early childhood education changed since you started in this field?

A: We now know that 90 percent of a child's brain develops before the age of four. We also now know children learn best through play. Because of this, I've seen the level of interaction and the type of interaction between teachers and students change for the better.

Q: A common misconception is that early childhood education is babysitting. What is your reaction to that?

A: Early childhood education is so much more than babysitting. Not only are early childhood educators helping children build knowledge, we also help them develop the social and emotional skills they will need to be successful in life.



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Q: What does an average day look like in your classroom?

A: We teach our toddlers many of the same things you'll see in any other grades. We teach them art, math, science, social studies... We engage our students in physical education and help them develop their gross and fine motor skills. More than anything, we help them connect the things they are learning with us to their own lives through hands-on activities, play, stories, and songs.

For example, if we are teaching a lesson on grocery shopping, my class might discuss how we could travel to the grocery store, the difference between a grocery store employee and a customer, what items we would buy from the grocery store, where those items came from and how they got put on the store shelves, how we would purchase the groceries with money and how people earn money, and what we would do with the groceries when we returned home.

As we discussed these things, we might sing "Wheels on the Bus" when we talk about transportation to get to the store and we might visit an activity center in the classroom set up like a store, allowing children to fill baskets with different foods and purchase them with play money.

Q: The ULL Child Development Center, where you've worked since 2003, earned a spot on the state's Honor Roll for its high performance. What do you think is needed to ensure a center provides a high quality education to students?

✕✕ **First and foremost: A successful center always puts children first.**

It must also:



Maintain communication with parents.

Every day, when each of my students arrives, I talk with their parents about how they are doing and how their child is doing at home, and I ask if there's anything I should know that might affect the child at school, like how they slept the previous night. At the end of the day, I tell parents what their child did at school, how they behaved, and anything else they might need to know. It's true that it takes a village to raise a child, and constant communication helps us all.



Employ strong leadership.

It's critical for the leaders of the center to communicate with their teachers and to facilitate professional development. I am thankful for the leaders I have worked under in my career; they taught me everything I know.



Encourage continual learning and improvement.

It's important for educators to stay up-to-date on the latest research and best practices, and receive continual training in those areas to ensure students are receiving the best care and education. It's also key for teachers to help one another, particularly new teachers.

Q: Why is high quality early childhood education so important to Louisiana?

A: Louisiana is ranked at the bottom in education. It's so important to start giving children high quality care and experiences at an early age. It forms a foundation to be successful in school.



*Nadene Harrison, University of Louisiana at Lafayette
Child Development Center*

