It’s a Big WORLD Out There

Pamela Haines, DVAEYC Public Policy Director

One of the strengths of our field is that many of us live and breathe early childhood education. We are absorbed with our programs, our families, our hopes and fears, our visions for the field. Sometimes it’s hard to remember that there’s a bigger world outside. Yet there are wonderful opportunities out there—both to get support from unexpected allies and to contribute what we know to other individuals, projects and systems in unexpected places. But to do this, we will need to venture outside our doors.

Those of us who have been active in advocating for a fully funded high quality system have come across some of these non-ECE allies: the police chiefs and public defenders at Fight Crime Invest in Kids, who speak out about how investing in ECE would give them less work to do; the military people in Mission Readiness who are concerned about the small pool of 17-year-olds who are physically and mentally fit to serve; the business people who understand that building up a competitive workforce has to start early. (For a testimonial from one of these local business people, see p. 2.) How many more such people are out there, just waiting to be asked to join in support?

Parents are starving for good information about ECE—how to choose a program, help their children prepare for school, advocate for the resources they need to flourish. The great work of the Parent Ambassadors at the West Philadelphia Early Childhood Education initiative was highlighted in the last issue of Connection. More recently, DVAEYC field workers and volunteers staffing tables at community fairs sponsored by State Representatives have been resourceful to hundreds of parents on these issues. A sister organization, Parent Power, is experimenting with providing block parties with a blanket, along with books, toys and ideas for activities, to enrich the experience of young children at such events. How might we build on experiments such as these?

The understandings we have gained in ECE are priceless, and potential partners are starting to recognize a good thing when they see it. Our work with Smith Playground on a nature pre-school is steadily growing legs. International Mud Day this year attracted not only hardy early childhood programs, but the Department of Parks and Recreation (see p. 4). Our understanding of the importance of outdoor play is helping the Community Design Collaborative plan for public play spaces and play yards for family child care programs. Members of Philadelphia’s new Universal Pre-K Commission (almost entirely outside the ECE world) are getting a crash course in the importance of our work—and expressing gratitude for that opportunity.

We are also making some headway in our impact on the K-12 system. The potential for building on a very successful CDA program for high school students is exciting (see p. 6) and we are exploring how to reach out to 8th and 9th graders to get them interested in ECE as a career. We are launching some shared professional development projects between K-3 teachers and the ECE programs that feed into their elementary schools. While those K-3 teachers may know some things that would be useful to us, the ECE community has wisdom to share with them as well. Stay tuned for more developments.

It’s a big world out there. Let’s remember our value, and step out, boldly confident in our ability to both receive support and to offer something of value—and ready to work with some unexpected partners.
Jackie Buhn

I am the owner of a boutique real estate consulting, development, and management firm in Philadelphia and I see nothing that will improve the value of real estate, and the success of my business, more than quality and quantity pre-K in PA. Setting our infant citizens up to succeed as educated voters is a long term benefit for the region. Nothing will make us more productive, competitive, and able to enjoy life at the same time—partly due to the many regional improvements these educated citizens will make. But pre-K is not just a long term play; I’m in the business of attracting companies to locate in the region and occupy real estate now, and even low taxes don’t speak louder than great schools. We business people are not just willing, we’re anxious to pay taxes to attract employees today—employees who want the best for their kids—and to train employees for tomorrow. It’s simply a core business investment.

I hate it when education is viewed as a soft, quality of life, ladies’ and children’s issue. I’m a grandma and I love little kids like anyone else. But this issue is pure economics: we can’t attract employers and employees without schools for their kids, and we can’t grow our knowledge-based businesses without educating our future inventors and workers. Sure, getting an education is good for individual kids—they’re likely to earn more and stay out of trouble because they frankly have better things to do. We all want OUR OWN kids educated. If we want healthy cities and states, we need ALL kids educated. They’ll contribute much more to our economy, waste less in prison, and be much less accepting of the political graft that burdens our economies.

Pre-K is the best thing anyone can do for our state. Please help make it happen.

Jacqueline Buhn is Principal and CEO of AthenianRazak LLC and serves on the board of directors of the Economy League of Greater Philadelphia.
After five months of providing technical assistance to Tick Tock Early Learning Center, now a STAR 4 program in Chester County, it is extremely satisfying to look back and reflect on all the progress they have made. It reminds me of how challenging this work is, and how each hard-won change for the better makes a difference for our children in their most formative years.

