



Early Childhood Education Fund

A fund of Community Foundation of North Louisiana

ANSWERING THE CALL

Mandy Neal, owner of Grandma's Arms Child Care and Development Center in Shreveport, is a savvy business owner whose success and contributions to the local economy are tangible and quantifiable. Since embarking on the path that eventually led her to open Grandma's Arms, Neal has built a new facility from the ground up, acquired a second facility she is preparing to renovate extensively, and trained and mentored dozens of employees in the field of early childhood education. She seeks constant improvement for both herself and her staff, researching new early childhood curricula, pursuing a post-graduate degree in early childhood education, and encouraging her employees to enroll in degree and certificate programs that will not only improve their skills as childcare workers but also open opportunities for their own career advancement. Having identified a growing need, Neal is also planning to invest significant resources in a "sensory room" for young children with autism and sensory issues.

Describing Mandy Neal as a "business owner," however, obscures an important part of her personal story as well as the wider impact of her work. She is quick to explain that what looks from the outside to be a career is really something much more profound: a calling.

"In 2003 I was working at Home Depot, and one day on the way to work I asked the Lord, 'What would you have me to do, with the knowledge that you gave me?,'" explains Neal. "Right off the bat, he spoke to me and said, 'Childcare.' I tried to deviate away from it because I was trying to get my own kids out of the house!"

But Neal understood a calling of this type was not to be ignored, so she dove into 12 years of research, study, and preparation that culminated in the official opening of Grandma's Arms on August 10, 2015. **Today, her childcare center encompasses two sites and serves over 130 children ages six weeks to 13 years old. Grandma's Arms has built a stellar reputation for its focus on helping children develop crucial social-emotional, physical, language, and cognitive skills in an atmosphere infused with trust and love.** Every year, Neal is especially proud to celebrate with her Grandma's Arms families as some of their kindergarten-bound children are accepted into competitive magnet school programs in Caddo Parish.



Pre-K4 student at Grandma's Arms



Infant student at Grandma's Arms

Grandma's Arms is also one of 18 Type III childcare centers participating in CFNLA's Early Childhood Education Scholarship Initiative. Neal and her staff are making crucial contributions to the initiative's goal of improving kindergarten readiness among children in Caddo Parish schools. **Currently, 60% of students entering kindergarten in Caddo Parish do not meet readiness benchmarks on math and reading evaluations.** Data collected by CFNLA in cooperation with Caddo Parish schools from 2021 through 2024 demonstrates children who have attended Type III childcare centers are far more kindergarten-ready than peers who do not attend preschool during the formative birth to three years. **National research studies have shown that 90% of brain development occurs by age four, before children enter kindergarten.** Children who have an opportunity to attend a program like Grandma's Arms are gaining a strong foundation that supports all future learning, behavior, and health.

PARTNERS FOR A BRIGHTER FUTURE

At an average cost of \$9,500 per year, high-quality childcare is out of reach for many families in north Louisiana. The CFNLA ECE Scholarship Initiative supports 12-month full-tuition scholarships to provide families with the opportunity to send their children to high-quality Type III childcare centers like Grandma's Arms. Pairing local fundraising with a dollar-to-dollar match from the State of Louisiana, the ECE Scholarship Initiative has leveraged over \$25 million since 2021.

Applications for scholarships are available through the Caddo Smart Start READY START Early Childhood Community Network, a collaborative effort created by the Louisiana Department of Education to increase access to high-quality early childhood care and education at the local level. Families applying for scholarships must fall below a certain income threshold based on household size and must have a caregiver who is working or in school. Caddo Smart Start matches eligible families with a Type III center based on availability, convenience, and other family needs. Scholarships are paid directly to the childcare centers from the Caddo Smart Start network.



Pre-K3 students at Grandma's Arms

Pamela Crook is the Early Childhood Accountability Specialist for Caddo Parish Schools and works closely with Type III centers through the Caddo Smart Start network. She believes the Caddo Smart Start network has played a crucial role in educating the wider community about the importance of early childhood education. “Families trust the local childcare centers,” says Crook. **“We have seen the number of infants and one year olds increase over time and I believe this illustrates an increase in the understanding of the importance of early childhood education. Eleven years ago, we were trying to brand Caddo Smart Start and were searching for families to fill the early childhood education seats. Now, mommas have told mommas and the word has spread.”**

Crook explains the Caddo Smart Start Network has also built trust and rapport with local childcare centers, helping center owners and staff understand they form the crucial first level of the Caddo Parish educational system. With more stable sources of funding available, childcare providers like Neal have been able to sustain investments in curriculum, personnel, training, and capital projects, all of which are strengthening the capacity and impact of the early childhood education landscape in north Louisiana.

“Investing in early childhood education is one of the most powerful ways we can shape the future of Caddo Parish,” says Caddo Superintendent Keith Burton. “The research is clear: when our youngest learners have access to high-quality early education, they enter kindergarten better prepared and are more likely to succeed throughout their academic journey. **Through partnerships like the ECE Scholarship Initiative, we are building a stronger foundation for student achievement, ensuring that every child, regardless of their family’s financial situation, has the opportunity to thrive in school and beyond.”**

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- Keith Burton

Every day, Mandy Neal sees the human impact of her work first-hand as she and her staff welcome, care for, and teach dozens of children who are in the midst of the greatest period of brain development they will experience in their lifetimes. Children and families at Grandma’s Arms benefit from Neal’s evidence-based approach to early childhood education and from the strategic investments that she has made to maintain a safe, engaging physical environment. These decisions have helped Neal build a thriving and successful business, but she is quick to point out that her original calling remains the central guiding principle of her life and work. “My main goal is to give the kids the best, because I know when I had my own kids and they were growing up, I just wanted them to get the best,” explains Neal. She has pursued this goal at Grandma’s Arms by changing her curriculum to better meet the needs of her students and encouraging families to test their children for magnet schools.

CFNLA’s ECE Scholarship Initiative is rooted in this same objective: to provide “the best” early childhood education opportunities for all children in North Louisiana, regardless of their family’s financial means. CFNLA is deeply grateful for the many donors and supporters who have become partners in this effort. Together, we are working to ensure all children get the strong developmental start they deserve while also strengthening our local economy and education system.

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