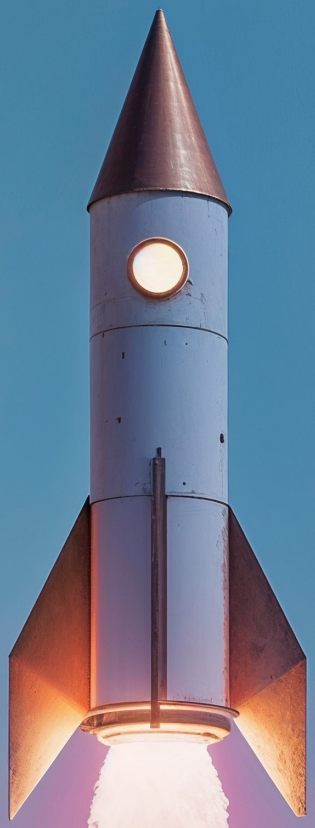
Elevating Leadership

2026 Region VII
Head Start/Early
Head Start



FALL LEADERSHIP CAUCUS

October 20 – 22, 2026

Pre-track sessions on 10/19

DOUBLETREE HOTEL
10100 College Blvd.
Overland Park, KS 66210

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For more information, visit **R7HSA.com**

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Featuring:

Katie Hamm
Principal

Next Steps Early Childhood, LLC.

AGENDA at-a-glance

Tuesday, October 20

9 – 11am	Opening Session
11:30 am – 1:30 pm	Awards Luncheon
2 – 3:30 pm	Breakout Sessions
3:45 – 4:45 pm	State Networking

Wednesday, October 21

8:30 – 10 am	Breakout Sessions
10:30 am – Noon	Breakout Sessions
Noon – 1:30 pm	Lunch provided
12:15 – 1:15 pm	Regional/State Association Luncheon
1:30 – 3 pm	Breakout Sessions
3:30 – 5 pm	Head Start Policy Update with Katie Hamm
5 – 5:15 pm	Annual Meeting

Thursday, October 22

8 – 9:30 am	Breakout Sessions
10 am – Noon	Closing Session

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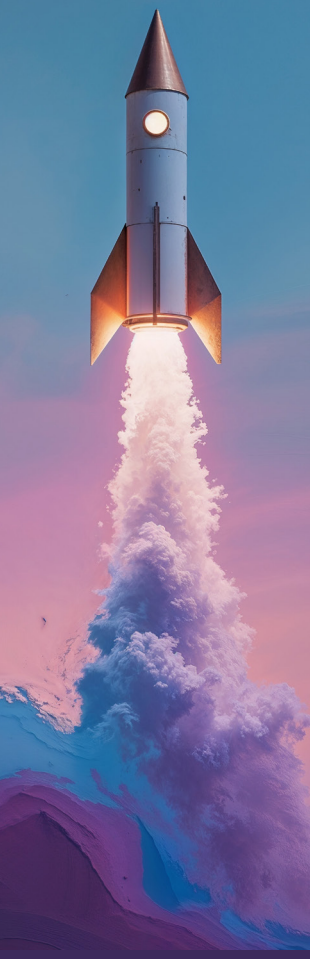

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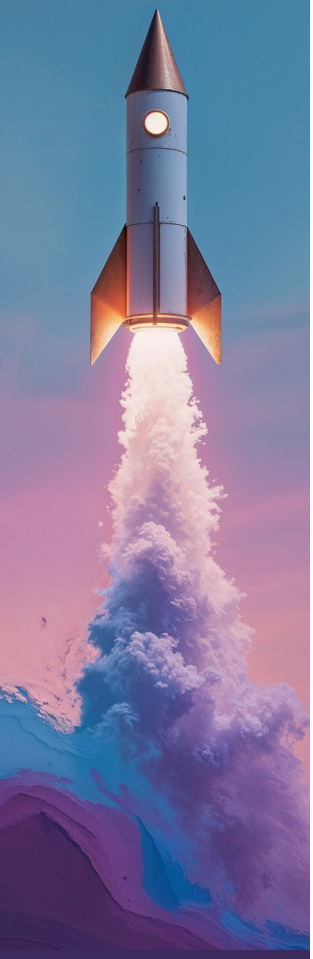
DETAILED AGENDA

