



 **Happy Birthday
Head Start**
Celebrating 60 Years!

May 18, 1965 – May 18, 2025



Region VII Head Start Association

IOWA | KANSAS | MISSOURI | NEBRASKA



REGION VII HEAD START 2025 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

JUNE 9-12, 2025 • SHERATON OVERLAND PARK, KS



Region VII Head Start Association

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1965 – 2025

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EVENT HIGHLIGHTS

- Monday, June 9th **Pre Track Sessions**
- **Management Acceleration Program** face-to-face session
- **First Day Learning Teachers Series** pre-track session
- **R7HSA Award & Alumni Recognition Brunch & Head Start's 60th Birthday Diamond Jubilee Celebration**
June 10th from 10:00am - 1:30pm. 30-minute break at 11:30am
- **More than 30 Professional Development Breakout Sessions** presented by Region VII program staff, private consultants and content area experts from across the nation
- **State Breakout Meetings**
- **Peer Colleague/Exhibitor Meet-up Reception**
- **Sponsor/Exhibit Gallery**
- **Region VII Head Start Association Annual Meeting** *June 11th at 4:45pm*
Hosted by your R7HSA Board of Directors
- **Dollar Per Child Fundraiser Raffle**
- **60th Birthday Poster Gallery**
- **Exciting Send Off Session**
- **Federal Dignitaries** invited and will be announced as they are confirmed closer to the event
- **National Head Start Association** (invited)
- **Region VII Training & Technical Assistance Team**
- Renowned Keynote Speaker, **Paul Behrman, Walnut Leadership**
- Featured Speaker, **Tom Krause**, 25-time contributing author for the *Chicken Soup For The Soul* series
- Musical Guest, **Ann Meeker Watson, Ph.D., MT-BC**
- **Surprise cameo visits!**

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PRESENTER HIGHLIGHT
Stephen Zwolak, CEO
 be**TOGETHER**stl
 be well. be together

The Impact of Smalltalk for Leaders
 PRE-TRACK SESSION
 Monday, June 9, 2025
 10 am - 3:30 pm

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R7HSA ANNUAL CONFERENCE
 June 9-12, 2025

Happy Birthday
 Head Start
 Celebrating 60 Years!
 May 18, 1965 - May 18, 2025
 DIAMOND JUBILEE



Musical Guest
Anne Meeker Watson
 Ph.D., MT-BC

Tuesday, June 10th
**Award & Alumni
 Recognition Brunch**

Sing Play Love

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Featured Speaker
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Tuesday, June 10th
**Award & Alumni
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Renowned Keynote Speaker,
Paul Behrman, Walnut Leadership

The Hero's Journey

Conference Closing
 Thursday, June 12, 2025
 10:15am

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R7HSA ANNUAL CONFERENCE
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R7HSA invites your program to showcase a poster at the Region VII June Conference *Celebrating Sixty Years of Head Start.*

Your poster can include historical photos from various years, flyers, and program facilities, playgrounds, etc. Consider adding images of policy council meetings, parent events, legislator visits, community volunteers engaging with children, i.e, dentists, doctors, firefighters, and more.

Take this opportunity to work as a team in putting together a visual presentation that captures the essence of the great work your program has done and continues to do across your service area for the past sixty years!



Tips for creating your poster:

- Gather photos and stories about the fun things that have taken place in your program and community over the years.
- Print your photos and stories and apply them to a posterboard.
- Make it as colorful as you can with other fun elements!
- * **If you've ever published a story in the R7HSA Sand Box magazine, you already have everything you need to make your poster!**

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JUNE 9-12, 2025 • SHERATON OVERLAND PARK, KS



AGENDA AT-A-GLANCE

Monday June 9, 2025	
9 am – Noon	Pre-Track: MAP (paid separately) First session in a series of six Cottonwood 1
10 am – Noon	Pre-Track: The Impact of Smalltalk for Leaders: Growing your staff from the outside in, so they will teach from the inside out: Strengthening your relationships with teachers Cottonwood 2
10 am – Noon	New Staff Meet-up and Networking Cottonwood 3
Noon – 1 pm	Lunch (Provided)
1 – 4:30 pm	Pre-Track: MAP (continued) Cottonwood 1
1 – 3:30 pm	Pre-Track: The Impact of Smalltalk for Leaders: Growing your staff from the outside in, so they will teach from the inside out: Strengthening your relationships with teachers Cottonwood 2
1 – 3:30 pm	New Staff Meet-up and Networking Cottonwood 3
1 – 3 pm	First Day Learning 2nd session (paid separately) Leatherwood 1
4 – 6:30 pm	R7HSA Board Meeting Hawthorne 1&2



REGION VII HEAD START 2025 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

JUNE 9-12, 2025 • SHERATON OVERLAND PARK, KS



AGENDA AT-A-GLANCE

Tuesday, June 10, 2025								
10 am – 1:30 pm	<p align="center">R7HSA Award & Alumni Recognition Brunch & Head Start's 60th Birthday Diamond Jubilee Celebration 10:30am – 1:30pm. 30-minute break at 11:30 Cottonwood 2 & 3</p>							
1:45 – 3:15 pm	Cottonwood 1 Dancing in the Rain: Creating Happy and Confident ECE Programs	Hawthorne 1 It's All About Relationships	Hawthorne 2 Empowering Families: The EHS Experience	Leatherwood 1 Building & Sustaining Impactful Partnerships with Public Schools	Leatherwood 2 Using Creativity to Design Curriculum and Lesson Plans	Leatherwood 3 Angry Love & Ruthless Compassion	Maple Room Essential Negotiation Skills Leaders	Juniper Room TBD
3:30 – 4:30 pm	Cottonwood 1 Missouri Networking	Hawthorne 1 Federal Staff	Hawthorne 2 TBD	Leatherwood 1 Iowa Networking	Leatherwood 2 Kansas Networking	Leatherwood 3 Nebraska Networking	Maple Room TBD	Juniper Room TBD
4:30 – 6:30 pm	<p align="center">Exhibit/Walk-About Reception Assorted appetizers and cash bar Prefunction Cottonwood Lobby/Leatherwood Lobby</p>							

Wednesday, June 11, 2025								
8 – 9:30 am	Cottonwood 1 Enhancing Emotional Intelligence for Stronger Connections and Leadership	Hawthorne 1 Navigating Burnout in early Childhood Education	Hawthorne 2 The Stories We Tell	Leatherwood 1 The Magic of ABC-123 Behavior Change Plans	Leatherwood 2 Strengthening Employee Wellbeing	Leatherwood 3 60 Years of Head Start, Countless Stories to Tell	Maple Room Attendance 101 - Supporting Families with Attendance	Juniper Room TBD
	Cottonwood 2 & 3 Program Contingency Plans							
9:30 – 10 am	Break							
10 – 11:30 am	Cottonwood 1 What Now? Practical Next Steps for TIC after Implementation	Hawthorne 1 Promoting Oral Health: Tips for Classroom Teachers, Expectant Parents, and Families Without Insurance	Hawthorne 2 Shift Your Professional Development to Professional Learning	Leatherwood 1 Strengthening the Head Start Workforce: Insights from Directors and Teachers on Retention, Professional Development, and Well-Being	Leatherwood 2 The HOPEful Classroom	Leatherwood 3 Tips and Updates for Supporting Immigrant Families	Maple Room CONT: Attendance 101 - Supporting Families with Attendance	Juniper Room TBD
	Cottonwood 2 & 3 CONT: Program Contingency Plans							
11:30 am – 1pm	Lunch Break (attendees on their own)							



REGION VII HEAD START 2025 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

JUNE 9-12, 2025 • SHERATON OVERLAND PARK, KS



AGENDA AT-A-GLANCE

Wednesday, June 11, 2025								
11:30 am – 1 pm	Private Luncheon: State-Regional-National Association Networking Luncheon Meet-Up							
1 – 2:30pm	Cottonwood 1 The Role of Attachment and Regulation in Trauma-Informed Classroom Management	Hawthorne 1 Getting to Know You	Hawthorne 2 Meet Ya' On the Front Porch	Leatherwood 1 Growing Healthy Communities Together	Leatherwood 2 Creating a Culture of Wellness That Attracts and Retains Top Talent	Leatherwood 3 Managing Your Self-Motivation	Maple Room Sing & Sign with Young Children	Juniper Room Practice Based Coaching
2:30 – 3 pm	Break							
3 – 4:30 pm	Cottonwood 1 CONT: The Role of Attachment and Regulation in Trauma-Informed Classroom Management	Hawthorne 1 Cultivating Collaboration, Curiosity, and Community: Engaging Collectively In Hands-On Learning Through Farm-to-Early Care and Education Experiences	Hawthorne 2 Jump for Joy!	Leatherwood 1 Teaching Behavior as a Skill=PAX	Leatherwood 2 CONT: Creating a Culture of Wellness	Leatherwood 3 What is Play Therapy & How Does It Help	Maple Room Fatherhood Male Engagement for Head Start Programs 2.0	Juniper Room R7HSA Workroom
R7HSA Annual Meeting 4:45 – 5:30 pm Cottonwood 2&3								
Evening on Your Own								

Thursday, June 11, 2025								
8:30 – 10 am	Cottonwood 1 Reclaiming Joy: A Trauma-Informed Guide to Understanding and Overcoming Burnout	Hawthorne 1 Reflective Professional Development Pathways	Hawthorne 2 Nebraska's CDA Roundtable: Relationships Matter	Leatherwood 1 Eat Healthy, Stay Active!	Leatherwood 2 Addressing Behavior Concerns Through Intentional Teaching Practices	Leatherwood 3 Stability at the Start	Maple Room Coaching for Directors and Management Staff	Juniper Room The Importance of Advocacy and Understanding How
10:15 am – 1 pm	Closing General Session Cottonwood 2 & 3							

REGION VII HEAD START 2025 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

JUNE 9-12, 2025 • SHERATON OVERLAND PARK, KS



PRE-TRACK SESSIONS

Monday, June 9, 2025

Management Acceleration Program (MAP)

9 am - 4:30 pm • Cottonwood 1

This is the first session in a series of six targeted at new leadership in Head Start programs. In this training, participants will learn about the Head Start Management Systems Wheel and understand how the various pieces function to support quality programming. Leadership and Governance, Program Planning, and Coordinated Approaches will be discussed and participants will have the opportunity for hands on activities to deepen their understanding of systems.

