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SOUTHWEST MICHIGAN LEADER IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION ANNOUNCES INNOVATIVE APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAM

PAW PAW, MI. - As southwest Michigan communities struggle to meet the demand for childcare and preschool education for children under age 5, Flowers Early Learning announced an innovative apprenticeship program this week, to recruit, train and support future early childhood educators. In partnership with Southwestern Michigan College and Michigan Works! Berrien, Cass, Van Buren, the apprenticeship is open to aspiring educators in Berrien, Cass, and Van Buren counties.

“Many southwest Michigan families live in childcare deserts,” said Chanda Hillman, CEO of Flowers Early Learning. “Our message to potential teachers is simple: If you care about children, come grow with us! Our teachers change lives.”

According to the Center for American Progressⁱ, southwest Michigan is home to dozens of childcare deserts, meaning three or more children live in a community for each childcare slot available.

Expanding the early childhood workforce is good for families.

“High quality childcare programs require safe facilities, including outdoor play areas, and well-trained staff members,” said Hillman. “Without one or the other, families struggle to find the care they need, diminishing job opportunities and economic growth and risking child health and safety as parents take drastic measures to provide for their families and provide adequate care.”

According to a 2024 National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) surveyⁱⁱ, more than 50% of childcare centers in Michigan faced staffing shortages last year, resulting in under-enrollment, increased tuition, and classroom closures.

Ranee Conley, Professor of Early Childhood Education at Southwestern Michigan College, trains new generations of educators. To Conley, this apprenticeship is an opportunity to equip teachers with the fundamental skills and resources they need to thrive.

“Teaching young children is hard and rewarding work,” said Conley, who is also a former preschool teacher. “As state and federal education requirements increase for early childhood educators, providers struggle to keep up with community needs, to pay their teachers a living wage, and to provide continuous professional development. This apprenticeship helps remove these barriers.”

Registered apprenticeship programs have a long history in American skilled trades, like construction, manufacturing and nursing, but they are relatively new to early childhood education. Michigan Works! Berrien, Cass, Van Buren promotes apprenticeship programs as a proven path for workers to earn better wages, build professional skills, and meet business demands for skilled labor.

Expanding the early childhood workforce is good business.

“Professionalizing early childhood education, with better pay and training, will benefit the regional economy,” said Mark O’Reilly, Director of Business Services for Michigan Works! Berrien, Cass, Van Buren. “More reliable childcare options for families means more reliable workers for Southwest Michigan businesses, more economic opportunity, less poverty and healthier children. This apprenticeship is a big win for our community.”

The two-year apprenticeship is open to anyone over 18 with a high school diploma or equivalent. Apprentices complete four college courses in early childhood education with paid tuition and paid release time, and 4,000 hours of on-the-job training, paired with experienced teachers.

High school students interested in early childhood education can get a jumpstart on their career goals with paid work-based learning opportunities thanks to collaborative partnerships among Flowers Early Learning, Michigan Works! Berrien, Cass, Van Buren and southwest Michigan school districts.

“This training plan not only ensures that teachers understand curriculum, brain development and best practices for early childhood education,” said Conley, “but also that they have the support they need to understand their own emotions, manage their stress levels, and provide healthy, nurturing environments for little brains to flourish.”

Expanding the early childhood workforce is good for everyone.

Flowers Early Learning (formerly Tri-County Head Start) has operated a federal Head Start grant for more than fifty years in Berrien, Cass, and Van Buren counties. Head Start promotes economic self-sufficiency and strong families, one parent and child at a time. Head Start sets a high-quality standard for early childhood education, including teacher qualifications, child safety, classroom ratios, curriculum goals, family partnerships and more.

“Our apprentices will learn best practices, build relationships with children and families, and promote healthy brain development,” said Hillman. “As our families break generational cycles of trauma and poverty, we improve health, economic and education outcomes, reduce violence and build a future where children and families thrive.”

To learn more about the apprenticeship program, or to apply for a position, please visit www.flowersearlylearning.org.

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ⁱ <https://www.americanprogress.org/series/child-care-deserts/>

ⁱⁱ https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/our-work/public-policy-advocacy/michigan_2024_feb_statebystate.pdf