Tuesday, October 20

8 am	Coffee
9 – 11am	**Opening General Session** *Monterey/Seattle Rooms* **The Art of Showing Up: Strengthening Leadership Presence in Head Start Programs** Nicole Sallis, Leadership Presence & Confidence Specialist for Head Start Leaders Design+Her+Life LLC
11 – 11:30 am	Break
11:30 am – 1:30 pm	**Awards Luncheon**
1:30 – 2 pm	Break
2 – 3:30 pm	**You're the Bottleneck: Stop Handcuffing Your Staff and Start Unlocking Leaders** Dr. Robert Welch, Executive Director, Tri-County *Dallas Room* **Embracing Imperfection: Rewriting the Story of Failure** Jason Mercer, Early Childhood Specialist Amber Buchheit, Early Childhood Specialist LUME Institute, Youth In Need *Houston Room* **Making AI Practical: Insight to Execution** James Heller, Director, PivIt Group Ron Heller, Insurance Consultant, Bukaty Companies *Overland Park Ballroom*
3:30 – 3:45 pm	Break
3:45 – 4:45 pm	State Networking **IA** *Dallas Room* **KS** *Houston Room* **MO** *Monterey/Seattle Room* **NE** *Overland Park Ballroom*
4:45 pm	FREE EVENING



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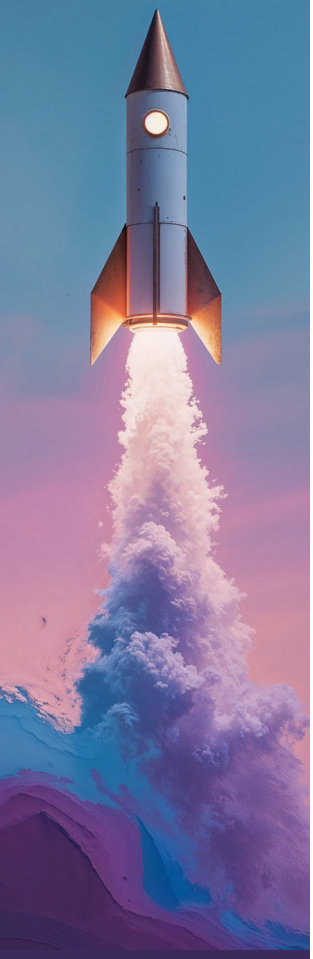
DETAILED AGENDA

Wednesday, October 21

8 am	Coffee
8:30 – 10 am	**Compliance Matters: Matters of Compliance** Dawn Rieves, Family and Community Partnership Compliance Manager Linda Love-Jackson, Education Operations Compliance Specialist YWCA Head Start *Dallas Room* Part 1 **All Day Every Day: Using Low-intensity Strategies to Minimize Challenging Behavior** Brian Brutzman, Ph.D., BCBA, LBA, Director of School-Based Services BK Behavior/Heartland ABA and Holly Creamer, MS, BCBA, LBA - Senior Clinical Director, Heartland ABA *Tucson Room* **From Me to We: Shifting Our Internal System** Amber Buchheit Early Childhood Specialist and Meghan Whitworth, Senior Director,LUME Institute, Youth In Need *Houston Room* **Better Together: The Team Approach to Professional Learning** Jenika J. Carmouche M.Ed, Educational Consultant, Teaching Strategies *Phoenix Room*
10 – 10:30 am	Break
10:30 am – Noon	**Let's Play** Karen Thomson, MA, LPC, RPT, Therapist, LDA *Dallas Room* Part 2 **All Day Every Day: Using Low-intensity Strategies to Minimize Challenging Behavior** *Tucson Room* **Beyond Mandates: Growing Meaningful Ecosystems** Meghan Whitworth, Senior Director and Jason Mercer, Early Childhood Specialist, LUME Institute, Youth In Need *Houston Room* **Getting Ready for Reading: How Head Start Leaders Can Leverage the Science of Reading** Jenika J. Carmouche M.Ed, Educational Consultant Teaching Strategies *Phoenix Room*
Noon – 1:30 pm	Lunch provided
12:15 – 1:15 pm	**Regional/State Association Leadership Luncheon**