Information and Registration for the Region VII Class of '25 Management Acceleration Program can be found at www.r7hsa.com/map

Jenny Burrows, Region 7 TTA Grantee Specialist Manager, ICF
Co-Presenters: Brenda Spurgeon, Region 7 TTA Early Childhood Manager, ICF
Beth Nichols, Region 7 Systems Specialist, ICF

The Impact of Smalltalk for Leaders: Growing your staff from the outside in, so they will teach from the inside out: Strengthening your relationships with teachers

10 am - 3:30 pm • Cottonwood 2

The Impact of Smalltalk – Come join us as we build intentional strategies that will guide your educators to think deeper about their own impact on children, families, as well as their classroom environment. Our time together will help educators enrich their relationships with those they work with and serve. SMALLTALK builds a sense of wonder which will grow into wisdom. It not only shepherds educators to promote a classroom culture of curiosity and wonder, it promotes an emotionally responsive dialogue with our children. Come join us and lay the foundation for SMALLTALK.

Stephen Zwolak, CEO, beTOGETHERst!
Co-Presenter: Theresa Brandt, Head Start Site Supervisor, Kansas City Public Schools

Documenting Behavior Teacher Training Series

1pm - 3:30 pm • Leatherwood 1

FirstDay Learning, 2nd of 2 sessions. Information and Registration can be found at <https://www.r7hsa.com/event/documenting-behavior-firstday-learning-3-part-training/>

New Staff Meet-up and Networking

All day • Cottonwood 3

REGION VII HEAD START 2025 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

JUNE 9-12, 2025 • SHERATON OVERLAND PARK, KS

TUESDAY, JUNE 10, 2025

10:00am – 1:30pm • Cottonwood 2 & 3 (30-minute break at 11:30am)



Musical Guest

ANNE MEEKER WATSON
Ph.D., MT-BC



Featured Speaker

TOM KRAUSE

25-time contributing author
for the *CHICKEN SOUP FOR
THE SOUL* series

The opening session of the 2025 Region VII Head Start annual conference will honor award recipients and Head Start alumni, and commemorate **60 Years of Head Start** with a Diamond Jubilee Celebration.

The Diamond Jubilee will include recognition of 2025 Region VII Head Start Award and Scholarship recipients, special guests, dignitaries, and a discussion with Head Start Alumni about their own experiences, memories, reasons for long-term involvement with the program, and how the program impacted them personally.

The session will also feature activities designed to build energy, including appearances by Head Start Super Stars who will share words of inspiration and motivate attendees as we celebrate sixty years of Head Start.

REGION VII HEAD START 2025 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

JUNE 9-12, 2025 • SHERATON OVERLAND PARK, KS



BREAKOUT SESSIONS

Tuesday, June 10, 2025

Dancing in the Rain: Creating Happy and Confident ECE Programs

1:45 pm - 3:15 pm • Cottonwood 1

This interactive session dives into understanding actionable strategies that lead to feeling happier and more confident, even in difficult circumstances. Lessons learned from remote communities that have prioritized happiness through self-care, positive assumptions and commitment to community are shared and participants are provided with time to reflect and plan on how to bring about positive changes in their programs.

Rebecca Freedman, Co-Founder, FirstDay Learning

Co-Presenter: Christine Perkins, Regional Client Director, FirstDay Learning

It's All About Relationships: Showing Up with an Open Heart

1:45 pm - 3:15 pm • Hawthorne 1

What is our role in being an emotional partner with children, families and colleagues? How do our reflective practices influence how we show up for ourselves and others? During our time together we will reflectively seek a holistic approach to understand how emotional development, temperament, family history and environment can help create a felt sense of love, belonging and appropriate power for all.

Roxeanna Steiner, Early Childhood Specialist, LUME Institute, Youth in Need

Co-Presenter: Amber Buchheit, Early Childhood Specialist, LUME Institute, Youth in Need

Empowering families: The Early Head Start Experience

1:45 pm - 3:15 pm • Hawthorne 2

This presentation focuses on enhancing the effectiveness of the home-visiting component of Early Head Start (EHS) by equipping home visitors with the tools and strategies they need to build strong, supportive relationships with families. The session will explore how home visitors can foster trust and engagement through individualized, family-centered support that promotes child development, empowers parents, and improves family outcomes. Participants will learn how to guide parents in becoming their child's first teacher, use everyday moments to encourage learning, and connect families to vital resources in health, nutrition, and social services. Through practical techniques and real-life examples, the session will emphasize a strengths-based approach to supporting families in the home setting. By the end, whether new or veteran, home visitors will be better prepared to engage families, promote healthy child development, and help parents access the resources they need for long-term success.

Michelle Strathman, Education Manager, NEK-CAP, Inc.

Co-Presenter: Bekki Piper- Education Manager at NEK-CAP, Inc.

REGION VII HEAD START 2025 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

JUNE 9-12, 2025 • SHERATON OVERLAND PARK, KS



BREAKOUT SESSIONS

Tuesday, June 10, 2025

Building and Sustaining Impactful Partnerships with Public Schools

1:45 pm - 3:15 pm • Leatherwood 1

This session will explore building and sustaining impactful partnerships between Head Start programs and public school districts. The presenters will share their experiences and strategies for successfully integrating Head Start children into public school preschool programs. Participants will gain practical insights into the approaches used and the challenges faced in these collaborations. The session will conclude with a Q&A segment, allowing attendees to ask questions and seek advice on overcoming challenges in their own efforts to establish similar partnerships.

Roxane Humphrey, Partnership Education & Special Services Manager, ESU 13 Head Start
Co-Presenter: Elise Gurrola, Partnership Liaison, ESU 13 Head Start

Using Creativity to Design Curriculum and Lesson Plans

1:45 pm - 3:15 pm • Leatherwood 2

This session will dig deep into scientific concepts of creativity and how to leverage those concepts to shape a robust and engaging curriculum for young children. We begin by unpacking the theory of domain-general and domain-specific creativity. Then we discuss how creativity and the Early Learning Outcomes Framework can be mutually supportive and not in opposition. Finally, we create an approach to teaching that embraces two bold claims: 1. all learning can support and be supported by creativity; 2. all skill development build creativity. Using these ideas, we engage participants in an exploration of creative instruction and how to extend that instruction from the classroom to the wider world.

Tom Rendon, Early Childhood Consultant, R7HSA Board Member, Iowa Head Start Association
Co-Presenter: Zach Stier, Children's Librarian, Erikson Public Library

Angry Love and Ruthless Compassion: Sometimes it is the only way children know how to get LOVE!

Teachers need to be Ruthlessly Compassionate!

1:45 pm - 3:15 pm • Leatherwood 3

How to understand WHY children feel so angry? What are strategies to quell such intense behaviors. Angry Love: A child's desperate attempt to get their needs met the only way they know how. This usually comes in the form of intense aggressive, negative behavior (foul language, hitting, spitting, and kicking). Here is an opportunity to integrate many mental health principles into the ECE world. Today's teachers need to understand the importance of mental health in the classroom setting. Understanding a child's negative behaviors in a nondefensive manner, responding with empathy, patience, thoughtfulness, and understanding.

Stephen Zwolak, CEO, beTOGETHERst!
Co-Presenter: Theresa Brandt, Principal Richardson Early Learning Center

REGION VII HEAD START 2025 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

JUNE 9-12, 2025 • SHERATON OVERLAND PARK, KS



BREAKOUT SESSIONS

Tuesday, June 10, 2025

Essential Negotiation Skills Leaders

1:45 pm - 3:15 pm • Maple Room

This interactive workshop equips social services professionals with fundamental negotiation skills to navigate challenging conversations, advocate for clients, and collaborate effectively with colleagues and stakeholders. Participants will learn core techniques such as active listening, interest-based bargaining, framing solutions, and managing emotions to foster positive outcomes. Through real-world scenarios and role-playing exercises, attendees will practice building rapport, finding common ground, and confidently addressing conflicts.

Sarah Ennis, Founder and President, SparkPoint

NETWORKING SESSIONS

3:30 pm - 4:30 pm

Iowa Networking

Leatherwood 1



Kansas Networking

Leatherwood 2



Missouri Networking

Cottonwood 1

Nebraska Networking

Leatherwood 3

EXHIBIT/WALK-ABOUT RECEPTION

Assorted appetizers and cash bar

4:30 - 6:30 pm • Prefunction Cottonwood Lobby/Leatherwood Lobby

REGION VII HEAD START 2025 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

JUNE 9-12, 2025 • SHERATON OVERLAND PARK, KS



BREAKOUT SESSIONS Wednesday, June 11, 2025

Enhancing Emotional Intelligence for Stronger Connections and Leadership

8 am - 9:30 am • Cottonwood 1

This engaging workshop delves into the fundamentals of Emotional Intelligence (EI) and its impact on personal and professional relationships. Through interactive activities and practical exercises, participants will explore the five key components of EI: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. Whether in leadership, teamwork, or personal growth, attendees will leave with actionable techniques to cultivate emotional intelligence for greater success and well-being.

Sarah Ennis, Founder and President, SparkPoint

Program Contingency Plans

8 am - 11:30 am • Cottonwood 2 & 3

In times of uncertainty, it is critical that federally funded programs and organizations have a contingency plan in place to ensure services continue with little or no interruption. Unfortunately, federally granted programs were recently reminded how vulnerable they are with the January 27th news of a Presidential Executive Order that called for a pause in funding federal grants. Although a second statement was soon released stating the pause would not impact Head Start, the original announcement followed by a sudden lack of access to the Program Management System (PMS) many programs encountered hours after the Executive Order was rescinded, reminded the Head Start Community of the importance of contingency planning. Almost everyone has heard or stated the following words at some point in time; "I have a Plan B" ready if things take an unexpected turn." However, it takes more than "B" to continue the course when managing a complex federally funded program or organization.

This session will include a facilitated open forum where participants can share experiences, strategies and resources including an alignment with policies and procedures for effectively navigating disruption while continuing the delivery of high-quality services to children, families and communities served. Participants will: Gain a better understanding of important key elements to consider when developing a comprehensive Contingency Plan. Explore new untapped resources that may be available at the local level. Leave the session with a Draft Contingency Plan Template to further develop with program leadership at the local level

Karen Surprenant, Independent Head Start Consultant and Content Area Expert
Co-presenter: Donna Veatch, Director of Executive Services, Region VII Head Start Association

REGION VII HEAD START 2025 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

JUNE 9-12, 2025 • SHERATON OVERLAND PARK, KS



BREAKOUT SESSIONS Wednesday, June 11, 2025

Navigating Burnout in Early Childhood Education:

Exploring Work-Life Balance Across Age, Role, and Experience

8 am - 9:30 am • Hawthorne 1

Burnout is a significant challenge in the field of Early Childhood Education (ECE), affecting educators at various stages of their careers and across different roles. This presentation aims to explore the complex relationship between work-life balance and burnout, focusing on how age, professional role, and years of experience may predict ECE teachers' well-being. Drawing on recent research and real-life examples from the workforce, we will examine the unique stressors that contribute to burnout in early childhood educators and explore potential strategies for promoting and advocating for healthier work-life integration.

