

Michele Fina, Branch Director, Morrisville Branch YMCA

Welcome Senator Casey. My name is Michele Fina and I am the branch director of the Morrisville YMCA, a child care center located in Morrisville Borough. I have been with the Morrisville Y since 1992. I currently serve as board president of the Bucks County Quality Child Care Coalition, our local community engagement group. I serve on the Bucks County Pre K Grantees Work Group. In addition, I am a member of the Morrisville Rotary Club. The Morrisville YMCA has been involved with Pre K Counts since the original Public Private Partnership and we continue to partner with the Morrisville Borough School District in PA Pre K Counts.

Our current enrollment is 125. Approximately 64% of our children are subsidized by Child Care Works. Another 5-10% receives YMCA scholarships. We have 18 full day preschool children funded through Pennsylvania Pre K Counts. For the past several years we have applied for an expansion grant to provide half day services to approximately ten children on our waiting list. Unfortunately, there weren't enough resources in Pennsylvania for that grant. Many of the children in our community have identified risk factors including poverty, English as a second language, and special needs.

To participate in PA Pre-K Counts, child care programs must meet the criteria of STAR 3 or 4 in Pennsylvania's voluntary, quality improvement and recognition system Keystone STARS. I am proud to say that our center earned a STAR 4 on March 24th.

Reaching this level of quality helps insure that all of our children will have a high quality pre-kindergarten experience with competent teachers and assistants in an environment that includes positive relationships, small class size, and a curriculum that aligns with the Pennsylvania Early Learning Standards. Centers are required annually to complete self-assessments using the Environmental Rating Scale (ERS) and then independent ERS assessors determine if the site has met the 5.5 to 7 point scores necessary. My staff can tell you how nerve wracking it is to have a stranger enter your room and scrutinize space and furnishings, personal care routines, language and reasoning, classroom activities, staff and children and staff and parent interactions, schedules, and staff development. I am proud to say that our Pre K Counts classroom scored 6.07 out of a possible 7.0 during our December 2009 independent ERS evaluations.

Our center has been involved in Keystone STARS for at least 10 years. For many of the first six years, we were a STAR 2, but we realized that in order to insure that we were providing high quality programming and to continue to participate PA Pre K Counts program we would need to move to STAR 3, which is the most involved and hardest step in the Keystone STARS program.

More staff needed higher education and for some, it meant returning to school more than 20 years after graduating from high school. I decided if teachers need to be role models for the children in their care, then I needed to inspire staff to pursue higher education. So I returned to school for my Master's Degree in Early Childhood Education.

The majority of our teachers and assistants have been with us for 5-23 years. Our staff attrition rate is low and we lose and add approximately one or two employees each year. Nearly 50% of our employees are pursuing certificates and degrees and several others already hold associate or bachelor degrees. Four years ago, we did not have staff as competent or educated.

What does this mean for us? PA Pre K Counts and Keystone STARS improve and continue to improve our entire program and everyone has benefited from our participation. Both programs provide dedicated resources and a support system with technical assistance and funding for everything from supplies to professional development. The children and their families, my staff, and all our community stakeholders have gained. The children and their families, my staff, and all our community stakeholders have gained. Children enter school prepared to learn.

Many of the children who enter our PA Pre K Counts program as three year olds, transition to Morrisville School District's pre-kindergarten PA Pre K Counts program. I believe we share a unique and supportive relationship with the school district and we work very closely to assure that our programs are aligned. Sixteen months ago, when the school district closed one of the elementary schools due to a mechanical failure, Dr. Yonson called me on a Sunday and asked if the PA Pre K Counts class could move to our building. Of course, my answer was yes and their class was housed in our building from December to June. That is the kind of partnership we share.

The strength in the PA Pre K Counts Program rests in the fact that we work together to achieve the same goals. We use the same standards, staff qualifications, and curriculum as school district classroom, other child care centers, Head Start programs and private kindergartens. This diverse

delivery system supports families and communities and gives families choices. Ultimately, it is the early learning standards which connect to the K-12th grade curriculum providing a seamless path from infancy through high school.

Why is quality early education important? Research indicates that 90% of the brain is developed by the time a child is 5 years old. We know the early years are crucial for development. Quality programs that participate in PA Pre K Counts and Keystone STARS, especially those at STAR 3 and 4 levels, follow stringent standards every day. Programs strive to provide developmentally appropriate activities to help children learn. ERS assessments provide valuable information for child care sites on professional development or programmatic changes that need to be made. And in turn we use child assessments like Work Sampling to determine if a child needs support in a particular area, if a child is making progress, and what we may need to work on next.

We work hard to create a family atmosphere within our center. Our goal is to help families feel comfortable entrusting their children to our care. Families are encouraged to participate in our events, to belong to our Family Group, and to become involved in their child's education.

I was walking through our center early one evening, checking to make sure that lights were turned off and I heard whispers coming from one of the empty rooms. Immediately, I thought, someone left a child alone in the room. I walked into the room and saw one of our fathers sitting in front of a child-sized sofa in the library/reading corner with his son in front of him. It was obvious the dad couldn't fit on the furniture. Dad read the book to him, using his finger to follow the print on the page while his son listened to every word. I wouldn't have expected this dad to be taking the time to sit on the floor and read. When dad was finished, he quietly stood up and said, "My son wanted me to read his favorite book to him because he wants me to buy it for him for Christmas." This is only one story, but if we reached this child and father, I know we reached many, many more. We read with our children many times each day and hope that they will grow to love the words and stories and develop the skills that are necessary for literacy.

We need both state and federal support to continue providing quality early care and education for our youngest and most vulnerable citizens. Child care centers need Keystone STARS. Families need programs like PA Pre K Counts. Without these programs, children may not reach their potential. The opportunity to participate in high quality, community-based early care and

education programs and strong partnerships between programs and schools helps smooth transitions to kindergarten. Child care centers work hard to uphold and maintain quality through Keystone STARS 3 or 4 designations or accreditation through the National Association for the Education of the Young Children (NAEYC). Strong state and federal funding partnerships are needed to provide programs that help children to be ready to learn and succeed in school.

Thank you