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DETAILED AGENDA

Wednesday, October 21 *continued*

1:30 – 3 pm

Risk Mitigation to Improve Quality, Align to OHS Priorities, and Prevent Competition
Patti Greenstein, Senior Consultant
Foundations for Families
Dallas Room

Nutritional Needs & the Impact on a Healthier Learning Environment
Cheri Wood CCNP, CMP, Nutrition Manager
HS/EHS & FDCH CAPNEMO
Tucson Room

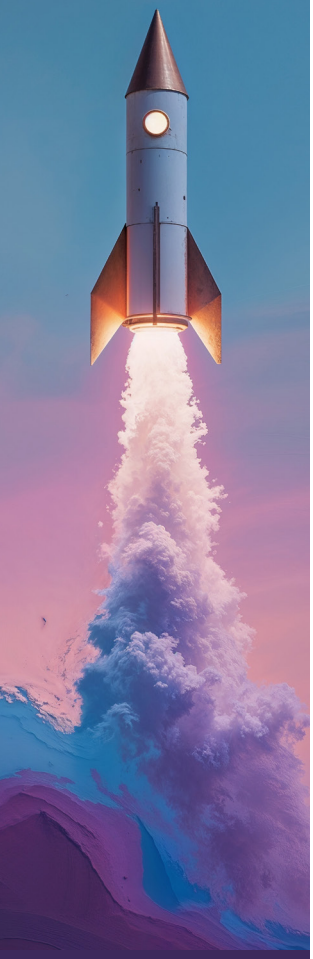
The Connected Colleague: Unmasking Attachment Style Superpowers
Roxeanna Steiner, Early Childhood Specialist
Jason Mercer, Early Childhood Specialist
LUME Institute, Youth In Need
Houston Room

Building a Culture of Wellness: A Scalable Approach for Head Start Programs
Lyz Schmitz, CFO
Tracey Sauke, RD, LD, Agency Dietitian
Tri-County Head Start
Phoenix Room

3 – 3:30 pm — Break

3:30 – 5 pm — **Head Start Policy Update with Katie Hamm**

5 – 5:15 pm — **Annual Meeting**



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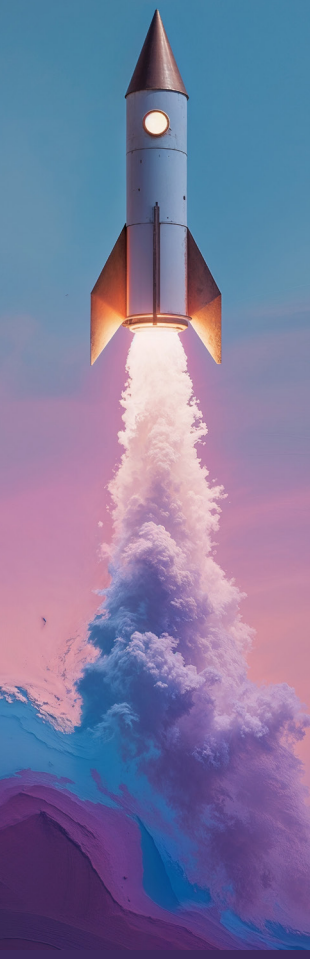
DETAILED AGENDA

Thursday, October 22

7:30 am	Coffee
8 – 9:30 am	**PAX Strategies for Behavior and Family Partnerships** Frances Witt, Outreach Specialist PAXIS Institute *Dallas Room* **Integrating the New Food Pyramid/Guidelines in Head Start Centers: Engaging Strategies for Lasting Impact** Dr. Michelle Lombardo, President The OrganWise Guys *Tucson Room* **Dear Director: How to Support Happy, Healthy Teachers Through Empathy and Accountability** Colleen Schmit, Early Childhood Consultant and Author Four Monkeys Press *Houston Room* **Strategies for Recruitment & Retention** Rachel Gast, Director, HR Consulting Liz Heller, Principal and Benefits Consultant Bukaty Companies *Phoenix Room*
9:30 am – 10 am	Break: Snacks
10 am – Noon	**Closing General Session** *Monterey/Seattle Rooms* **Good Leadership Lessons from "Bad" Kids: Insights from a Child Therapist on Leading Well Under Pressure** Stuart "Mr. Stu" Perry, LCSW, ASDCS Child Therapist, Motivational Speaker, Worship Leader, Author, Television Personality
Noon	Depart — Safe Travels!



