



CASE STUDY

Little Believer's Academy

Garner, North Carolina

Little Believer's Academy (LBA) is a five-star Christian-based child care program serving children from 6 months through school-age with two locations in Wake and Johnston Counties. LBA serves primarily low-income families receiving child care subsidies and also offers the NC Pre-K Program.

Recruiting a qualified workforce is a never-ending challenge that preceded the COVID-19 pandemic and is now harder than ever, according to Cassandra Brooks, LBA's executive director. "Child care just hasn't been able to keep up with the changing employment market," said Brooks, citing Target's recent announcement that it will raise its minimum wage to \$24 per hour in some markets. "Hiring is almost unmanageable, and we just can't compete," she said, noting one teacher who was receiving \$17 per hour, even without a degree, who still left to work in another field for higher wages. "In today's market, people have so many job options that pay more and offer more flexible schedules in positions that don't require specialized educations and skills."

LBA offers hourly starting wages between \$14-\$16 per hour for teachers with degrees, as well as a fairly comprehensive benefits package including dental, vision and health care, paid time off, vacation and 401(K) retirement match up to 3% after one year. Still, most of her staff cannot afford the monthly \$200 co-pay for health insurance and few can take advantage of the center's retirement plans because the pay is too low.

Brooks "had big hopes and dreams" for improving teacher salary and benefits with the advent of the Stabilization Grant. She wanted to support the loyal, committed teachers who have stayed through the duration of the pandemic with additional

mental health or personal days and gift cards. She also planned to pay the full cost of dental and vision insurance, increase vacation days, and give everyone salary raises using a salary scale similar to the Model Salary Scale offered by the state.

The Stabilization Grant funds have helped get her part of the way toward these dreams. With the grant funding, she has raised salaries and now provides two additional paid mental health days, as well as training support from a professional counselor to talk to the staff about different ways to relax, manage stress and care for themselves. But even with the grant funds, there is not enough to increase vacation or pay the full costs of dental and vision insurance for all of her staff. Brooks will soon offer gift cards for perfect attendance, which staff can use for increased gas costs or other personal expenses. "I don't want to lose staff who can't afford the gas to get to work," she said. "Keeping all staff working every day is key to our success."

In addition to supporting and retaining current staff, recruiting new teachers remains the biggest challenge for LBA. As a business woman, Brooks is looking at different models and ways to improve marketing and staff recruitment and recently hired a coach. "We market our services for parents, and now we have to market to teachers," she said. With the workforce shortage, she is now looking to other fields to recruit people who may have the necessary soft skills and know how to build relationships, nurture, and care for people. She recently hired two new staff from the nursing home field and is hopeful it will be a good fit for the center. "We can train them and support them in going to school with the T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® Program to get their credentials."



A large portion of their Stabilization Grant funds are being used to support the workforce, but LBA is also using the funds to support parents. Brooks has covered families' tuition costs when the center was forced to close for COVID-19 quarantines, and she also provides Instacart grocery packages for families who might be facing special hardships like losing employment. These efforts have helped many families, especially single-parent families, during hard times.

She is also using the grant funds to make improvements in play equipment, cleaning technology and building enhancements like new windows with screens and an updated outdoor learning environment. "My goal is to have a true outdoor classroom, and we're starting by increasing the outdoor space with new fencing. If you have a great outdoor environment the children can be outdoors nearly year-round."

Looking to the future, Brooks cannot yet envision a way to sustain the workforce improvement when the Stabilization Grant ends. Since LBA primarily serves families receiving child care subsidies, she just has not been able to build a budget that is sufficient to cover all of the operating costs. "Subsidy reimbursement rates haven't increased in five years, and they've never paid the true cost of care. And rates haven't kept up with inflation and higher costs for everything, including transportation and gas prices," said Brooks. She adds that increasing tuition is not an option for her parents, the majority of whom cannot pay more than they do now. And she will not charge parents more than the market rate, adding that it is not the right time to put that burden on families, given the stress of COVID-19 and the increased cost of living.

Brooks believes it is time to solve the child care crisis. "I'm very thankful to the federal and state policymakers who believe in the value of child care, and I'm grateful for these grants. But it's like putting band-aids on the problem to stop the bleeding. We're not applying the right treatment," she added. "After all of this, child care is still going

to need help. If we return back to the way it was, you are going to have a mass exodus of teachers. They are not going to come back for \$10 an hour. The marketplace has changed. If you don't have teachers, then you can't care for children - it's just that simple. There will be a mass closing of centers."

Always an advocate, Brooks believes it is going to take all of us working together to solve the child care crisis, with enough funding to improve teacher compensation without adding to the cost for parents. For her, the collective "all of us" includes

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local businesses who need employees investing in child care in their own communities, more federal and state funding, universal pre-school and taxpayers funding child care as a priority for a strong economy.

"Let's continue to push child care forward and not end it here. Let's make these grant funds permanent and let's solve the child care problem. We all need these children to take care of us and run this world, and they need to be smart and have a solid foundation before they get to school," she concluded.