FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

November 5, 2026

Contact: Ivette Bucio, Communications & Engagement Coordinator
ibucio@flowersearlylearning.org
(269) 657-2581 x124

SOUTHWEST MICHIGAN'S LARGEST PRESCHOOL PROVIDER NAMES NEW CEO

The largest early care and education agency in Southwest Michigan has named a new leader for only the fourth time in its 54-year history. Kevin Wordelman accepted the role of Chief Executive Officer at Flowers Early Learning (formerly Tri-County Head Start) in August, having previously served as Chief Operations Officer and Human Resources Director for the agency that serves nearly 600 children and families every year.

With 17 locations and 200 employees, Flowers Early Learning has operated a federal Head Start grant in Cass, Berrien and Van Buren counties since 1972. Wordelman credits continuity of leadership for their long track record of safe, high-quality programming for children ages 0-5.

"Young children need stability and predictable routines for healthy brain development," said Wordelman. "As our fourth CEO in nearly 55 years, I am honored and grateful to carry this legacy forward. Continuous leadership and community support are critical for the work we do to support families and develop southwest Michigan's most valuable resource."

Head Start is a federally funded early care and education program launched in 1965 to support eligible families and children living in poverty. Tri-County Head Start began providing services in Southwest Michigan in 1972 under the leadership of its founding director, Orion Flowers. In 2024, the agency renamed as Flowers Early Learning with the goal of expanding to serve more families through private tuition and scholarships.

Chanda Hillman served as CEO for 8 years before accepting the role of Executive Director for the Michigan Head Start Association, this spring.

"Head Start has always been deeply personal to me," Hillman said. "I first experienced the program as a parent, and I have seen firsthand how it supports children, families, and communities. Kevin Wordelman understands this and brings the passion and vision necessary to continue this work."

Prior to joining the agency in 2022, Wordelman served as operations director for Open Doors Kalamazoo, director of people of culture for the Kalamazoo Nature Center, and administrator for two American Federation of Teachers unions at Western Michigan University. Wordelman previously served two terms on the Kalamazoo County Board of Commissioners and as campaign manager for the 2020 Homes for All campaign in Kalamazoo County.

CONTINUED

"Kevin is a great fit for this position," said Flowers Early Learning Board Chair Brian Saxton. "With his background in public service, his understanding of the challenges facing families in Southwest Michigan, and his experience in workforce development, Kevin will be a catalyst for growth to expand our impact across the region."

Early care and education providers like Flowers Early Learning face myriad challenges at the local, state and national level, including stagnant funding, staffing shortages, inadequate facilities and shifting demographics. But demand for early care and education services is strong. Wordelman said that at times they feel like they are swimming upstream against a powerful current.

"The early childhood business requires strong people and safe places," Wordelman said. "Artificial intelligence will not replace us. To thrive, children need patience, kindness, eye contact, physical safety, emotional security, nutritious meals, medical and dental treatment, regular interactions with familiar caregivers and more. Our team works wonders every day, but we need help."

As Human Resources Director, Wordelman collaborated with Michigan Works! Berrien, Cass, Van Buren to develop a registered apprenticeship program for early childhood educators. With more than 30 apprentices in the first two years of the program, Michigan Works! recognized Flowers Early Learning earlier this year as a champion in the "Race to Talent" promoting registered apprenticeships statewide.

Flowers Early Learning also announced promotions of key leaders with more than 50 years of combined agency experience:

- Cindy Thomas, Master of Social Work, Chief Operations Officer (27 years)
- Mandy Orlando, Master of Early Childhood Education, Chief Program Officer (18 years)
- Laura Burtis, Master of Science in Management & Leadership, Chief Finance Officer (11 Years)

"With this leadership team, we have a stable foundation to build for the next 55 years," said Wordelman. "With the right community support, anything is possible."

To learn more about Flowers Early Learning, including enrollment, job openings, volunteering and donations, visit www.flowersearlylearning.org.

###