Paula Thompson, Associate Professor, University of Nebraska at Kearney

Co-Presenters: Alexandra Daro, Director of Applied Research, Buffett Early Childhood Institute

Kate Sutton, Senior Research Specialist, Buffett Early Childhood Institute

The Stories We Tell:

Shifting Our Narratives to Cultivate Resilience

8 am - 9:30 am • Hawthorne 2

All behavior has meaning, rooted in our experiences beginning in childhood. Become a reliable narrator and shift your internal dialogue from impossible to empowering. How we think is how we feel. The stories we tell can either undermine or lift our well-being.

Amber Buchheit, Early Childhood Specialist, LUME Institute, Youth in Need

Co-Presenter: Meghan Whitworth, Sr. Director, LUME Institute, Youth in Need

The Magic of ABC-123 Behavior Change plans

8 am - 9:30 am • Leatherwood 1

Are you seeing escalating challenging behaviors in your classroom and/or program and feeling unsure how to create an effective plan to help both the teacher and child? This session takes a deep dive into the creation and use of easy to implement, actionable behavior change plans. Participants will be trained on FirstDay's ABC-123 plan for effective prevention and responses to challenging behavior. Time and guidance will be provided to understand the key steps in a behavior change program and make specific plans to implement them in your own programs and classrooms.

Rebecca Freedman, Co-Founder, FirstDay Learning, FirstDay Learning

Co-Presenter: Christine Perkins, Regional Client Director, FirstDay Learning



REGION VII HEAD START 2025 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

JUNE 9-12, 2025 • SHERATON OVERLAND PARK, KS



BREAKOUT SESSIONS Wednesday, June 11, 2025

Strengthening Employee Wellbeing (session pending)
8 am - 9:30 am • Leatherwood 2

We're on a mission to simplify the path to money + life balance, so your team can stress less about money and focus on what they love. The Beans provides evidence-based financial care to strengthen staff and families, relieve financial stress, reduce turnover, and improve employee wellbeing.

Melissa Pancoast, Founder/CEO, The Beans

Co-Presenters: Alex Orozco, Co Founder and Chief Design Officer of The Beans

60 Years of Head Start, Countless Stories to Tell: The Science Behind the Magic of Early Literacy
8 am - 9:30 am • Leatherwood 3

In this session, participants will hear stories from other EHS/HS programs on the impact they've had on early literacy amongst the families and children they serve. Jen and Kat will discuss using engaging, intentional strategies that foster a love of reading and language development, utilizing the science of reading. Participants will discover ways to create a print-rich early childhood environment, incorporate literacy into interest areas, involve families, and use purposeful teaching experiences to support early literacy growth in meaningful ways. By the end of the session, participants will have their passion for early literacy re-ignited, be able to communicate the essential components of effective literacy instruction, and have actionable steps for their staff to implement in their classrooms. Jen and Kat will focus on resources that provide opportunities to teach phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, using a play-based approach to learning.

Kat Kelley, Kansas and Nebraska Rep, Teaching Strategies

Co-Presenter: Dr. Jennifer Sturgeon, Master of Education Instructor, Northwestern College

Attendance 101 - Supporting Families with Attendance
8 am - 11:30 am • Maple Room

Do you have that child and family that rarely comes to school? Are they always sick or have other reasons for not attending? Review attendance procedures that include working with families on the importance of attendance from the first day of school. The process starts with families before a child ever falls into the Chronically absent percentage. Explore different strategies to engage families in discussing attendance and how to improve attendance. Discover additional data tracking system to enhance your outlook on daily attendance before your children are considered chronically absent. Additionally, we will dive into analyzing the reasons that children and families are absent.

Jill Putnam, Family Services Team Leader, Douglass Community Services, HS/EHS

Co-Presenters: Jessica Freels, Family Outcomes Administrator, Douglass Community Services

REGION VII HEAD START 2025 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

JUNE 9-12, 2025 • SHERATON OVERLAND PARK, KS



BREAKOUT SESSIONS Wednesday, June 11, 2025

What Now? Practical Next Steps for TIC after Implementation

10 am - 11:30 am • Cottonwood 1

A common struggle for organizations who have successfully implemented trauma-informed care is how to continue their journey. This session will provide participants with an understanding of the key constructs to sustaining trauma-informed care in addition to the common pitfalls that organizations face after initial implementation. This session will: · Provide participants with knowledge of the Trauma-Informed Continuum and the systematic change process for organizations · Participants will increase their awareness of difficulties organizations face in sustaining trauma-informed care. · 3 strategies from Trauma Smart will be shared with attendees that will help them navigate the evaluation, maintenance, and monitoring stage. The common pitfalls that organizations face after initial implementation.

Ryan Pankiewicz, Manager Community Programs and Prevention, Trauma Smart-Crittenton Children's Center
Co-Presenter: Jeannie Thurston, Manager Community Programs and Prevention, Trauma Smart-Crittenton Children's Center

Promoting Oral Health: Tips for Classroom Teachers, Expectant Parents, and Families Without Insurance

10 am - 11:30 am • Hawthorne 1

This session will provide Head Start staff with the necessary tools and resources to help ensure Head Start oral health performance standards are promoted and met. At the end of this session, attendees will be able to:
-Describe the steps for classroom toothbrushing at the table. -Describe how to prevent the transmission of respiratory illness and other communicable diseases in the classroom during toothbrushing activities.
-Explain how to handle and store toothbrushes safely. -Explore approaches Head Start staff can use to facilitate dental visits during pregnancy.-Identify how to find oral health care for Head Start participants who are uninsured or who cannot access oral health care.

Kelsey Siegel, MO Dental Hygienist Liaison, National Center on Health, Behavioral Health and Safety

Shift Your Professional Development to Professional Learning

10 am - 11:30 am • Hawthorne 2

Both Professional Development and Professional Learning have a place in our need to grow, yet most focus is placed on Professional Development: training on a topic deemed necessary for all staff to know, e.g., CPR. Professional Learning opportunities are designed to promote higher level thinking and engagement, and thus learning to apply in context, e.g., solution discovery around addressing children's severe behaviors so prevalent today. Participants will participate in some professional learning during this session to further understand its critical value and engage in planning for its use in the upcoming school year.

Janet Humphries, Founder, Coach, Consultant, Instructor, Coaching Potentials LLC

REGION VII HEAD START 2025 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

JUNE 9-12, 2025 • SHERATON OVERLAND PARK, KS



BREAKOUT SESSIONS Wednesday, June 11, 2025

Strengthening the Head Start Workforce:

Insights from Directors and Teachers on Retention, Professional Development, and Well-Being

10 am - 11:30 am • Leatherwood 1

This session will present key findings from the Missouri Head Start Workforce Survey, which gathered insights from Head Start directors and teachers to understand workforce challenges, job satisfaction, professional development needs, and well-being. The director survey results highlight concerns about compensation and benefits, with 40% of respondents dissatisfied with wage structures and 73% dissatisfied with pay parity between Head Start lead teachers and public-school teachers. Staff retention remains a major challenge, with higher pay, work-life balance, and job stability cited as key factors. Mental health concerns, including burnout (60%) and workload stress (66.7%), further impact workforce sustainability. Additionally, behavioral management training (100%) and leadership development (53.3%) emerged as critical professional development needs.

The teacher survey, which will be completed by the end of February, will provide complementary insights from frontline educators, including perspectives on workforce conditions, classroom management, and mental well-being. This session will integrate both director and teacher perspectives to explore practical solutions for improving workforce retention and compensation, enhancing professional development opportunities, addressing mental health challenges and well-being, and supporting staff in managing classroom behaviors. Attendees will engage in discussions on policy implications, leadership strategies, and innovative workforce support models to strengthen the Head Start workforce across Missouri.

Shinyoung Jeon, Assistant Professor, Department of Human Development and Family Science, University of Missouri
Co-Presenters: Uma Awasthi, Graduate Assistant Student and Aileen Garcia, Assistant Professor, Department of Human Development and Family Science, University of Missouri; Stacey Wright, Director and Carolyn Stemmons, Assistant Director, Missouri Head Start Collaboration Office; Tina Bernskoetter, Director/Executive Services, Missouri Head Start Association

The HOPEful Classroom: Integrating ACEs and PCEs for Student Success

10 am - 11:30 am

Leatherwood 2

This interactive workshop equips educators with the knowledge and tools to address the impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) while fostering Positive Childhood Experiences (PCEs) in the classroom. Participants will explore the science behind ACEs and their effects on learning and behavior, then shift focus to strategies for building resilience through the HOPE framework (Healthy Outcomes from Positive Experiences).

Through engaging discussions, real-world case studies, and collaborative activities, attendees will learn to create classroom environments that promote safety, trust, and connection. The session also includes action planning to help educators immediately apply their insights to support student success and well-being.

Beth Reeder, Training Specialist, Kansas Children's Service League
Co-Presenter: Dana Book, Training Specialist and HOPE facilitator, Kansas Children's Service League

REGION VII HEAD START 2025 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

JUNE 9-12, 2025 • SHERATON OVERLAND PARK, KS



BREAKOUT SESSIONS Wednesday, June 11, 2025

Tips and Updates for Supporting Immigrant Families

10 am - 11:30 am • Leatherwood 3

Many Head Start families are feeling some anxiety related to new threats against immigrants and undocumented residents. As a first step to support these families, this presentation provides basic training on the rights all residents of the United States have, regardless of immigration status. It will include suggestions that may improve the outcome of any encounter with the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

Tom Rendon, Early Childhood Consultant; R7HSA Board Member, Iowa Head Start Association

The Role of Attachment and Regulation in Trauma-Informed Classroom Management (3hr)

1 pm - 4:30 pm • Cottonwood 1

Effective classroom management goes beyond enforcing rules and maintaining order—it is deeply influenced by the quality of relationships between staff and children. Trauma-informed care highlights the importance of secure relationships in fostering a positive learning environment where children feel safe, respected, and able to be engaged. When staff establish strong, supportive connections with the children they work with, they create a foundation of trust, emotional regulation, that promotes well-being and better-quality learning environments. In this session participants will have an opportunity to hear the benefits of a trauma-informed approach. They will learn the foundations of building strong attachment as well as have an opportunity to participate in reflection on how their own regulation impacts their ability to feel effective in building relationships and managing the learning environment.

Jeannie Thurston, Manager Community Programs and Prevention, Trauma Smart-Crittenton Children's Center
Co-Presenters: Laura Niederer, Manager Community Programs and Prevention, Trauma Smart-Crittenton Children's Center;
LeAnn Keck, Director, Trauma Smart-Crittenton Children's Center

Getting to Know You

1 pm - 2:30 pm • Hawthorne 1

Taking the time to get to know parents with simple conversation develops relationships and improves school achievement. This simple training activity builds staff confidence to start the process. Attendees will participate in a mini partnership and share with the group. We will also review the family partnership agreement used at our agency and how we came to utilize the process. This is an interactive session for everyone with a focus on advocates/social services staff. Learning Objectives to include, Embracing the philosophy of engagement and partnerships. Being supportive of shared power with families. Making connections with parents for overall student success.