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SESSION DESCRIPTIONS

The Art of Showing Up: Strengthening Leadership Presence in Head Start Programs

Nicole Sallis, Leadership Presence & Confidence Specialist for Head Start Leaders
Design+Her+Life LLC

Head Start leaders operate in complex environments that require strong communication, emotional intelligence, and the ability to lead diverse teams serving children and families.

While many leadership trainings focus on technical program management, leaders often report a different challenge: how they show up in leadership spaces directly impacts staff trust, program culture, and decision-making effectiveness.

This professional development session introduces participants to The Art of Showing Up Framework, a practical leadership development approach that strengthens how leaders communicate, influence, and navigate high-responsibility environments within Head Start programs.

Grounded in principles of adult learning theory, social-emotional leadership practices, and professional presence, the session explores how internal mindset, communication patterns, and visible leadership behaviors influence how leaders are perceived by staff, governing bodies, and community partners.

Participants will engage in guided reflection and interactive exercises designed to strengthen:

- Leadership confidence in high-stakes environments
- Professional communication and clarity with staff and stakeholders
- Self-awareness and emotional regulation in leadership roles
- The ability to model calm, consistent leadership during program challenges

Leaders will leave with practical strategies they can apply immediately to strengthen team communication, staff trust, and overall leadership effectiveness within their programs.

You're the Bottleneck: Stop Handcuffing Your Staff and Start Unlocking Leaders

Dr. Robert Welch, Executive Director, Tri-County

Most leaders believe their value comes from solving problems. But in reality, the more you solve, the more you slow everything down; because now everything has to come through you.

In Head Start and Early Head Start programs, this pattern shows up daily: staff dependency, constant interruptions, leadership burnout, and missed opportunities to grow strong, confident teams. Leaders unintentionally become the bottleneck; not because they lack skill, but because they haven't shifted from doing the work to developing the people responsible for it.

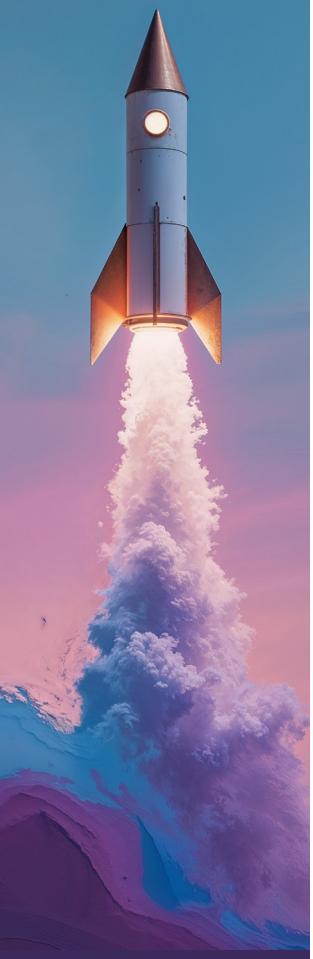
This high-impact session challenges leaders to confront how their own behaviors may be "handcuffing" their staff and limiting team capacity. Participants will explore how over-functioning, rescuing, and constant problem-solving can suppress leadership in others and learn practical strategies to replace those habits with systems that promote ownership, accountability, and leadership at every level.

Grounded in real-world Head Start leadership experiences, this session will provide actionable tools to help leaders move from being the go-to, to developing teams that can think, act, solve, and lead independently.

