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Mesa Community College Children's Center's curriculum focuses on each child's needs

May 8th, 2017 · by Joe Jacquez, Special to the Independent · Comments: 0

In one classroom, a group of children act out chosen animals to improve their creativity; in another room, a child works on healthy habits by washing his hands after a quick snack.

A flurry of activity was underway on a Friday morning at the Mesa Community College Children's Center, which was recognized for providing quality early childhood education in Mesa. It is at Building 26 at 1833 W. Southern Ave., according to <https://www.mesacc.edu/students/childrens-center>.

[See a slideshow of photos by the author at

<http://www.photosnack.com/JoeJacquez/mesacommunitycollegechildrenscenter.html>]

In March 2014, the center received a five-star rating from Quality First, a signature program of **First Things First**, a statewide organization funded by an 80-cent-per-pack tax on tobacco products. Quality First assesses and partners with child care and preschool facilities and providers to improve the quality of early childhood education by conducting assessments on the environment, adult-child interaction and administrative practices of the facility.

"We were nationally accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children, so we were already a high-quality program," Donna Candreva, children's center director, said. "Quality First has helped measure relationships between the staff and children to promote growth and learning, which is something we focus on a lot."

Ms. Candreva said the center builds great relationships between the staff and each child without a great student-to-teacher ratio.

She said two teachers lead the activities each day, along with two to three support staff. The maximum number of students Ms. Candreva and her staff will place in each classroom at one time is 20.

"Every child gets attention," Ms. Candreva said. "If they need something, have a question, there is someone readily available to sit down with them, talk about what they're doing and answer those questions."

Individual choice learning

Ms. Candreva and her staff have centered the curriculum around each individual's needs. She said the program, which serves 3- to 5-year-olds before they move on to kindergarten, offers each child the same material, but the activities centered around that material will differ.

Ms. Candreva said center staff chose to use an emerging curriculum because they believe that children learn best when they choose. It keeps children engaged in what they are doing because it was their choice and often exhibit pride and ownership.

"The ideas come from the children themselves," Ms. Candreva said. "If they find a spider on the playground, then that can be a focus of an activity. If we have a time of year when children are getting updates on their shots, then play might become a hospital or a doctor's office."

Another reason the staff chose this approach to learning is children can learn the language based around concepts that interest them or are on their mind that day or week.

To help foster this type of learning, Ms. Candreva said each of the two classrooms are divided into centers that teach specific subjects. Language and literacy, math and science are three of the subject centers. In addition, the director said children are exposed to different hands on science activities that many other programs do not offer.

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"We have a block area and different animals are in each classroom, including fish, guinea pigs and hermit crabs," Ms. Candreva said. "We have a teacher that is hatching chickens out in our classroom and the kids help take care of all the animals."

She said the center touches on each subject daily with different students and all of the materials are placed in the different subject areas. Ms. Candreva said the teachers focus on letting kids play and depending on the interest level of the kids for that day's activities, materials are swapped out every two days.

"We believe that children learn best by interacting with the materials," she said. "We'll have a water table or a messy table in each classroom and if the kids are not interested after two days it is gone. We really encourage letting the kids learn what they want each day."

Each day

While the kids get to dictate what is accomplished each day, Ms. Candreva said a certain level of structure still exists. She said every day is divided into sections including science and reading.

In addition to introducing science, reading, writing and math concepts, Ms. Candreva said the program also is focused on developing each child's cognitive, physical, fine motor and social skills.

"We have circle time with movement to music," Ms. Candreva said. "We talk about the calendar, and it is not so much time, but they understand putting action to a number in terms of movement; three, that is not a big number, but if I have to do jumping jacks 30 times, then my heart is beating fast because that number is bigger."

These activities, Ms. Candreva said, help each child gain a better understanding of what greater than and less than mean.

Another example of hands-on activity learning happened on a recent Friday. Ms. Candreva had file folder games out for children to practice matching and one-to-one correspondence to math. Each set of cards is more difficult than the previous one and asks the children to do more.

"There are little carrots and they have to match what they are," Ms. Candreva said. "Then there are more difficult ones where numbers are missing and they have to determine what number comes next or which one goes in the middle."

At the beginning of the semester, the teachers will set goals for the children based on what their needs are and help them get to that goal. Ms. Candreva said this is part of individualized and choice based learning, but said it also helps a child foster and know what a great relationship means.

"Ninety-nine percent of what we do is social skills," Ms. Candreva said. "You have to be able to interact with each other in a positive manner and then the rest comes."

Grateful parents

The program was designed to help students at the college pursue a degree and start providing for the future of their young child.

Julia Sheehan's 4-year-old daughter Oliva enrolled in the program in the summer of 2016. She said she in part picked Mesa Community College to pursue her nursing degree because of the five-star rating that the children's center had.

Ms. Sheehan has seen immense growth in her daughter's development and said she could not have gone to school and provided child care without the scholarship she received from Quality First.

"She has gotten so much better at numbers and counting. She does her ABC's, all the times and she is able to write all the letters since she started here," Ms. Sheehan said. "I am a single mom (and) I don't get financial support from her dad. The scholarship is amazing because I cannot work right now. It gives me more time to study and I know where she is."