Shelby Howard, PFCE Manager, NEK-CAP, Inc.
Co-Presenter: Suzy Middleton, ERSEA Manager, NEK-CAP, INC.

REGION VII HEAD START 2025 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

JUNE 9-12, 2025 • SHERATON OVERLAND PARK, KS



BREAKOUT SESSIONS Wednesday, June 11, 2025

Meet Ya' on theFront Porch: The Lost Art of Communication

1 pm - 2:30 pm • Hawthorne 2

What happened to front porch sitting? The kind of neighborhood where you knew the people across the fence or shared a cup of coffee with. We want to invite you to join a community of learning where you can come as you are while we discuss the value of diverse perspectives and togetherness. Unity outshines isolation!

Jason Mercer, Early Childhood Specialist, LUME Institute, Youth in Need
Co-Presenters: Meghan Whitworth, Sr. Director, LUME Institute, Youth in Need

Growing Healthy Communities Together

1 pm - 2:30 pm • Leatherwood 1

The Growing Healthy Communities Podcast grew out of the concern of the Missouri Department of Mental Health (DMH) Children's Office regarding the persistent mental health crisis. Growing Healthy Communities is a podcast by parents for parents to learn about resources, strategies, or navigating life with young children. Join us as we learn about the partnership between the Missouri DMH Children's Office, Missouri Head Start Collaboration Office and Missouri Head Start Association and their efforts to improve the capacity of parents to meet their children's emotional health through a podcast platform.

Melody Boling, Early Childhood Wellness Coordinator, Missouri Department of Mental Health
Co-Presenter: Carolyn Stemmons, Assistant Director, Missouri Head Start Collaboration Office

Creating a Culture of Wellness That Attracts and Retains Top Talent

1 pm - 4:30 pm • Leatherwood 2

Join us for an engaging and interactive workshop designed to help leaders and managers create a workplace culture that attracts and retains top talent. In "Creating a Culture of Wellness That Attracts and Retains Top Talent," you'll explore Gallup's 12 Elements of Engagement and learn how they contribute to staff wellness and organizational success. Through interactive discussions and group exercises, you'll share your best moments at work, understand the importance of discretionary effort, and develop an action plan to implement engagement strategies. We'll also examine the connection between engagement and well-being, highlighting how an engaging culture can reduce stress, anxiety, and depression among employees. This workshop is ideal for leaders, managers, and HR professionals committed to building a positive and engaging workplace culture. You'll leave with practical strategies and a clear plan to enhance engagement at your site. Join us and take the next step toward creating a thriving and engaging workplace!

Katie Ingam, Region 7 TTA Grantee Specialist, ICF
Co-Presenters: Pam Black, Trena Cox, and Irene Mayland, Region 7 TTA Grantee Specialists, ICF

REGION VII HEAD START 2025 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

JUNE 9-12, 2025 • SHERATON OVERLAND PARK, KS



BREAKOUT SESSIONS Wednesday, June 11, 2025

Managing Your Self-Motivation

1 pm - 2:30 pm • Leatherwood 3

Self-motivation is discovering an individual's initiative to do a task or activity. This very interactive session will enable participants to discover their passion and drive for a more self-motivated and rewarding experience in their current educational experiences.

Karen Thomson MA LPC RPT, Director of Program and Resource Development/Therapist, St. Louis LDA

Practice-Based Coaching – Continuing the Journey

1 pm – 2:30 pm • Juniper Room

This workshop session will provide support for coaches, focusing on the challenges of coaching, balancing caseloads, evaluating efforts and effects of coaching, and finding valuable resources to support conversations with coachees. Participants will gain insights into effective coaching strategies and explore practical solutions to common coaching challenges. No matter where you are on your journey as a coach, this session has something for you.

Learning Objectives: Identify and address common challenges faced by coaches in early childhood education. Develop strategies for balancing caseloads and managing time effectively. Discover and utilize resources that support meaningful conversations with coachees. Identify program data sources that measure coaching efforts and effects.

Brenda Spurgeon, Region 7 TTA Early Childhood Manager, ICF
Co-Presenter: Loretta Skinner, Region 7 TTA, Early Childhood Specialist, ICF

Sing & Sign with Young Children

Supporting Emerging Language, the Young Child's Way through Music and Play.

1 pm – 2:30 pm • Maple Room

The author of the *Baby Sing & Sign* book series shares her easy and practical strategies for incorporating music, signing, and play into the daily lives of young children and their caring adults. Learn the benefits of signing key vocabulary words for babies, toddlers and preschoolers. Anne's engaging songs and fun-filled play activities support the language skills of young children at every stage of their development, including children who are talking.

Anne Meeker Watson, Ph.D., MT-BC
Target Audience: Infant-Toddler EHS or ECSE Birth to Five staff

REGION VII HEAD START 2025 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

JUNE 9-12, 2025 • SHERATON OVERLAND PARK, KS



BREAKOUT SESSIONS Wednesday, June 11, 2025

Cultivating Collaboration, Curiosity, and Community: Engaging Collectively In Hands-On Learning Through Farm-to-Early Care and Education Experiences

3 pm - 4:30 pm • Hawthorne 1

Have you ever wanted to explore new ways to make learning outdoors experiential? Have you ever considered incorporating Farm to Early Care and Education experiences into your classroom programming? Have you ever wanted to “sprout” growth and engagement, and integrate locally grown food into your classroom through gardening? Farm to Early Care and Education experiences can have an extraordinary impact on children, families, classrooms or programs, and the greater community! Join us to learn about how to actively build collaborative partnerships designed to connect community organizations, local farmers and gardeners, early childhood education programs, and children and families. Explore ways to foster curiosity and engage children and families through the incorporation of hands-on Farm to Early Care and Education experiences. And explore with us ways we can actively build community between children and families, classroom programs, and the broader community through the exploration of nature, the experiential discovery of where food comes from and how its grown, and through the fostering of a natural wonder about the environment and the world around us. Come “grow” with us!

*Cassandra Clyde, Community Engagement and Volunteer Services Specialist, Drake University Head Start
Co-Presenter: Sarah Martinez, Health and Nutrition Administrative Assistant II, Drake University Head Start*

Jump for Joy! Playing On Purpose with Purpose

3 pm - 4:30 pm • Hawthorne 2

When is the last time you played, like really played? Stress impacts all systems in the body. Play is the antidote, a powerful force that fuels exploration and lifelong learning! Join us to reexamine and center purpose, bring joy back to our environments, and transform well-being.

*Meghan Whitworth, Sr. Director, LUME Institute, Youth in Need
Co-Presenter: Amber Buchheit, Early Childhood Specialist, LUME Institute, Youth in Need*

Teaching Behavior as a Skill=PAX Good Behavior Game for Early Childhood

3 pm - 4:30 pm • Leatherwood 1

PAX Good Behavior Game® (PAX GBG) is a school-based, classroom preventive intervention implemented by educators to teach students self-regulation and behavior as a skill. The PAX Good Behavior Game allows educators in Head Start, preschool, and other early childhood settings to utilize the trauma-informed, evidence-based strategies of the PAX Good Behavior Game, which improve children’s behavior, learning, social development, school readiness, and self-regulation.

*Carmen Irving, Vice President, PAXIS Institute
Co-Presenter: Jeanette Puskas, Director of Programs, PAXIS Institute*



REGION VII HEAD START 2025 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

JUNE 9-12, 2025 • SHERATON OVERLAND PARK, KS



BREAKOUT SESSIONS Wednesday, June 11, 2025

What is Play Therapy and How Does It Help - Making It Meaningful in the Classroom

3 pm - 4:30 pm • Leatherwood 3

This interactive session will define the process of Play Therapy and the benefit to children and families. It will include Theraplay techniques such as Sunshine Circles that can be used in the classroom.

Karen Thomson MA LPC RPT, Director of Program and Resource Development, St. Louis LDA

Fatherhood Male Engagement for Head Start Programs 2.0

3 pm - 4:30 pm • Maple Room

Program leaders often wonder, “Where are all the males in Head Start?” Or “How can fathers get involved in our program?” The real question is, “How is Head Start a place for males?” This requires a shift in traditions, beyond just building a male-inclusive workforce. It involves changing how we operate, engage, create safer spaces, and support male caregivers. Join the Region VII TTA team to discuss helping program leaders and staff confront challenges that hinder male engagement. Network and share strategies for fostering meaningful involvement with fathers, male caregivers, and program staff.

Langston Jones, Region 7 TTA Family Engagement Specialist, ICF
Co-Presenters: Raina Davis, Region 7 TTA Early Childhood Specialist, ICF; Adama Sawadogo, MPH, MHA Health, Safety, and Nutrition Specialist, Sarpy County/ESU #3 Head Start; Mustafaa El-Scari, MA, Program Specialist, HHS-ACF, OHS

Workroom available for attendees who wish to work on program planning/contingency plans. Presenter(s) will be available during this time.

3 pm - 4:30 pm • Juniper Room

R7HSA ANNUAL MEETING

4:45 – 5:30 pm • Cottonwood 2&3

REGION VII HEAD START 2025 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

JUNE 9-12, 2025 • SHERATON OVERLAND PARK, KS



BREAKOUT SESSIONS

Thursday, June 12, 2025

Reclaiming Joy: A Trauma-Informed Guide to Understanding and Overcoming Burnout (90)

8:30 am - 10 am • Cottonwood 1

Have you or your staff members ever felt drained, unmotivated, and disconnected from what you once loved about your job? Burnout is common in high demand fields, and it is on the rise. In this session, participants will learn a trauma-informed framework for rediscovering their passion and purpose. Participants will learn the symptoms of burnout, the risk factors for burnout, and uncover practical strategies to reclaim joy and build resilience.

Jeannie Thurston, Manager Community Programs and Prevention, Trauma Smart-Crittenton Children's Center
Co-Presenter: Andrew Penner, Manager Community Programs and Prevention, Trauma Smart-Crittenton Children's Center

Reflective Professional Development Pathways: Building Healthy Tech Practices in Early Education

8:30 am - 10 am • Hawthorne 1

Participants will learn how reflective practice is utilized at multiple levels of professional development when developing a new initiative, in this case a technology initiative. Collaborative, data-based reflection on practice during coaching and supervisory sessions is imperative to the success of innovative pilots. This session is for all staff interested in building reflective practice through collaboration and professional development. It is also a great opportunity for those interested in high quality teaching practice around technology in early childhood. Participants will leave with guiding principles for a healthy approach to technology use in early childhood, tools for coaching teachers in their instructional practice around technology, and developing trainings that reflect the unique needs of adult learners.