Embracing Imperfection: Rewriting the Story of Failure

Jason Mercer, Early Childhood Specialist
Amber Buchheit, Early Childhood Specialist
LUME Institute, Youth In Need

What if failure wasn't something to fear, but a necessary ingredient for growth? This presentation explores how setbacks, missteps, and disappointments can become powerful catalysts for innovation, resilience, and long-term success. Through real world stories and insights, we'll uncover how embracing failure can unlock your greatest potential.



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SESSION DESCRIPTIONS

Making AI Practical: Insight to Execution

James Heller, Director, PivIt Group
Ron Heller, Insurance Consultant, Bukaty Companies

Artificial intelligence is reshaping how organizations think, plan, and execute — but for many teams, the challenge isn't access to technology, it's understanding how to apply it with confidence and clarity.

This interactive session is designed to make AI practical, approachable, and immediately useful, regardless of participants' prior experience. Built around a modular, high-energy format that scales seamlessly from small workshops to large audiences, the session balances real-world learning with hands-on engagement.

Attendees begin with a concise framing of what AI is (and isn't), grounding the conversation in realistic use cases and measurable business value. From there, live demonstrations showcase how AI can support decision-making, automate routine work, and enhance productivity in everyday scenarios. Participants then move into guided interactive exercises tailored to group size, encouraging collaboration, problem-solving, and direct application of concepts. The session concludes with shared insights, practical next steps, and open discussion — ensuring attendees leave not just informed, but empowered.

Throughout the experience, pacing and format are intentionally varied to support different learning styles while maintaining engagement. The focus is simple: demystify AI, connect it to real organizational needs, and provide actionable ideas participants can use immediately.

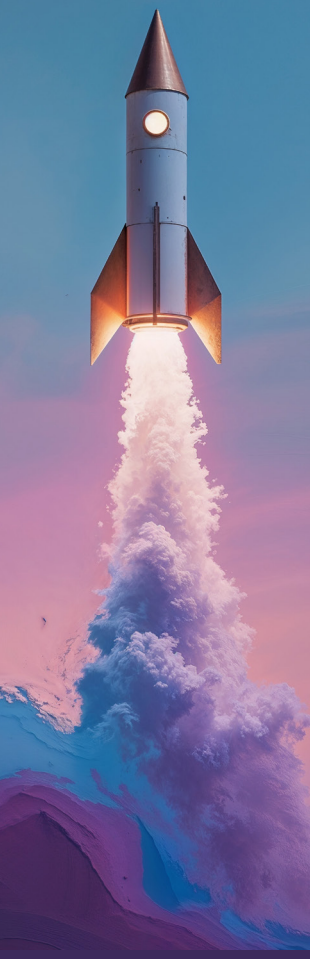
Compliance Matters: Matters of Compliance

Dawn Rieves, Family and Community Partnership Compliance Manager
Linda Love-Jackson, Education Operations Compliance Specialist
YWCA Head Start

This presentation provides a comprehensive overview of the organization's compliance monitoring framework, focusing on the continuous oversight of business operations to ensure alignment with legal requirements, regulatory mandates, and internal policies. It highlights key methodologies for detecting non-compliance early, assessing operational risks, and implementing corrective actions to safeguard the organization's reputation and financial stability.

Objectives

- Define Compliance Monitoring: Outline the purpose, scope, and key elements of an effective, ongoing compliance monitoring plan.
- Identify Regulatory Gaps: Explain how to evaluate current operations against industry standards to spot risks before they become violations.
- Establish Internal Accountability: Clarify roles and responsibilities for monitoring activities, reporting mechanisms, and remedial actions.
- Promote Proactive Compliance: Shift from reactive auditing to a proactive, continuous improvement model to reduce risks.
- Ensure Reporting Transparency: Detail the process for documenting compliance status and reporting to stakeholders/regulators.