Ms. Sheehan said she was paying almost \$40 a day at a previous day care center.

Maria Dawes has a 4-year-old daughter in the program and she said this program has made a world of difference.

"The First Things First scholarship is a life saver, they are the missing piece for a parent like myself to be able to afford a college education and earn a higher-paying job," Ms. Dawes said. "As a single mother of a child with no child support and everything that I have had to go through since she was gone, First Things First makes it so easy to find parenting resources and I am able to spend more time with my daughter instead of having to worry about things I should not have to worry about as a parent."

Relationship with the college

Another aspect that has helped distinguish the program at Mesa Community College is the amount of resources available outside of the center itself.

Ms. Candreva said because the center is located on a college campus, the kids are exposed to a variety of experiences that kids in some programs are not. She said the curriculum used different programs and places at the college such as math, science, reading and other concepts.

"We go out and see the animals on the backside of campus, part of the agriculture program," Ms. Candreva said. "There are art festivals and music festivals on campus and we are part of that. There is a fitness club on campus and they put on an event for the kids."

She said the fitness club set up an obstacle course and had someone that specialized in activities with hula-hoops, and afterwards members of the club talked with the kids about fitness safety.

Ms. Candreva said she could talk for hours about different partnerships that the children's center has formed.

"We have taken them over to the life sciences building and they got to meet and learn about horned toads, scorpions, snakes and lizards," she said. "We have taken them to the planetarium to see the star shows."

Ms. Candreva said before she got on board, the staff took the children to the anatomy and physiology department. The students learned and saw skeletons and bones. In addition, she said the kids participate in an annual Dr. Seuss event on campus.

In addition, Ms. Candreva said the children's center has a partnership with the nursing program at MCC to help promote healthy habits.

"Our nurses come over and part of their nursing is they have to teach a lesson to the children and then they get to take their vitals and interact with the kids," Ms. Candreva said. "We have had oral health, nutrition, fire safety and just anything you can think of. I have a giant toothbrush in the classroom with big teeth. One woman (from the nursing program) created a comic book and it was about germs with a germ character. They get lots of diverse experiences being here and it is always about giving them the choices."

Background, limitations and fulfillment

During his [2017 State of the City Address](#), Mesa Mayor John Giles announced the city had received a grant from First Things First. Mr. Giles said the grant would allow the city to better utilize existing resources, including parks and recreation programs and supplement that with new initiatives.

The city's Early Childhood Education task force has looked at in-house solutions and out-of-state models to help solve this issue. Vice Mayor David Luna said Mr. Giles created the taskforce after talking with education professionals who identified too many kids unprepared for kindergarten.

The college, according to taskforce documents, has provided financial resources to help provide salaries and benefits for employees, and the hiring of temporary hourly workers. In addition, the revenue from the Children's Center has helped provide resources and snacks.

In addition, the documents also said the center receives \$56,160 every year from the U.S. Department of Education.

In addition, per taskforce documents, because of the five-star rating from First Things First, the program has participated in the Quality First Scholarship program. The center has received 11 scholarships for students who qualify based on their income level, but the center decided to divide each one in half because most parents did not need the full scholarship. As a result, 22 part-time scholarships are provided to fund the hourly rate that the center charges.

Ms. Candreva said despite all the great activities and resources they can provide children and parents, she admitted their work doesn't come without limitations.

Ms. Candreva said a lack of funding from city and state government is still a limitation, but she also mentioned facility space. Ms. Candreva said an MCC architectural student redesigned the building and she said the center has plans to create a third classroom.

In spite of these limitations, Ms. Candreva said seeing kids progress and grow makes coming to work every day worth it.

"You're asking them questions that get them to think on a different level," Ms. Candreva said. "Oh, how do you get that playdough to be so flat" and they will show you that they rolled it or pushed it down.

"We had a little boy here one time that thrived in the block area, getting things to balance that should not balance," Ms. Candreva said. "He made this big square balance and then he filled in the space with blocks and he had to figure out what would fit where. Where else do you get to experience that kind of thing?"

Ms. Candreva said the kids get to explore their interests independently, without a teacher nagging on them to do certain activities at certain times.

"If they're into the bugs, we just raised butterflies, then there is an outlet for that," Ms. Candreva said. "They can grow plants and spend a lot of time in the science area. But if they're into math all of those things are available. In the housekeeping area, it is not just dress up and cooking. They get to be a doctor or a florist based on what interests them."

At the end of the day, Ms. Candreva said seeing kids move on from the program is sad, but at the same time fulfilling.

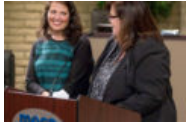
"When you develop these relationships with these kids it's almost like a graduation, you just want to hold onto them," Ms. Candreva said. "It is really rewarding and we have a lot of parents that will bring their kids back and say

‘there (the parent’s kid) being so successful.’

Joe Jacquez is a journalism student at the [Arizona State University Walter Cronkite School of Journalism](#) and wrote the article as a class assignment.

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