Amy Turcotte, Early Childhood Technology Coach, Project Eagle Head Start / Educare KC
Co-Presenters: DeLinda Johnson, Mentor Teacher, Project Eagle Head Start / Educare KC;
Hannah Buckholz, Teacher, Project Eagle Head Start / Educare KC



REGION VII HEAD START 2025 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

JUNE 9-12, 2025 • SHERATON OVERLAND PARK, KS



BREAKOUT SESSIONS

Thursday, June 12, 2025

Nebraska's CDA Roundtable -Relationships Matter

8:30 am - 10 am • Hawthorne 2

Join us as we explore the collaborative efforts of the Child Development Associates Credential Roundtable members in Nebraska, who are passionately committed to fostering cooperation among Early Childhood stakeholders across the state. This collaborative approach holds significant potential to create a unified and thriving Early Childhood workforce that positively impacts child development. By bringing together resources, expertise, and perspectives, we aim to develop a comprehensive strategy addressing existing gaps, promoting equitable opportunities, and enhancing the education and professional growth of Early Childhood professionals. Our coordinated initiatives are already making meaningful changes that not only benefit the workforce but also uplift the children and families they serve. During this session, participants will delve into the innovative strategies that have emerged from the Nebraska CDA Roundtable's collaboration with key organizations, including the Nebraska Department of Education's Office of Early Childhood, Head Start Collaboration, Early Learning Connection Professional Development Regions, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's Early Childhood Extension, the Buffett Early Childhood Institute, the Nebraska Institutes of Higher Education, and nearly 60 other organizations. This includes representation from policy and legislative officials, as well as partnership with the Nebraska AEYC and the Council for Professional Recognition, along with early childhood directors and providers working in the field. Participants will gain insights into the unwavering commitment these organizations demonstrate in creating a streamlined process for all in advancing the education and professional development of Early Childhood professionals, as well as the support systems in place to facilitate their success. This session promises valuable perspectives and opportunities for engaging discussions focused on harnessing the power of collaboration to strengthen the Early Childhood workforce and ensure optimal development for future generations.

Facilitator: Stephanie Knust, Nebraska Head Start Collaboration Office Director, Nebraska Department of Education, Office of Early Childhood

Panel Members: Jenè Chapman, NE Dept. Of Education Office of Early Childhood, Early Childhood Training Specialist; Aimee Hoes, Education Service Unit #3, Nebraska CDA Navigator; Erika Fink, Educational Service Unit #1, Early Learning Connection Coordinator for the Northern Region; Additional Panelists TBD

Eat Healthy, StayActive!

8:30 am - 10 am • Leatherwood 1

Obesity and its related health problems have become a serious problem for children in America. Central Missouri Community Action Head Start has brought together their students, staff, parents, community, and university medical students to address this issue that affects our community's most vulnerable students- children living in poverty. Over a period of 16 weeks children, staff, and parents are educated on nutrition, the need for physical activity, shopping on a budget and limiting screen time. Participants are encouraged to make small changes that make a big difference. Learning strategies include classroom experiences, parent training, and family activities This presentation will include data results, photos, video, and stories on how this low literacy childhood obesity prevention project has changed the lives of everyone it has touched.

*Jackie Rivera, Health Administrator, Central Missouri Community Action Women and Infant Relief Fund
Co-Presenter: Lisa Cumins*

REGION VII HEAD START 2025 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

JUNE 9-12, 2025 • SHERATON OVERLAND PARK, KS



BREAKOUT SESSIONS

Thursday, June 12, 2025

Addressing Behavior Concerns Through Intentional Teaching Practices

8:30 am - 10 am • Leatherwood 2

Addressing Behavior Concerns Through Intentional Teaching Practices will explore effective strategies for addressing behavior concerns in early childhood settings through intentional teaching practices. Participants will learn how to identify and understand the root causes of challenging behaviors and implement proactive, positive approaches to support children's social-emotional development. The session will provide practical tools and techniques for creating supportive learning environments, fostering positive relationships, and promoting self-regulation and problem-solving skills in young children. Participants will leave with a deeper understanding of how to integrate these practices into their daily routines to enhance the overall classroom experience and support children's success.

Raina Davis, Region 7 TTA Early Childhood Specialist, ICF

Co-Presenters: Bethanie Grass, Region 7 TTA Early Childhood Specialist, ICF;

Julie Eck, Region 7 TTA Early Childhood Specialist, ICF

Stability at the Start

8:30 am - 10 am • Leatherwood 3

Teacher turnover remains one of the most pressing challenges in early childhood education. High attrition rates disrupt classroom stability, impede student outcomes, and burden programs with constant recruiting and training demands. This session, based on Dr. Bernadine Martinez's groundbreaking book *Stability at the Start* and its accompanying workbook, provides actionable tools and strategies for early childhood leaders to combat this issue effectively. Participants will engage in an interactive workshop designed to equip them with research-driven approaches for fostering teacher retention. By creating supportive environments, revising professional development practices, and cultivating a culture of collaboration, leadership teams will leave with practical solutions to build stability for both staff and students alike.

Relevance to Early Childhood Education: Stability is the foundation for effective learning environments, yet persistent teacher turnover undermines this foundation. Head Start programs, which serve our most vulnerable populations, are particularly impacted by this crisis. This session addresses the unique challenges faced by early childhood leaders, offering insights and tools tailored to the complex realities of these programs. Through this workshop, participants will be empowered to create long-term, sustainable change within their organizations, ultimately benefiting staff, children, and families.

Dr. Bernadine Martinez, Educator, Power Your Potential PD

Co-Presenter: Arthur Martinez, Trainer

REGION VII HEAD START 2025 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

JUNE 9-12, 2025 • SHERATON OVERLAND PARK, KS



BREAKOUT SESSIONS

Thursday, June 12, 2025

Coaching for Directors & Management Staff: A Growth and Retention Strategy

8:30 am - 10 am • Maple Room

Quality leadership is an essential component of thriving organizations. If you as a director or manager want staff to thrive – be energized and empowered to do the meaningful work asked of them – you yourself need to thrive. Focusing on your own wellbeing increases your energy and sets the model for other staff. Both are critical to the organizational culture as you are responsible for influencing team connection and staff wellbeing. Could developing your coaching skills support your budding competence in achieving such quality leadership? Join us as we explore how developing your coaching skills could lead to the thriving organization you've dreamed of!

Janet Humphries, Founder, Coach, Consultant, Instructor, Coaching Potentials LLC

The Importance of Advocacy and Understanding How

8:30 am - 10 am • Juniper Room

Session description coming soon.

REGION VII HEAD START 2025 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

JUNE 9-12, 2025 • SHERATON OVERLAND PARK, KS



Thursday, June 12, 2025

Closing Plenary Session
10:15 am – 12 pm • Cottonwood 2 & 3



Renowned Keynote Speaker
Paul Behrman, Walnut Leadership

THE HERO'S JOURNEY

This is a special keynote presentation designed to inspire, uplift and validate the people and organizations affiliated with the magnificent Head Start program!

This engaging and interactive keynote presentation celebrates as heroes the people and organizations affiliated with Head Start, and highlight's themes around compassion, self-care and personal wellness, teamwork, and the service we bring to the children and families we serve. The presentation highlights the mindset for our work (our mission of service to children, families, staff and communities), the heartset needed for this mission (compassion, engagement, and an abundance of kindness), and the anchoring practices necessary to maintain compassion and mission-focus (specific practices around self-care, personal wellness and self-regulation). This special keynote is structured to provide outstanding content, as well as a considerable "fun factor" with activities to make it interactive, engaging and memorable.

Closing Remarks and Raffle Giveaways
Noon – 1 pm • Cottonwood 2 & 3

Safe Travels!

THANK YOU FOR BEING HERE!

REGION VII HEAD START 2025 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

JUNE 9-12, 2025 • SHERATON OVERLAND PARK, KS



PRESENTER BIOS

Pam Black, Region 7 TTA Grantee Specialist, ICF

Ms. Black has worked in the field of Early Education for 30+ years as a teacher, parent educator, trainer, behavior consultant, learning coach and director. She has supported early childhood programs to implement federal and state regulations, as well as to become nationally accredited. The primary focus throughout all her positions has been ensuring that all children and families have access to quality early childhood services that meet their needs, and early education professionals receive the support they need to provide high quality services. Ms. Black furthered her education in systems development while receiving her Master of Human Resources Development/Organizational Development.

Melody Boling, Early Childhood Wellness Coordinator, Missouri Department of Mental Health

Melody Boling, MSW, ACSW, LCSW IMH-E® serves as the Early Childhood Wellness Coordinator with the Missouri Department of Mental Health in the Directors Children's Office. In this role, Melody provides education, collaboration and innovation on statewide efforts for children prenatally through age five. Melody is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker and Endorsed in Infant Mental Health.

Theresa Brandt, Head Start Site Supervisor, Kansas City Public Schools

Theresa has dedicated 21 years to the early childhood field, bringing a wealth of experience and a deep commitment to the development of young children. As a former owner and director of an early childhood center, she cultivated a nurturing, supportive environment where both staff and children thrived. Theresa has also served in the roles of behavior interventionist and site supervisor, providing invaluable support for children with diverse needs. With a background in social work and psychology, she applies a holistic approach to education, focusing on the emotional, social, and cognitive development of each child and her staff. Passionate about building meaningful relationships, Theresa believes that fostering strong connections within her school community is key to creating lasting, positive impacts on the children and families she serves. Her leadership is centered on collaboration, empathy, and a shared commitment to providing exceptional care and education.

Amber Buchheit, Early Childhood Specialist, LUME Institute, Youth in Need

Amber Buchheit has comprehensive experience in Early Education & Head Start/Early Head Start programming, and is a certified coach. Through her own process of transformation and a career change after twenty years, Amber is showing up as her truest self these days—a perfectly imperfect, tender-hearted “squiggle” who is letting go, looking on the bright side, and living a healthier, connected, & balanced life. Her role at LUME Institute aligns with her purpose to lead with love, nurture metacognition, foster systems change and inspire hope. She is deeply committed to her own growth and development and finds motivation in collective learning, discourse, and reflection with her teammates, educators, leaders, and community partners. Amber's personal and professional journey ignited her passion to coach others towards self-discovery, resiliency, and a life of possibilities so that they can live into their fullest human potential.

