



CASE STUDY

First Presbyterian Day School

Durham, North Carolina

First Presbyterian Day School is a five-star child care center that has been in the heart of downtown Durham since 1970. Although it receives some financial support from the church for which it is named, the center is a nonprofit, non-religious program and relies primarily on full enrollment from private tuition parents, although it does serve some children receiving child care subsidies.

The COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted the center, which closed its door for three months in the face of so much uncertainty. It then reopened in June 2020 with just 16 children, although it had previously served 56 children. The center now has 37 children enrolled, slightly more than half of full enrollment. "We've been slowly rebuilding over the past two years," said Michele Miller Cox, the center's executive director. "It seems like now people are less afraid and slowly returning to child care, although some people may still be working remotely or not returning to work yet."

Finding qualified staff will be the key to the center's effort to rebuild its program, along with recruiting new families. Before COVID-19, the center's teaching staff were solid, with very low turnover and an average teacher tenure of 10 years, with some teachers there for more than 20 years. But the pandemic changed that staffing picture. To cope with the low enrollment without having to lay off staff, the center decided to reduce full-time staff hours from 40 hours to 30 hours. Consequently, they lost two teachers who left for full-time employment elsewhere. The center has since been able to return full-time staff back to a 40-hour workweek, because of the increase in enrollment.

Miller-Cox attributes the center's pre-pandemic workforce success to its "awesome" wages and

benefits package. The center is certified by the Durham Living Wage Project, offering staff at least \$13.50 per hour, which is above the state average of \$12.00 per hour. They also provide full-time employees with a comprehensive benefits package, including employer-paid health and dental care, a vision/eye care plan which employees can opt into, a 3% IRA retirement match, monthly paid time off, all of the traditional holidays plus a birthday holiday and an extended holiday break between Christmas and New Year's Day.

With the Stabilization Grant, the center decided its top priority was to "let the staff know that they are important in this world, and that in this pandemic, they are valuable, they are essential, and to recognize that they stuck it out and stayed with us despite all the risks and uncertainty," said Miller-Cox. The center adopted a salary scale that was based on the Model Salary Scale recommended by the state and added different steps for education and longevity. Every staff member received a \$4.00 per hour pay raise, which is more than the annual 3% raise. In addition, the center increased their retirement contribution from 3% to 4%, picked up the cost for vision insurance and allowed part-time staff to choose either health and dental insurance or the paid time off plan.

In addition, Miller-Cox is committed to improving staff morale, or "healing the staff," as one of the center's board members described the workforce situation. With grant funding, the staff have been engaged in redesigning and upgrading their classrooms and the outdoor playground with guidance from the Natural Outdoor Learning Initiative at NC State. All staff have received advanced training in the ITERS and ECERS programs and will receive training on the Creative



Curriculum, which the center is adopting. “We’ve worked really hard to create a friendly, happy work environment, and it’s happening,” said Miller-Cox. “The staff are ‘happy campers’ now and are transforming their classrooms and teaching practices. I can see the progress and growth in the teachers.” She added that it is obvious even to the rating assessors, who shared that they felt welcomed and could notice the positive changes in the staff.

Parents are also very excited about the changes and have received notices about the grant and program improvements in their monthly newsletter. With the grant funds, the center also established a lactation room near the entrance of the program and are offering special family programs each quarter this year. In the first quarter, the center’s chef-prepared dinner for all the families, and in the second quarter, the center will prorate the costs for days the program was closed, or parents missed time because of COVID-19 quarantines.

Whether the center can sustain these positive changes is something that concerns Miller-Cox. She imagines that they may be able to do so when the center reaches full enrollment again and restarts the NC Pre-K/Durham PreK program in fall 2023. But there’s a Catch-22 that may not be easy to solve: in order to expand enrollment and serve more children, the center needs to hire two teachers for the 2- and 3-year-old classrooms. “With full enrollment, we can handle a percentage of the pay increase. But right now, we can’t find the people to do the work. That’s the biggest challenge,” she exclaimed.

Running a five-star program and the NC Pre-K/Durham PreK program requires staff who have early education degrees, and qualified teachers are in short supply. Despite widespread advertising and sharing the new pay and benefits package

offered by the center, she received not one qualified applicant for her recent full-time job opening. “It’s really, really scary,” said Miller-Cox, who also teaches in the Early Education Program at Durham Technical Community College. She said they typically see new young people coming into the field, and noted that last semester, the introductory required credential course EDU-119 was canceled

because of lack of student interest. Miller-Cox speculates that perhaps students are just tired and exhausted and can see that child care pay is not that great compared to other fields.

To that end, she believes it is time to make child care a real profession and base ongoing pay and benefits similar to state employees. “If you are working in a child care center that is licensed by the state, couldn’t the state view us as state employees, and offer us state benefits?” she asked. “We’re still viewed as babysitters. Early care and education workers are not seen as real professionals.” Until that happen, she suggests one option

would be for the state to require a model salary scale and support programs that are using this model with ongoing grants and stipends.

For now, Miller-Cox is focused on new hiring strategies, including recruiting part-time staff instead of full-time staff for morning and afternoon shifts, which seems to be working. And she is looking at creative ways to reach the goal of full enrollment of 64 children by the time the Stabilization Grant ends in September 2023. She hopes that adding the NC Pre-K/Durham PreK program and potentially including a transportation option to pick children up who live outside the immediate downtown bus service may help to increase enrollment sooner.

But Miller-Cox concluded that she is worried that even if childcare programs make all of these improvements now with the Stabilization Grants, they still won’t be able to solve the workforce crisis. “It’s a problem for the entire field.”

“**We’ve worked really hard to create a friendly, happy work environment, and it’s happening....The staff are ‘happy campers’ now and are transforming their classrooms and teaching practices. I can see the progress and growth in the teachers.**”