Tick Tock requested technical assistance to support teachers with challenging behaviors within the young and older toddler classrooms. At intake, the executive director, center director, family services manager and teachers all participated in the initial meeting, creating an immediate partnership with the DVAEYC technical assistant. Teachers shared their struggles about the various social/emotional and global developmental delays creating difficulties within the classrooms. They reported that often these behaviors had a “snowball” effect on the classroom, and were seeking suggestions about how to better handle such challenges.

Initial observation indicated that transition struggles often triggered these challenging behaviors. Together we developed strategies to help ease child wait time, especially in between activities, before and after lunch, and during personal care routines. Using strategies from CARA’S KIT to guide this process, I asked the teachers to reflect on what they would like to see happen during transitions and what they thought the ideal classroom environment should look like. Together, our action steps were developed. Teachers put in place strategies that included using small groups to better manage routine care times; shorten activities to meet the developmental interests of the children; and provide activities during all child wait times. They eliminated having both teachers “task” at the same time, creating better supervision of the children, and they began to utilize extra float staff when needed to ensure that children were not waiting unengaged, especially during meal time preparation.

Subsequent observation visits showed teachers working hard to implement these ideas, with a positive effect on the classroom. They began offering planned activities during all transitions, engaging children through singing, reading or providing simple table top toys. Because classroom management became somewhat easier, teachers seemed less stressed, leading to improved child interactions. Other successes included better communication among the teachers as they became more proactive with the children and were able to prevent some behavior struggles from happening.

As our work progressed and classroom transitions improved, we began addressing ways to meet the social and emotional needs of children with behavioral challenges. We developed another goal: for teachers to address children at eye level, modeling appropriate behaviors through verbal and visual supports. Through strength-based coaching, several strategies were implemented. Teachers started with charting child upsets throughout the day to see if a pattern emerged – hoping to identify keys times when additional behavioral supports were needed. Because some of the children were experiencing extreme separation behaviors, a consistent teacher “script” was developed. This was paired with a pictorial classroom schedule which served as a visual reinforcement for the children. After using the “script”, teachers would immediately redirect behavior by offering to play house, read a story, etc.

Teachers began using a neutral and supportive tone of voice while validating and acknowledging children’s feelings, even if the behavior seemed inappropriate. By reinforcing all positive behaviors with praise and enthusiasm, they were able to turn these moments into developmentally appropriate learning opportunities. Perhaps most importantly, teachers worked to engage parents as partners in this process. Parents were supported to pursue outside evaluations such as early intervention services to provide additional developmental support. Fortunately, parents showed great buy-in for this process, agreeing to referrals and open to following through with suggested behavior management strategies at home.

A challenge that we experienced was that several of these children were found not eligible for early intervention services, as their development was within normal limits and behavioral concerns alone did not qualify them for services. This was disappointing, since the teachers had worked hard to convince parents to pursue these evaluations, and felt that they had lost some credibility. Yet they were reminded of all the positive changes they accomplished within a short period of time and the dramatic turnaround in classroom management. They have been empowered from this collaborative effort and have the tools to better address behavior challenges.

Meeting children on their level, being mindful of unengaged child wait time, using supportive language and, most importantly, developing a partnership with parents, staff and outside community supports are essential to meet the developmental needs of all children. The successes we experienced at this center provide a dramatic example that meaningful change can happen from a collaborative approach, creating true and awesome partnerships.
Inviting Our Teachers to Mud Day

Deb Green, Director, Parent Infant Center

After carefully observing our first year at PIC with our nature playground, I have observed how some of our teachers have easily grasped on to our new playground and offer their children many opportunities to truly play in the dirt (and in every other part of the playground). Conversely, for others, it has been a slow and quite difficult process for them to accept and encourage play that is so foreign to their own roots. It has been a tremendous learning experience for me, and I feel strongly that we need to understand the multiple perspectives involved. I’ve thrown out “If we build it, they will come” and am thinking much more about “Why aren’t they coming?” and “What do we need to do differently to get them there?” Our celebration of International Mud Day was heartening in this regard. The article by Nicole Williams, one of our infant-toddler teachers, makes me so hopeful about the possibilities.

The Joy of Mud

Nicole Williams, Bumblebee lead teacher, Parent Infant Center

As a kid growing up, I was taught never to play in mud. It was described as being dirty, nasty, and messy. Needless to say, when I heard about International Mud Day, I was less than thrilled. I had an image of mud flying everywhere, getting into the children’s hair and on their clothes, and making a HUGE mess!