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SESSION DESCRIPTIONS

All Day Every Day: Using Low-intensity Strategies to Minimize Challenging Behavior

Brian Brutzman, Ph.D., BCBA, LBA, Director of School-Based Services, BK Behavior/ Heartland ABA and Holly Creamer, MS, BCBA, LBA - Senior Clinical Director, Heartland ABA

This session will connect the dots between behavioral challenges and effective treatment in early childhood settings. By taking a functional approach to behavior, we can unpack why it might be occurring and successfully modify the environment (which includes our own adult behavior) to affect positive outcomes. We will begin with a functional approach to challenging behavior and identify antecedents, behavior, and consequences (A-B-C's). We will then move into behavioral escalation and successful de-escalation. From there we will outline behavioral skills training as a framework to learn, practice, and master up to 7 different strategies to proactively handle challenging behavior in early childhood settings. This approach will utilize traditional instruction and modeling as well as role playing scenarios where participants will rehearse and receive feedback in real time. At the culmination of this session, attendees will have a comprehensive tool box of strategies to address various behavioral challenges and the confidence to use them with fluency.

From Me to We: Shifting Our Internal System

Amber Buchheit, Early Childhood Specialist
Meghan Whitworth, Senior Director
LUME Institute, Youth In Need

Every individual operates within an internal system shaped by our beliefs, values, and ways of being. This session explores how shifting that system, from one rooted in ego and separation to one grounded in connection and wholeness, can transform how we show up in our work and relationships. By cultivating love, belonging, and appropriate power within, we lay the foundation for meaningful change in the systems around us.

Better Together: The Team Approach to Professional Learning

Jenika J. Carmouche M.Ed, Educational Consultant, Teaching Strategies

Join an engaging session on the benefits of collaborative learning. Learn how working with others can enhance professional growth and classroom impact. Discover strategies to foster collaboration, shared learning, and mutual support. Incorporate reflection into your daily routine to improve teaching. Leave with a personalized plan to transform reflection into a powerful tool for professional growth and educational success. Don't miss this transformative opportunity!

(1) Describe benefits of collaborative learning with teachers, coaches and administrators
(2) Develop strategies for becoming part of a successful learning "team"
(3) Create a plan to make reflection a powerful, daily part of your work

Let's Play

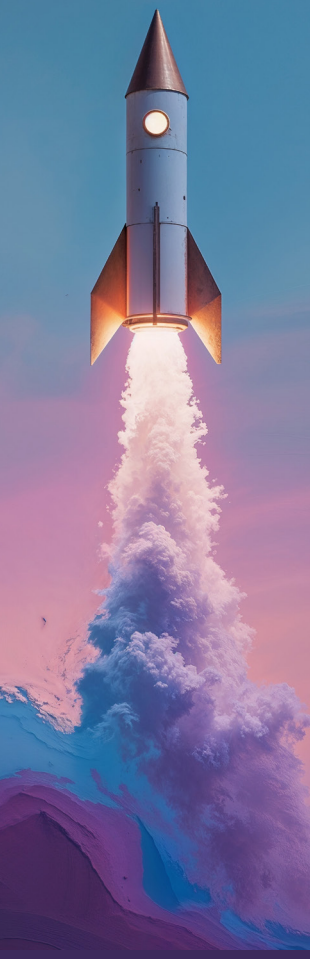
Karen Thomson, MA, LPC, RPT, Therapist, LDA

This interactive workshop explores how Play Therapy supports children of all abilities and their families. Beginning with non-directive approaches and moving to more directive modalities, this workshop offers practical techniques you can use in the classroom. This is a hands-on, engaging session where caregivers learn through play—just like their children do. Limited to 40 participants.

Beyond Mandates: Growing Meaningful Ecosystems

Meghan Whitworth, Senior Director
Jason Mercer, Early Childhood Specialist
LUME Institute, Youth In Need

Too often, organizational systems prioritize mandates and individual success over connection and collaboration. This session invites participants to rethink and redesign systems that center a sense of belonging. Through reflection, dialogue, and practical strategies, participants will explore how to move from me to we, fostering ecosystems where trust, shared purpose, and collective growth thrive.



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SESSION DESCRIPTIONS

Getting Ready for Reading: How Head Start Leaders Can Leverage the Science of Reading

Jenika J. Carmouche M.Ed, Educational Consultant, Teaching Strategies

The foundation for reading success begins long before fourth grade testing. But, according to The Nation's Report Card by the National Assessment of Education Progress in 2022, only 1 in 3 fourth graders are testing as proficient in reading. We will address important concerns related to reading proficiency and school readiness and identify ways to set up all children for success in kindergarten and beyond.