Jenny Burrows, Region 7 TTA Grantee Specialist Manager, ICF

Jenny Burrows has been in the field of Early Childhood Education for over 25 years and has worked with HS/EHS in Region VII for over 20 years. She joined the TTA network in 2019 as an Early Childhood (EC) Specialist and served as Grantee Specialist from August of 2020 until September of 2024 when she became the Grantee Specialist Manager. In her tenure as a TTA Specialist, Ms. Burrows delivered TTA to grant recipients supporting systems development including: child incident corrections, monitoring findings, Change in Scope applications, FEI, New Directors, Human Resources, Staff Retention/Recruitment, Community Assessment, Strategic Planning and Monitoring,

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REGION VII HEAD START 2025 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

JUNE 9-12, 2025 • SHERATON OVERLAND PARK, KS



Cassandra Clyde, Community Engagement and Volunteer Services Specialist, Drake University Head Start

Cassandra Clyde is the Community Engagement and Volunteer Services Specialist at Drake University Head Start. She has worked in the service of children and families in a variety of ways for almost 30 years and has served with Drake University Head Start for the past 17 years, starting her tenure as a Family Engagement Specialist before moving into her current position. She is a passionate professional who dreams big, is dedicated to continuous learning and growth opportunities, and values collaborative innovation for collective elevation. She holds a BS in Child and Family Services from Iowa State University, an MS in Adult Learning and Organizational Performance as well as an MPA from Drake University, and has been certified as a Family Development Specialist through the National Resource Center for Family Centered Practice & the University of Iowa's School of Social Work.

Trena Cox, Region 7 TTA Grantee Specialist, ICF

Ms. Cox has 15 years of dedicated experience in the Head Start and Early Head Start programs. She has established herself as a leader in early childhood education and program management. Her career began as a teacher associate, where she built strong relationships with parents and advocated for children in a disability inclusion classroom. Her educational background includes a Bachelor of Science in Early Childhood Education and an Associate of Science in Interdisciplinary Studies of Early Childhood Development. Trena advanced from a teacher associate to Director, leveraging her skills to benefit children, staff, and families. Her collaboration with federal, state, and local agencies was pivotal to the program's success, ensuring compliance with the Head Start Program Performance Standards and the Head Start Act of 2007 through data analysis, oversight, monitoring, and evaluation.

Alexandra Daro, Director of Applied Research, Buffett Early Childhood Institute

Alexandra Daro is the Director of Applied Research at the Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska. Daro, who joined the Institute in 2015 as a graduate assistant and was named a research specialist in 2020 and research scientist in 2024. She has her master's degree and Ph.D. in developmental psychology from the University of Nebraska at Omaha. She earned her bachelor's degree in psychology from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Her role largely focuses on efforts related to understanding gaps and barriers for families accessing and for childcare providers delivering quality, equitable early care and education in Nebraska. She also works on the Nebraska Child Care Market Rate Survey, learning what licensed childcare providers across the state charge for care.

Raina Davis, Region 7 TTA Early Childhood Specialist, ICF

Mrs. Raina Davis has dedicated 24 years to the field of early childhood education, beginning her career at the Child Development Center at Missouri State University, where she earned a bachelor's degree in Child and Family Development. She further honed her expertise as the Assistant Director of a childcare program, caring for children aged six weeks to five years. Mrs. Davis then pursued a master's degree in Elementary Education with an emphasis on Early Childhood from Southeast Missouri State University.

Throughout her career, Mrs. Davis has worked in various roles, including Teacher, Education Coordinator, and Early Learning Director. She is currently serving as an Early Childhood Specialist for Region VII TTA and was nominated for an ICF award for "Rookie of the Year". Her experience includes supporting dual language learners, monitoring IEP and IFSP goals, coaching, reflective supervision, and providing professional development for Head Start and Early Head Start staff on developmentally appropriate practices in early childhood education.

Mrs. Davis has spent the last 21 years working with young children, teachers, and families in Head Start Programs, demonstrating a deep commitment to the growth and development of children and the professional advancement of educators.

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REGION VII HEAD START 2025 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

JUNE 9-12, 2025 • SHERATON OVERLAND PARK, KS



Sarah Ennis, Founder and President, SparkPoint

I am a former teacher and began consulting with companies in the early 2000's in instructional design and facilitating learning events. My experiences took me from the classrooms of high schools and colleges to creating learning architectures for Fortune 500 and 100 companies. While the learning was sound, it was frustrating to see how companies got in their own way to put into place the changes they intended. This set me on a path to be involved in organizational development to do my best to help organizations harness their resources, teach their leaders, help everyone understand the intersections between people and processes. It's about creating healthy cultures that can be sustained and can thrive, even in the midst of change.

Throughout the years I have worked with many organizations – what I have found is people want to do the best job they can, fulfill the mission, meet expectations, and have work that is purposeful and meaningful. What I have also learned is that organizations don't always know how to align everyone, create processes that help everyone succeed, and deal productively with inevitable differences of opinions. In addition, because we know what our intentions are, we don't always pay attention to or recognize the impact we have as individuals, teams, leaders or organizations.

Rebecca Freedman, Co-Founder & SVP of Professional Development, FirstDay Learning

Rebecca has over 20 years of experience in Early Childhood Education in a variety of roles, organizations, and settings. She is experienced in collaborating with leadership from community-based development organizations -- nationally to provide technical assistance and curriculum design to high-need early education centers -- and internationally in assisting schools with social-emotional curriculum development and innovation. Rebecca's experience is based in Applied Behavior Analysis and includes supporting families and educators in promoting pro-social behaviors and having effective responses to challenging behavior.

Jessica Freels, Family Outcomes Administrator, Douglass Community Services

Jessica Freels serves as the Family Outcomes Administrator at Douglass Community Services. She has been with the program for over 12 years in just about every role except Home Visitor. Jessica has Master's in Business Administration.

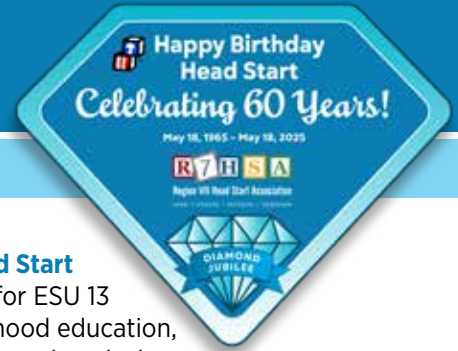
Shelby Howard, PFCE Manager, NEK-CAP, Inc.

Shelby Howard is from NEK-CAP, Inc. (Northeast Kansas Community Action Program). She currently is the PFCE Manager and has been in Head Start for 27 years. Shelby has lead the NEK-CAP, Inc Policy Council for 8 years. She is the lead facilitator for the Family Development Credential for the agency and is leading the 10th class. She provides coaching, training and support to the Area Managers and Child and Family Advocates. She also trains and supports the EHS/HS school bus drivers. As a past Head Start parent, she believes wholeheartedly that Head Start can make a difference in children, families and communities.

Shelby obtained her bachelor's degree from Kansas State University in 1986, FDC instructor and Portfolio Advisor certification – 2011, Family Development Credential (FDC)-2014, Kansas Community Action Living the Promise Award – 2014, National Certified ROMA Implementer – 2017. She currently serves on the Kansas Head Start Association Board. Shelby's time away from work is spent volunteering with church, youth programs and her grandchildren's activities. She loves to travel to the mountains and western events.

REGION VII HEAD START 2025 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

JUNE 9-12, 2025 • SHERATON OVERLAND PARK, KS



Roxane Humphrey, Partnership Education & Special Services Manager, ESU 13 Head Start

Roxane Humphrey serves as the Partnership Education & Special Services Manager for ESU 13 Head Start in Scottsbluff, Nebraska. With over 30 years of experience in early childhood education, she has provided leadership and training in diverse educational settings. Over the past decade, her work has centered on building partnerships with public school preschools that serve Head Start children. She holds a Master of Arts in Education with a specialization in Early Childhood from California State University, Long Beach, and a Bachelor of Arts in Elementary Education with an Early Childhood Concentration from Concordia University, St. Paul, Minnesota.

Janet Humphryes, Founder, Coach, Consultant, Instructor, Coaching Potentials LLC

Janet Humphryes, M.A. is founder, coach and consultant for Coaching Potentials and the EC Coaching Certificate instructor of the three-course Coaching Program, which she co-designed in 2010. Janet has 48 years of experience developing federal, state and Tribal early education systems in organizations. She was a national TA EC Specialist/Manager, Program Director, college faculty, EC teacher, and parent/staff educator/consultant and coach. Janet is a founding (2007) and current member of the Colorado Coaching Consortium Board. With an ECE M.A. from UCD, a B.A. in Behavioral Science from Metropolitan State University and a Montessori International teaching credential, her career focus has been on implementing human behavioral science to maximize human potential.

Katie Ingham, Region 7 TTA Grantee Specialist, ICF

Ms. Ingham has more than 30 years of experience working in the realm of Head Start and Early Head Start serving in various roles. Initially, her work was direct service in Head Start classrooms as a teacher then moving to include the duties of Master Teacher to mentor other teachers. With wave I of Early Head Start, she moved to administration and was the manager of the initial center-based and home-based Early Head Start program at the grantee. After seven years working at the grantee level, she moved to work under the monitoring contract for the Office of Head Start for the next 16 years. Her varied experiences in monitoring led Ms. Ingham to want to attempt TTA in OHS Region VII with ICF. Her expertise is in Infant/Toddler and Preschool education where she holds a master's degree. Her first 8 years of TTA were spent as an Early Childhood Specialist and this last year she moved into the role of TTA Grantee Specialist.

Carmen Irving, Vice President, PAXIS Institute

Carmen Irving is the Vice President of the PAXIS Institute. Carmen has her master's degree in Human Development from Kent State University and is a Certified Family Life Educator and Certified Child and Youth Care Professional. Carmen currently serves as the Past President of the Ohio Council on Family Relations. Carmen's career has been devoted to empowering youth and strengthening families. Throughout Carmen's career, she has implemented evidence-based programs and has co-authored several curricula. It is Carmen's core belief that all children deserve nurturing adults who help support their success and development.

Shinyoung Jeon, Assistant Professor, Department of Human Development and Family Science, University of Missouri

Dr. Shinyoung Jeon is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Science at the University of Missouri. She received her Ph.D. in Human Development and Family Studies with a minor in Statistics from Iowa State University in 2017. Prior to joining MU, she worked as a Senior Research and Policy Associate at the Early Childhood Education Institute at the University of Oklahoma-Tulsa. Dr. Jeon's research aims to identify protective factors and promote equitable opportunities for disadvantaged children and families, particularly through collaborations with Head Start programs. She focuses on early care and education, child development, and the longitudinal development of children from low-income families. Her methodological expertise includes data integration and applied developmental analyses, which she leverages to address complex research questions. Dr. Jeon's work has been published in leading journals such as *Child Development*, *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, and *Early Education and Development*.

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REGION VII HEAD START 2025 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

JUNE 9-12, 2025 • SHERATON OVERLAND PARK, KS



Langston Jones, Region 7 TTA Family Engagement Specialist, ICF

Langston Jones serves as the Region VII Family Engagement Specialist with more than 15 years of experience in early childhood education (ECE) and demonstrating skills in classroom management, organization, project management and planning, client relations, technical and verbal instruction, growth, and development in Head Start programs. He also has results-driven, goal-oriented analytics professionally with extensive experience in client relations, education, community outreach and skills beyond entry-level tech skills.

