

MSU EXTENSION

Helps Child-Care Center Thrive

By Keri Collins Lewis

Where some saw an eyesore, others saw an opportunity: could an old hatchery be transformed into a much-needed child-care center? With a lot of hard work, patience and some help from the Mississippi State University Extension Service, not only did Sanderson Farms Inc. create a place for their employees' children to be cared for, they developed it into the most highly rated child-care center in the area.

Sanderson Farms, which began as a farm supply store in 1947, invested more than \$1 million to convert the hatchery into a child-care center that serves the families of its employees as well as the community. In fact, 70 percent of the company's local workforce depends on the child-care center, where about 40 staff members serve 190 children over two shifts. When a child-care center is open nearly 24 hours a day, sometimes six days a week, the challenges are numerous and unique.

Director Glenda Bonds wanted to provide a high-quality learning experience and environment for children, but one key component of quality is teacher education. With staff serving on rotating shifts and children coming and going at all hours, child-care providers found it difficult to attend the local training sessions, which were held in the evenings and on Saturdays.

Enter Child and Family Development area agent Karen Benson and the Mississippi Child Care Research and Referral Network. As "The Helper Piece" in Mississippi's early care and education field, the network offers free statewide training to increase quality. It also provides personalized technical assistance with experienced mentors and resource libraries filled with educational materials available for free checkout. In addition to conducting regularly scheduled workshops, Benson has worked with Bonds for six years to plan staff development, some of which is conducted on-site to accommodate different shifts.

"This past year we focused on the early learning guidelines classes to help them meet requirements in the quality rating system, or QRS," Benson said. "They were committed to

being trained in all of the guideline areas in one year and were willing to make needed changes in the learning environment."

The administration and staff of the center successfully overcame many obstacles to participate in the QRS, Mississippi's voluntary rating system for licensed child-care centers. Their hard work was rewarded when they received a four-star rating during their QRS assessment. Only six out of more than 245 rated child-care centers in the state have gained this designation. Receiving four stars requires extensive professional development and higher levels of education for providers, as well as a family resource center, a volunteer program for parents, weekly newsletters, a lending library and workshops for parents, above and beyond all of the requirements within the classrooms.

QRS assessment is part of a national effort to apply defined standards to early care and education programs in order to improve quality for our youngest and most vulnerable population.

Systems vary from state to state, but most include monitoring and assessment to hold centers accountable while offering incentives such as increased funding.

The Early Childhood Institute at MSU monitors and evaluates participating centers in five areas: administrative policy, professional development, learning environments, parent involvement and evaluation.

Bonds recognized the importance of the collaboration with the Extension Service in helping the Sanderson Farms child-care center reach its QRS goals.

"This challenge came with guidance, partners and mentors, making the challenge attainable," she said. "Our staff responded to the requirements of QRS with enthusiasm. We're very proud of Sanderson Farms Inc. Child Care Center and the care we provide for the children of our employees. Our accomplishments are a team effort."

Their future goals are clear.

"My staff and I cannot wait to hang that Fifth Star in our center," Bonds said.



Scott Corey