1. How to choose an effective, research-based curriculum;

2. What high-quality literacy instruction looks like in a pre-K classroom; and

3. How you can lead teachers in promoting language and early literacy learning that is grounded in the science of reading.

Risk Mitigation to Improve Quality, Align to OHS Priorities, and Prevent Competition

Patti Greenstein, Senior Consultant
Foundations for Families

A program's response to continuous program improvement, DRS, or monitoring findings is often reactive. But taking a proactive approach and conducting required activities through a risk mitigation lens can be an effective way to ensure ongoing continuous improvement, while also increasing the likelihood of a successful monitoring review and minimizing a program's risk for competition in DRS.

Session Objectives:

1. To identify the key components of a risk mitigation strategy and explain the importance for HSP/EHS programs.
2. To provide risk mitigation strategies that are grounded in the implementation of key program requirements.

Nutritional Needs & the Impact on a Healthier Learning Environment

Cheri Wood CCNP, CMP, Nutrition Manager
HS/EHS & FDCH, CAPNEMO

Objectives:

- Discuss nutritional deficits and the possible side effects of those deficits
- Discuss trends/lifestyles and how they contribute to the quality of early childhood nutrition.
- Show how Teachers can foster an indoor garden big or small on a budget. Forming partnerships with local green houses, extension offices, conservation departments and grant opportunities.

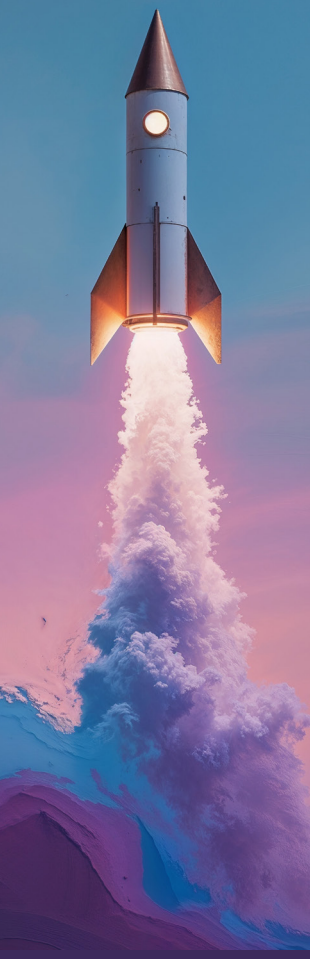
Explore how nutritional deficits can significantly impact a child's learning ability to engage, behaviors and overall health. Integrating indoor gardening can foster a road to meet nutritional needs and/or impact a healthier learning environment. Engaging parents/families in the process can help set new trends to help bridge the gap in nutritional needs with fresh foods.

*All information in this presentation is fact based evidence of nutritional deficits and is never meant to be a diagnosis of any sort.

The Connected Colleague: Unmasking Attachment Style Superpowers

Roxeanna Steiner, Early Childhood Specialist
Jason Mercer, Early Childhood Specialist
LUME Institute, Youth In Need

We operate from a unique attachment style, a subconscious mental model shaped in the first three years of life, that influences our communication and responses. In this interactive session, we will examine the four attachment styles through a workplace lens. You'll unmask your own style, reflect on your relational habits, and gain strategies for turning potential blind spots into connection superpowers! Because no attachment style exists in isolation, we'll explore how they can either create tension or strengthen trust across teams.



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SESSION DESCRIPTIONS

Building a Culture of Wellness: A Scalable Approach for Head Start Programs

Lyz Schmitz, CFO
Tracey Sauke, RD, LD, Agency Dietitian
Tri-County Head Start

Head Start Performance Standard 1302.93(d) calls for programs to cultivate a program-wide culture of wellness that empowers staff and supports them in delivering high-quality services. Tri-County Head Start designed and implemented a holistic wellness initiative that operationalizes this standard through intentional planning, broad staff involvement, and ongoing evaluation.

This presentation will outline the practical steps our program used to build a sustainable wellness culture. We will also share tips and tricks gained from five years of lessons learned and ongoing improvement—offering candid insights into what worked, what didn't, and how we adapted along the way.