I asked myself, are we just playing in the mud or is there a reason for us to get messy? Through some quick research, I learned that on Mud Day children connect with friends around the globe and explore the wonders of nature through mud play. While a wonderful cause, I was still not excited.

On Mud Day, we walked with the children around to the black top. Before we could reach PIC’s big iron gate, I heard the laughter and screams of joy coming from the yard. When we circled the corner, I witnessed the children literally having the times of their lives. It was awesome to see!

The Bumblebees were so very excited. Most of them ran right for the mud without any hesitation. One of our Bees, Kieran, belly flopped right into the mud. He jumped right back up and went again. Elena mushed the mud in between her hands, letting the mud ooze down. At that moment, I thought to myself, “I cannot believe I missed out on this type of fun as a kid.”
My granddaughter Amelia had so much fun! Each time I bring her to Pennypack—or even ride by—she starts yelling with excitement, “Mud, mud mud!” She loved making mud pies and baking them in the pretend ovens. Painting with the mud was also a big hit. Slapping it on with fly swatters, rolling toy cars in it and making “tracks” on the paper was cool too!

Marvelous Mud

Excerpts from an article by Randy Keeler

It’s really just about designating a space, and allowing it to happen. It’s about giving yourself and your children permission to do it. To go for it! To do what children have always naturally done. The parents of your children trust you and believe in you. If you see the benefits of mud play, help them see the benefits too. And ask for some extra clothes for those special dirty days!

Studies have recently revealed the positive qualities of earth, soil, and mud. Science says that being barefoot is good for you. Mud has microscopic bacteria that soothe you, relax you, and calm you down. So that’s why it feels so good to kick off your shoes and socks! Now why not take a deep breath and give it a go? Talk it over with your staff, parents, and children. Gather some extra clothes. Designate an area for mud play. You could have a summertime “Mud Week” like they do in Winnipeg at the Discovery Children’s Centre. Or you could schedule your special “mud day” to coincide with the soon-to-be-world-famous “International Mud Day” started in 2009 by spirited folks in Nepal and Australia. You gotta love it. You gotta go for it. Don’t you?

Then I thought about the learning that was taking place. One of the older Bees, Uwais, was measuring the mud with a measuring cup and dumping it into a bucket. Max was transferring mud from one hand to the other. After seeing the kids have so much fun, I knew I had to join. I stepped out of my comfort zone and allowed myself to be free!

I was pleasantly surprised at what I learned and witnessed on Mud Day. I saw splashing, rolling, squishing, sliding, making mud pies, and much more. I saw learning take place at the messiest of times. Children are explorers and they love to learn new things.

In the Bumblebee classroom, we have decided to play in the mud more often. At home, parents can gather some mud in a bucket, add shovels, spoons, rakes, measuring cups, put on swim suits, and get down and dirty. But most importantly, have fun!
When I started teaching CDA in South Philadelphia High School, I knew how to make it fun and exciting. I taught the students the way we teach the children, incorporating the common core knowledge for English and Math through play. After sharing objectives and goals for the week, I engaged them through play, and gave the lecture afterwards; I did practice, then theory, so they were able to understand what they were doing.

**Learning Through Play**

Transforming high school students into ECE professionals

Kimrenee Coaxum  
CDA Instructor, South Philadelphia High School

For example I would pull out the play dough and tell them to pick their favorite color. We sat in circles, so they never had to worry about who was behind them and they always felt included. I invited them to manipulate the play dough, then asked questions about how they felt, how their night was—the way we would do circle time with young children. After the lesson, I asked open-ended questions based on what they knew, then asked new questions to get them ready for the next lesson. We would talk about guidance and how to redirect an upset child, about how sensory materials could help them settle down. They could see that asking children how they were feeling would create two-way conversation, expand language, redirect, and build trust and security at same time. I asked which development they were supporting with this activity, and they identified social emotional and fine motor development. Then I asked what other things in our classroom, with all its learning centers, could build on this experience, and they had to find another toy and tell the class why they were choosing that toy.

I do a two to three week project on understanding how to develop a classroom from a professional perspective, and start from where they are. They love to shop, so I ask them to think about those environments. What stores do they shop at and why? They talk about being able to find stuff easily, whether the staff are friendly. I get conversations started, building on their prior knowledge, then ask what the ideal classroom would look like. They work in partners or teams to start creating their own classroom. I show pictures of different classrooms, talk about color schemes and the problems of overstimulation, talk about the four corners—wet, dry, active, quiet—and what learning centers go in the different corners and why. We watch videos to see how other teachers do it, and look at the ECERS standards. Then they build their ideal classroom, write a parent handbook to help parent see how the centers are used, then go to Lakeshore, pick out the items that would best fit their learning center, then develop a budget.