Mr. Jones began his ECE work as an assistant to the teacher and then as a quick learner progressed to a teaching role that included creating an environment that was conducive for learning and appropriate for the maturity and interests of students. From the classroom to home visiting, he spent 7 years in a local Head Start program providing regularly scheduled home visits, intake assessments, and was responsible for case management, family advocacy, and education. Mr. Jones forged strategic partnerships with parents to develop individualized programs for children from birth to five years of age and assisting parents to strengthen the family's knowledge of child development, health, and nutrition topics. His extensive experience in the development of a collaborative model, including family and community partnerships and engagement, including fatherhood and male engagement.

Tom Krause, 25-time Contributing Author, *Chicken Soup For The Soul*, book series.

- 24 years National Motivational Speaker.
- 31 years teacher/coach Missouri Public School System (Retired)

Education: Master's Degree Education, University of Missouri - Columbia 1988, Bachelor's Degree Education, University of Central Missouri 1979, High School Diploma, Boonville High School, Boonville, MO.

Work Experience: International Educational Motivational Speaker for Twenty-five years., Teacher at Missouri Public Schools for thirty-one years (retired) Tom has spread his inspiring message YOU MAKE A DIFFERENCE! Many thousands of educators across Missouri and other states as well as over 300 conferences including the International Lion's Club Leadership Conference, European Council of International Schools, National Speakers Association Convention, Future Business Leaders of America, Insurance Leaders Conference, National SADD, National TREND, Missouri Department of Secondary Education, Missouri State Teachers Association, U.S. District Attorney's Victim Conference, the Central States/Canada Regional 4H Leadership Conference.

Published work: Author of A Christmas Lesson, Touching Hearts-Teaching Greatness, A Teen's Guide to NOT Being Perfect, The Little Boy's Smile, and Who Takes Care of the Caretaker? Contributing author to over twenty books in the Chicken Soup for the Soul book series. Published articles on leadership, business, and education have appeared in international and national publications such as The School Administrator, Global Study Magazine, Leading Today Magazine, Leadership Values, Academic Leadership Today, and others.

REGION VII HEAD START 2025 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

JUNE 9-12, 2025 • SHERATON OVERLAND PARK, KS



Dr. Bernadine Martinez, Educator, Power Your Potential PD

Dr. Bernadine Martinez, a highly qualified leadership coach, specializes in guiding non-profit, for-profit, and academic professionals towards sustainable and measurable improvements in continuous quality enhancement. With a remarkable background in education, Dr. Martinez has served as an Assistant Superintendent of Education, Regional Head Start Program Director, early childhood teacher, principal, and as a leader of diverse and resilient educational teams exceeding 300 members. Her expertise extends to designing innovative training and instructional systems that foster cultural, transformational, and professional growth. As a Certified Speaker, Coach, and Trainer with The John Maxwell Team, Dr. Martinez is privileged to witness the life-changing benefits of leadership coaching. Her commitment, focus, and pursuit of excellence are evident in every coaching session, empowering clients to overcome limiting beliefs and emerge as high-performing leaders and teams. Dr. Martinez holds various credentials, including a Superintendent credentials from Texas State University, a Post-Master's Principal Certification, a Master's degree in Education specializing in Elementary Education, and a Bachelor's degree in Occupational Education, all attained from Wayland Baptist University. She further earned her Doctorate in Educational Leadership from West Texas A&M, with a research emphasis on early childhood and Head Start teacher attrition rates, and the relationship between preparation and support of center directors.

Irene Mayland, Region 7 TTA Grantee Specialist, ICF

With a career span of 25 years, Ms. Mayland has been a steadfast advocate for low-income families and children. Her journey in the field of human services is marked by her extensive work in Head Start Programs, where she has excelled in various roles including Home-Based Teacher, Home-Based Coach, Program Coordinator, and Program Director. Ms. Mayland's educational background features a Bachelor of Arts in Human Services and Associate's degrees in Psychology and Sociology, with a specialized focus on Substance Abuse and Mental Health. This academic foundation has empowered her to provide comprehensive support to families and children, addressing their diverse needs with empathy and expertise. Throughout her career, Ms. Mayland has emphasized the development and implementation of a strong systems approach. This approach ensures individualized support for families, children, and employees, fostering a culture of safety, wellbeing, and growth within an inclusive environment. Her dedication to creating positive, lasting changes in the lives of those she serves is evident in every aspect of her work.

Jason Mercer, Early Childhood Specialist, LUME Institute, Youth in Need

Jason Mercer is an optimist with a passion for driving positive change. With a background in Elementary and Early Childhood Education, he has consistently demonstrated a commitment to lifelong learning and a strong focus on connections and relationships with others. Jason has a transformative mindset combined with a deep understanding of his life's purpose, to have an open mind, open heart, and open will. He believes that asking the right questions leads to breakthroughs and seeing other perspectives. Outside of work, you will find Jason spending time with his wife and two children, working in his garden, and embracing playfulness to fuel his spirit.

REGION VII HEAD START 2025 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

JUNE 9-12, 2025 • SHERATON OVERLAND PARK, KS



Melissa Pancoast, Founder/CEO, The Beans

When Melissa was a teacher, she noticed that her community's stress, from the teachers' lounge to her students' parents, had financial roots. She and her friend were working long hours and weren't able to enjoy our hard-earned income. After teaching, coaching, and working in education policy, Melissa followed her concerns to graduate school where she studied financial behavior at The University of Oxford.

Melissa then worked as a researcher at the University of Oxford and developed the Economic Strengthening Program which has been used by the UN, WHO, and CDC to reduce the financial stress of 300 million people globally and started her career as a math teacher in NYC. Melissa has a MSc in Evidence-Based Social Intervention from the University of Oxford and a BS in Political Science from Stetson University. She rowed competitively and coached rowing for many years and takes every opportunity she can to be on or near the water.

Now Melissa leads The Beans. The Beans tackles financial stress, the #1 reason Caring Professionals leave their jobs. Our mission is to simplify the path to financial balance by combining evidence-based recommendations with automation, so that Caring Professionals, our teachers, healthcare, and public employees, can stress less about money and focus on what they love.

Today, The Beans has partnered with 100 Head Start Sites nationwide to provide evidence-based content, tools, and support to staff. This work empowers staff to break free from financial stress and start a ripple effect that transforms communities nationwide.

Ryan Pankiewicz, Manager Community Programs and Prevention, Trauma Smart-Crittenton Children's Center

Ryan Pankiewicz is a Licensed Professional Counselor and has worked with children, adolescents, and adults in school, community, and hospital settings. He is passionate about educating individuals on the impact of trauma and supporting organizations in becoming trauma informed. He has served as a Manager of Community and Prevention Programs with Trauma Smart program at Crittenton Children's Center for the past six years, working with organizations across the U.S. as they implement and sustain trauma informed care.

Christine Perkins, Regional Client Director, FirstDay Learning

Christine has over 20 years experience in early childhood education. She started her career as an early childhood educator and has worked in both public and private school settings. Over the last decade, she has been in leadership roles. Most recently, prior to joining the team at FirstDay Learning, Christine was a Founding Head of School serving children from birth to 6 years of age. She created a thriving community for hundreds of children and their families. Christine lives in Evanston, Illinois with her husband Brian and their four children; Jack, Charlotte, James & William.

Jill Putnam, Family Services Team Leader, Douglass Community Services - HS/EHS

Jill Putnam serves the children and families in Northeast Missouri as the Family Services Team Leader. She has been with Douglass Community Services for over 25 years. This role has guidance and oversight through Family Services, ERSEA, Parent Engagement, Childcare Partners, and Health. Jill is a two-time University of Missouri - Columbia graduate with a Bachelor of Science in Human Development and Family Studies and a Master of Arts in Family and Community Services.

REGION VII HEAD START 2025 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

JUNE 9-12, 2025 • SHERATON OVERLAND PARK, KS



Beth Reeder, Training Specialist, Kansas Children's Service League

- BA in Elementary Education/Speech communication from Southwestern College of Winfield KS
Graduation Date: May 1984
- Certificate in Christian Education from Perkins School of Theology, SMU, Dallas TX June 1995
- Certificate in Supervision, Hugo Wall School of Urban & Public Affairs, WSU, December 2000
- Incredible Years: Parent, Teacher and Children Training Series training, Seattle Washington, 2003
- Crisis Prevention Intervention certified trainer, July 2004
- Conscious Discipline I training July 2005, II February 2007
- Conscious Discipline Certified Instructor-C.C.D.I. April 2007-November 2019
- Arbor Day/Dimensions Nature Explore Workshop for Staff Development 2008

Professional Experience

- Six years Kindergarten and Second grade teacher in Caldwell, Kansas.
- Ten years as Children's Ministries director for East Heights United Methodist program birth-6th grade.
- Two years as Staff Development Coordinator with Child Care Association, Wichita Head Start.
- Ten years as Director of Staff Development and Outreach for Rainbows United, Inc., Wichita KS.
- Nine years teacher Wichita Collegiate Schools, Wichita KS
- Eight years Adjunct Instructor Butler Community College, El Dorado KS
- Two years Senior Program Director, Greater Wichita YMCA, Wichita KS
- Currently Training Specialist, Kansas Children's Service League, Wichita KS

Tom Rendon, Early Childhood Consultant; R7HSA Board Member, Iowa Head Start Association

Tom is an author and consultant focusing on early childhood education. He has authored several articles, resources, chapters and a book relating with an emphasis on state level early childhood systems, governance, collaboration efforts, social emotional development and equity. He consults with two national Head Start technical assistance centers, He has also consulted with the Pyramid Model Consortium. He is co-author of Saving Play: Addressing Standards through Play-Based Learning in Preschool and Kindergarten and his second book, Creativity in Young Children: What Science Tells Us and Our Hearts Know, was published in 2025 by Redleaf Press and the basis of the proposed presentation.

He was the Head Start Collaboration Office Coordinator with the Iowa Department of Education until his retirement in 2020, as Collaboration Office coordinator, he helped design and lead various statewide Head Start collaboration initiatives including Early Childhood Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, multi-tiered systems of support, oral health services, support for dual language learners, hearing screening, smoking cessation, health literacy, promoting nutrition and physical activity, promoting equity within early childhood services, and expanding inclusive settings.

Jackie Rivera, Health Administrator, Central Missouri Community Action Women and Infant Relief Fund

Jackie is the Health Administrator at Central Missouri Community Action Program Head Start and a Credential Reviewer for The Academy with the National Head Start Association. Before becoming a nurse, Jackie spent 10 years as an early childhood education teacher. Jackie is a core developer of the Eat Healthy, Stay Active! project which has impacted over 4000 children, 1500 parents and 350 medical students. Jackie has a passion for training and believes training experiences should be relevant, incorporate all adult learning principles, inspire, and be fun!

