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More Support for Kalamazoo County Early Education Teachers On Its Way

Non-profit providing access to health and wellness benefits to over 300 early educators

KALAMAZOO, MI: It's no secret the COVID-19 pandemic has hit the early education sector hard. It's an industry that was already in a precarious position: private providers rely on tuition and subsidies to stay open and even prior to 2020, many operated on razor-thin margins. Those razor-thin margins contribute to the early childhood education staffing crisis: without the ability to pay a living wage or offer health benefits, recruiting and retaining staff remains a problem. Kalamazoo County Ready 4s (KC Ready 4s) partners with 50 private pre-Kindergarten programs throughout Kalamazoo County, and over 55% of the programs say that staffing is their greatest challenge. In January of this year, KC Ready 4s provided a Gratitude Bonus to teachers at their partnering programs to assist with wages. **Now, KC Ready 4s is announcing a new initiative, *Thriving Teachers* --> *Thriving Children*, offering health and wellness benefits through an Employee Assistance Program (EAP).**

Not only are preschool teachers in the bottom 3-5% of the national wage scale, but 45% do not have access to health benefits. That percentage is much higher when you only look at privately owned preschools. **Of the KC Ready 4s partner preschools, only 22% had access to health benefits. To address the lack of health benefits, *Thriving Teachers* --> *Thriving Children* will provide access to free counseling, 24-hour crisis line, telehealth, professional coaching, and more. All teachers, not just pre-kindergarten teachers, at partnering programs that participate in KC Ready 4s' PLUS supports (over 300 teachers) are eligible for this benefit.** KC Ready 4s Executive Director Kristyn Buhl-Lepisto said, "We simply must do more to support our early educators. Not being able to find and retain teachers has huge implications on quality."

"The response from teachers and directors about the *Thriving Teachers* Initiative has been incredible," Kristyn said. "Center directors who are trying to hire are going to share this as an employee benefit. And we've had teachers thank us with tears in their eyes because they are so grateful for access to these supports, especially after the last 18 months."

The KC Ready 4s' Board of Directors is equally excited to be supporting this initiative, says Elizabeth Jackson-Spaner, Board Member and Coordinator for Early Childhood Education/Greenwood Principal for Kalamazoo Public Schools, "Early Education, birth to age 8, is the foundation for school success. If we, as a community, invest in our children we invest in a stronger community. The key to a strong foundation for learning is relationships between child and teacher. If we do not support our teacher's physical and mental health, we are merely planting seeds and not tending to them. Healthy teaching staff lead to healthy learning environments for children."

PCCN Director Laurie Kreg said, "The *Thriving Teachers* initiative is going to gift our teachers and their families the opportunity to seek necessary health supports that our programs simply cannot afford. It's

another example of how KC Ready 4s continues to not only support young learners in Kalamazoo County but also the programs that are leading the way in high quality early childhood education. "

KC Ready 4s looks forward to launching this initiative on July 1st, 2021. Suzanne Bouffard, author of *The Most Important Year: Pre-Kindergarten & The Future of our children*, identifies that the most important factor in classroom quality is strong, positive adult-child relationships. KC Ready 4s knows that teachers need strong supports in place in order to create those relationships, and that when teachers thrive, children thrive.

To learn more about Kalamazoo County Ready 4s, visit the website www.kcready4s.org.

To learn more about *Thriving Teachers* → *Thriving Children*, visit <https://kcready4s.org/thrivingteachers/>

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About Kalamazoo County Ready 4s

Kalamazoo County Ready 4s (KC Ready 4s) envisions a community where all children enter kindergarten ready to succeed, regardless of family circumstance. Equity and education are the best path towards this goal, and guide the work with over 55 pre-kindergarten providers and the thousands of children in KC Ready 4s' supported classrooms each year. Since 2011, KC Ready 4s has provided over \$4 million in tuition assistance to nearly 1,600 eligible families in Kalamazoo County. The mission of KC Ready 4s is to advance fully accessible, high-quality pre-kindergarten education for every 3- and 4-year-old in Kalamazoo County through collaborative leadership with public and private community partners.

To learn more about Kalamazoo County Ready 4s or to make a donation, please visit www.kcready4s.org.