They do math when they develop the budget and measure their space to determine how many children would be in the classroom. They do English when they write the handbook. When I do it from that perspective, they kind of forget that they are doing math, reading and writing, because it’s something they enjoy. I pair the ones who are struggling with others, so they don’t feel overwhelmed. Those who want extra support can stay after school.

I’m excited because the students are excited about learning. They’re understanding the importance of being an educator. I’ll tell them I have to write lesson plans, and we talk about what’s a lesson plan? It makes me happy when they come in and they ask what the objective is for today. I see their language developing. They feel proud. When they go out to a center, they feel valued. The teachers say how much they know, how they get down on the floor, and take initiative. They are excited that they know. When I took them to the DVAEYC conference, one was able to raise her hand in a workshop and explain what attachment was.

As I prepare them to become teachers in an infant toddler program, they see that they don’t want to be a parent right away, that it’s a lot of
work. I want them to connect to the parent coming into the infant classroom. If you know the stresses that a parent is going through, it will support how you interact with that parent. So they do a family budget. They find out how much infant care costs, and use Babies “R” Us to calculate other prices. We talk about how to care for the baby, picking up cues, failure to thrive and SIDS, so if they are in an infant classroom, they are able to talk with the main teacher and parent.

We do a lot on parent teacher communication, a lot of role playing. In my job as a director, I saw a lot of staff struggle with communication. How can you explain something to a parent without making them feel defensive? We talk about cultural competence, and trying to understand where parents are coming from, so we can meet them where they are and not judge their choices. I pull scenarios from the NAEYC Code of Ethics so students can role play. I’ll do it first with no explanation, then talk about the issues and do it again. I can see their tone and facial expression and body language change.

I’m going into my third year at South Philly High. I had twenty students in first year, and 35 in the second. Five seniors have graduated, and they are all in college ECE programs. One young woman was placed in our program in tenth grade because the others were full, so she came with no interest. But once she started coming to class, she really got engaged, and glad to be learning so much. She took initiative to help others learn certain things, and when she struggled with lesson plans she came after school to get help. When I see her help her teacher do lesson plans, I feel proud.

The teachers are thrilled to have a young person not need so much direction, come in with ideas. Recently I got a phone call that one director wants to hire one of my students and help me build up the program even more. That shows me that what I am doing is working, and motivates me to think of new ideas to help these young people be great teacher candidates. Even though I’m not in a center, I’m still having an impact because I’m preparing young people to move into this work.

It makes me happy to do what I was doing with children, using the principles I was taught, to help my high school students understand what it means to be an ECE educator. Using facilitation and play, rather than just pouring information into them, I see the impact.

I get to prepare and motivate these young people to go to college and get a job. A lot of children have such a bad experience at school that college can seem unreachable, but I’ve seen attitudes about school change. I remember learning that if you don’t reach a child by third grade sometimes you lose them. These students are beyond the third grade—but though many have low reading levels they strive to improve and learn skills that impact young children’ early care and education. To have them come regularly, and see in their eyes that they want to learn, to give them employability skills and see them get a job—that’s priceless.
As I begin to schedule new DVAEYC trainings on the calendar for the upcoming school year, I can’t help but reflect on this past year with the Registry…how far we’ve come, and where we are going next. While I’d like to say the transition into the new system was smooth, I simply can’t deny that the challenges have been taxing. I can think of countless times when I felt defeated and frustrated, trying so hard to push through the obstacles of an imperfect system and a steep learning curve. If what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger, then I’d say the PD Department is now our strongest yet!

We’ve strived so hard to keep our heads above water over the past year, that I’m hopeful it will be smooth sailing from here on out. I am so energized at the prospect of being proactive instead of reactive, and supporting the ECE community with a confident and helpful hand instead of struggling to learn with you along the way. Those moments of confusion and frustration have grown into motivation to thrive in the coming year. While our spirits may have faltered here and there in times of uncertainty with the new system, our tenacity never did, and that’s what makes our PD Department, our organization as a whole, and our field so remarkable.

Normally I wouldn’t toot my own horn, but I’m ready to start the new year with confidence and positivity. Let’s turn these past hurdles into opportunities to excel. Here’s to a successful year with inspiring trainings! Looking forward to seeing you there!

Let’s turn these past hurdles into opportunities to excel.