REGION VII HEAD START 2025 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

JUNE 9-12, 2025 • SHERATON OVERLAND PARK, KS



Kelsey Siegel, MO Dental Hygienist Liaison, National Center on Health, Behavioral Health and Safety

Kelsey Siegel is registered dental hygienist with over 8 years of experience focusing clinically. She earned her Associates of Dental Hygiene from State Fair Community College in 2016. Kelsey has been with the Office of Dental Health for 2 years working as an Oral Health Consultant growing the Preventive Service Program. She has worked with the State Fair Community College Dental Hygiene students guiding them clinically and showing how to teach education to patients. Kelsey has recently become expanded functions dental assistant certified 1 and 2 and is also laser certified to better help patients and coworkers in the office. She has worked with diverse populations and enjoys educating patients on decay prevention strategies. In her free time Kelsey loves hanging out with her two boys and husband on the family farm.

Roxeanna Steiner, Early Childhood Specialist, LUME Institute, Youth in Need

Roxeanna's passion is built on the foundational understanding that everything happens in the context of relationships. As an early childhood specialist, Roxeanna facilitates adult learning sessions with an inside-out approach that looks holistically at life's puzzle pieces. Through authentic, reflective conversations, Roxeanna journeys with others to vulnerably and courageously better understand self and others through the lens of early childhood development and emotional well-being. With a career in education that has spanned over 35 years, she has had the privilege of sharing her expertise at numerous conferences nationwide, facilitating professional development opportunities for early childhood and home visiting programs, acting project manager for Vroom and Be Strong Families Parent Cafe trainer. Roxeanna has found joy in reflectively engaging with parents, educators, and leaders, sharing her warmth and knowledge to empower others by emphasizing the power of authentic connection between children and their caregivers.

Zach Stier, Children's Librarian, Erickson Public Library; Consultant, Zachary Stier Consulting, LLC

We are each on a journey that includes hills and valleys. My journey to open a consulting practice starts back in elementary school. I was first diagnosed with a learning disability in kindergarten. I was placed in special education and while this decision was made with good intentions something was missing. I understood earlier on that I did not learn using traditional approaches rather my learning needed a creative approach. Starting in sixth grade, my parents encouraged me to attend my IEP meetings (individualized education plan) and this is where I became my own advocate. Although I continued to advocate for myself, the journey continued to be rocky. After graduation, I had a mission to graduate from college despite the believe that this was possible. It would take me until the end of my first Masters degree to fully accept that I have learning disability and this is a driving force to help me help others. This was in 2014 and it was also the same year that I opened, Zachary Stier Consulting, LLC. I look forward to working with you.

Michelle Strathman, Education Manager, NEK-CAP, Inc.

I am Michelle Strathman, an Education Manager with NEK-CAP Inc. I started my journey with this agency as a Child and Family Advocate for the prenatal- age 3 group completing home visits with these families, and have worked my way up to being an Education Manager for four counties that our agency serves. I went to school at Kansas State University (GO KSU WILDCATS) and completed my Bachelors in Human Services and Family Science. I went on to complete my Masters in Human Services and Family Science with an emphasis in Early Childhood Education. I have 8 years of experience of being in the classroom, including my years as the co-lead of a 3-5 preschool room. I am grateful to be able to be a part of the hard work that Head Start does and impact many families and children and share any knowledge that I can with others.

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REGION VII HEAD START 2025 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

JUNE 9-12, 2025 • SHERATON OVERLAND PARK, KS



Karen Surprenant

Karen Surprenant has spent her entire career with the Head Start Program in both direct services as a Head Start Director and in the national Training and Technical Assistance network as a Program Management and Governance Specialist. Over the years with the program, she has developed a wide range of resources to support grant recipients in the areas of leadership, program planning, data utilization and ERSEA. Karen has provided training on these topics through various means including webinars, conferences, and institutes. As a Head Start director for over 20 years, she expanded enrollment, acquired facilities, managed multiple funding streams, and developed systems to monitor and improve program services. She has experience working with Boards and Policy Councils, offering training and technical assistance for decision-making. Karen has held positions on state and regional boards and formed partnerships at the local level to enhance services for children and families. She has extensive experience working with Boards and Policy Councils, providing the training and technical assistance needed for meaningful decision-making. Karen has held leadership positions on state and regional boards and has developed partnerships at the local level to strengthen services for children and families. Ms. Surprenant is an experienced active FA2 reviewer. Karen holds a master's degree in educational leadership from Bridgewater State University and a bachelor's degree in elementary education and psychology from UMass Dartmouth.

Kate Sutton, Senior Research Specialist, Buffet Early Childhood Institute

Kate Sutton is a senior research specialist at Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska. She joined the Institute in 2019 as a research specialist with a special focus on qualitative methods. Before joining the Institute, she spent five years at the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, in the Division of Chronic Disease and Injury Prevention, contributing to a range of evaluation projects. Sutton received a bachelor of science in biology from the University of Nebraska Lincoln and a Master of Public Health from the University of Nebraska Medical Center.

Dr. Paula Thompson, Associate Professor, University of Nebraska at Kearney

Paula Thompson is an Associate Professor at the University of Nebraska at Kearney (UNK). Thompson earned her bachelor's and master's degrees in elementary education and early childhood education from UNK. She earned her Ed.D. in educational studies and early childhood special education from the University of Nebraska Lincoln. Prior to her time at UNK, she was employed with Head Start for over 18 years, serving as teacher, professional development coordinator, and assistant director. In 2022, she was honored as the Nebraska Head Start State Children's Champion. Dr. Thompson teaches early childhood inclusive courses at UNK and her research interests include early STEM, early literacy, family engagement, and early childhood workforce development and well-being.

Karen Thomson MA LPC RPT, Director of Program and Resource Development, St. Louis LDA

Karen Thomson is a Licensed Professional Counselor and a Registered Play Therapist. She is currently the Director of Program and Resource Development at St. Louis Learning Disabilities Association. Prior to that she was the Regional Program Planner at The Salvation Army. Ms. Thomson has over 30 years of experience in both the profit and non-profit resource and program development field. This background includes management roles, oversight of programs, extensive work in federally funded organizations, as well as leadership roles in the peer and grant review processes. With a focus in early childhood education and social/emotional development, Karen has coached and provided training for hundreds local and national teachers and centers. She teaches at local Universities, sharing best practices, current trends and emerging concerns in the industry.

Jeannie Thurston, Manager Community Programs and Prevention, Trauma Smart-Crittenton Children's Center

Jeannie Thurston is a Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC) and Certified Clinical Trauma Professional (CCTP-I) with over 20 years of experience specializing in trauma-informed care. With a passion for supporting organizations, Jeannie focuses on helping businesses, healthcare providers, schools, and community groups integrate trauma-informed practices into their operations. She provides expert consultation, training, and organizational development services to foster environments that promote psychological safety, resilience, and well-being.

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REGION VII HEAD START 2025 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

JUNE 9-12, 2025 • SHERATON OVERLAND PARK, KS



Amy Turcotte, Early Childhood Technology Coach, Project Eagle Head Start / Educare KC

Amy Turcotte holds a Master of Science in Child Development and Family Studies. She currently serves as the Early Childhood Technology Coach for Educare KC / Project Eagle Head Start. This role involves creating and implementing professional development for teachers to increase developmentally appropriate use of technology for learning in the classroom, ad hoc consulting, and practice-based coaching. Prior to her role at Project Eagle, Amy spent 11 years working in early childhood and autism research at the University of Kansas. In her role at the University of Kansas, she was engaged in content development, intervention implementation, and professional development and coaching. She also built websites and project managed app development for mobile and web-based apps. She also served as an early intervention specialist for infants and toddlers eligible for Part C services, both in-home and at early childhood centers.

Donna Veatch, Director of Executive Services, Region VII Start Association

Donna Veatch serves as the Director of Executive Services for the Region VII Start Association and former Executive Director of the Missouri Head Start Association. Donna first walked into a Head Start classroom as a community volunteer over forty years ago and never looked back. She has dedicated her entire career, serving in various roles in the field of Early Childhood Education. She is a past Program Management and Governance Specialist for the National Center on Program Management and Fiscal Operations (PMFO). Ms. Veatch holds a BA degree in Early Childhood Development from Ottawa University, she obtained a Graduate level certification in Executive Leadership, and certification as an Executive Leadership Coach through the Avila University's International Coaching Federation program. She was a National Head Start Association Board member (2006-2014), graduated from UCLA's 2005 Head Start Management Fellows Program, and completed NIKE Starting Block Leadership Training in 2013. Most importantly, she is a proud Mom and Grandmother who holds a strong passion for working with underserved individuals.

Meghan Whitworth, Sr. Director, LUME Institute, Youth in Need

Meghan Whitworth finds passion and purpose planting seeds of possibility and abundant thinking, shining light on the brilliance of others, and igniting wonder. She believes leadership is the dance of attunement, offering the gifts of grace, gratitude, and love to those she serves.

Early Childhood has been her field of study for 23 years and growing. She began her career at Youth In Need, a Head Start/Early Head Start grantee, as a preschool teacher and has held many positions along the pathway to her current role at LUME Institute.

Meghan resides just outside of St. Louis, MO with her husband Steve, two sons Aidan & Cooper, and sweet pup Penny. You will find her cultivating her resilience by hanging out on the patio, discussing new ideas with friends & family, baking, bowling, and cheering her son on at sporting events.

REGION VII HEAD START 2025 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

JUNE 9-12, 2025 • SHERATON OVERLAND PARK, KS



Stephen Zwolak, CEO of beTOGETHERstl, beTOGETHERstl

Steve Zwolak is Executive Director Emeritus of University City Children’s Center and LUME Institute. He has 56 years of experience as a student of children, tirelessly advancing and advocating for early childhood. Steve’s years as a classroom teacher and leader in the field of early childhood enabled him to build the LUME Approach to education, which focuses on Emotionally Responsive Teaching. The Approach emphasizes that the emotional development of children is critical to a child’s future success. In addition, there is preliminary evidence that his work has the potential in closing the racial and socioeconomic achievement gap. We know the foundation for diversity, inclusion and equity are embedded in the emotional development of children in the first three years of life. Steve teaches teachers that there is a major watershed from 0 - 5 years of age, where children must begin to socialize their internal understanding of diversity, inclusion and equity to make it an embedded way of life.

Steve believes that if children are physically safe, they will feel emotionally safe, and then they can take social risk as they feel socially safe and finally they will be confident in their own competencies to take academic risk. “All learning happens in relationships”.

Steve has been recognized locally, regionally and nationally for his work with children, families and educators. He is a storyteller and loves to PLAY!