

March 18, 2020

RE: Coronavirus and Preschool Operations and Closures

Dear Providers,

Currently, we are experiencing a very unprecedented time in the early learning industry. A time of uncertainty, a time of doubt and a time of fear. On the news many of us have heard about the increased need for first responders, including law enforcement, fire, EMS and medical staff. It is my firm belief that childcare directors, owners, teachers and support staff are also part of the first responder family. I assure you that we here at the Early Learning Coalition of Escambia County are committed to walking beside you during this time. In all of the uncertainty around the Coronavirus Pandemic/COVID-19 I am certain of one thing: that ***the Escambia County workforce is critically dependent on you and your staff!***

Today I was assured by the leadership within the Florida Department of Education and the Office of Early Learning that our stakeholders within the School Readiness and Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten Programs will be supported throughout the current health care crisis. These supports will be for children, parents and providers and will extend through the time in which COVID-19 will be a thing of the past.

One of the most critical actions that you can take as the owner/director of a childcare facility is to ensure that you, your staff and your parents are adhering to the guidance of the CDC including, but not limited to:

1. Encourage your staff and parents to protect their personal health,
2. Post the signs and symptoms of COVID-19: fever, cough, shortness of breath,
3. Encourage parents to stay home and keep children home when sick,
4. Creating and maintaining heightened cleaning and sanitation procedures is of the utmost important; Clean surfaces that are frequently touched – things such as shared desks, toys, countertops, kitchen areas, electronics and doorknobs,
5. Postpone or cancel field trips and meetings that require close contact,
6. Stay up to date on developments in your community,
7. Create an emergency plan for possible outbreak,
8. Assess if parents and children are at a higher risk and plan accordingly,
9. Follow the recommended guidelines for higher risk populations of no more than 10 people convening in a single occupied space, therefore breaking children into smaller groups when possible.

The majority of the guidelines above are common practice for our early childhood professionals, so to that I say ***“Do what you normally do!”***

For providers who choose to keep your doors open, do not fret. We are here to supports you. Things to consider if you are considering suspending operations include, but are not limited to:

1. Being open during this time period presents some additional risks to the health and safety of our children, families and community;
2. **However**, closing may present work challenges for families and it may also force them to shelter at home. The experts keep talking about the need to flatten the curve through social distancing. This is the best way to accomplish this;
3. Children may not be as vulnerable regarding COVID-19 however, they may transmit contagions that are threatening to older adults and those with risks conditions.
4. Create a communications plan to maintain contact with your staff and families so that you can assess your readiness to re-open.

Regardless of your personal decision regarding the operation status of your facility, here are some of the financial supports that we, the Coalition in conjunction with OEL and DOE, are working on:

- Increase allowable absences for enrolled and attending children in the School Readiness & VPK Programs,
- Consider waiving parent co-pay fees for parents that are not able to work due to forced work closures, layoffs or loss of employment,
- Provide reimbursement for closure days for contracted School Readiness and/or VPK Providers,
- Amend eligibility requirement deadlines to prevent loss of services.

In a press release dated Tuesday, March 17th the Commissioner of Education stated that all School Readiness and Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten Programs will receive their full allocation of funding through June 30, 2020 as though there was no disruption in education. The purpose of this continued funding is to ensure that childcare providers will be able to financially support their day to day operations **including paying teachers and childcare staff** regardless of the decision to remain open during this health crisis, or not. The exact details of how we go about doing this and what exactly will qualify is still being determined. I know for certain if you stay open you will be paid for everyone, present or not, so keep good records.

I am currently working very closely with our fellow Coalitions across the state, the Office of Early Learning and Department of Education to identify and document exactly how these supports will be put in place. Once the details have been ironed-out I will share them with you.

The next few weeks will be very trying times for all of us and the workforce will be counting on you to do what you do best, care for children! I trust and feel confident that you will continue to serve the community during this time.

If you need our services I encourage you to reach out to me directly, day or night at bwatson@elclc.org but also include askelc@elcescambia.org so our staff can be engaged too. If necessary, you can also call my direct line at 850-607-7620. We are here to help, and we entertain any ideas you have that might benefit all of us!

Thank you to your commitment to the Escambia County community.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Walter B. Watson, Jr.', written in a cursive style.

Walter B. Watson, Jr.
Executive Director