As a finalist for Iowa's Healthiest Workplace in 2025, Tri-County will also share guidance on scaling a wellness plan to meet the needs of organizations of different sizes and capacities. Attendees will leave with replicable strategies, planning tools, and practical lessons to support the development of their own program-wide wellness culture.

PAX Strategies for Behavior and Family Partnerships

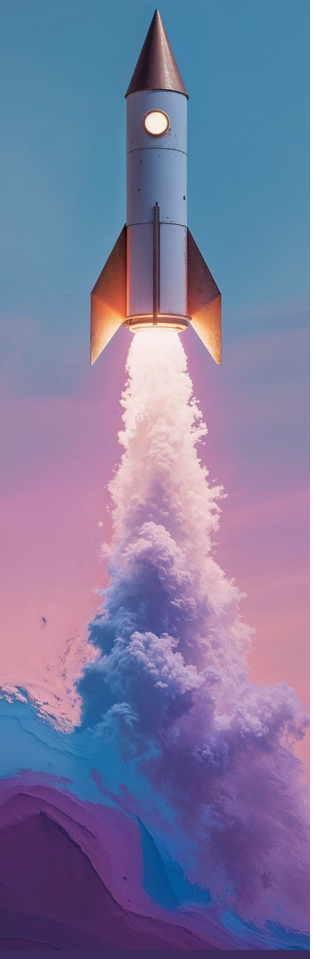
Frances Witt, Outreach Specialist
PAXIS Institute

Young children thrive when adults in their lives use shared language and consistent strategies to teach self-regulation and positive behavior. This workshop introduces practical, evidence-based PAX strategies that can be used by Head Start educators, family service staff, and caregivers to create nurturing environments both in the classroom and at home. Participants will explore how these simple tools support adult self-regulation, strengthen family partnerships, and provide a strengths-based framework for family goal setting and skill development.

Integrating the New Food Pyramid/Guidelines in Head Start Centers: Engaging Strategies for Lasting Impact

Dr. Michelle Lombardo, President
The OrganWise Guys

This interactive session equips Head Start leaders/educators with practical tools to incorporate the latest USDA Food Pyramid/guidelines into everyday center activities. By exploring fun, character-driven lessons that promote balanced meals, fruit and vegetable intake, and active play, participants will learn adaptable methods to foster healthy habits among young children. Drawing on three decades of nationwide implementation in early childhood settings, using SNAP-Ed-approved curricula, this session will highlight real-world examples where such approaches have increased children's engagement and health outcomes through simple, prep-free resources. Participants will explore an accessible online platform aligned with the HS Early Learning Outcomes Framework and state-specific academic objectives, designed for seamless integration into daily programming and home engagement. Join us to learn actionable approaches for fostering healthy habits and school readiness in young children.



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SESSION DESCRIPTIONS

Dear Director: How to Support Happy, Healthy Teachers Through Empathy and Accountability

Colleen Schmit, Early Childhood Consultant and Author, Four Monkeys Press

Does it feel like turnover and constantly training new staff has become your norm? Are your strongest team members leaving, while those with a "clock-in, clock-out" mindset remain? Is gossip and negativity starting to shape the climate and culture of your program?

What may be missing isn't more training—it's the balance of empathy, accountability, and clear expectations.

During this interactive session, participants will...

1. Participants will identify key components of an empathy-based communication framework that supports both relationship-building and accountability in early childhood leadership.

2. Participants will apply a repeatable 7-step conversation structure to real-world scenarios in order to effectively navigate difficult staff conversations.

3. Participants will practice and refine language strategies (e.g., using "AND" statements, neutral observations, and impact statements) to confidently address challenging situations while maintaining trust and professionalism.

Strategies for Recruitment & Retention

Rachel Gast, Director, HR Consulting
Liz Heller, Principal and Benefits Consultant
Bukaty Companies

How to Recruit Top Talent
- Creating a strategic recruitment plan
- Job descriptions
- Interviewing
- Factors affecting recruitment
- Compensation
- Benefits

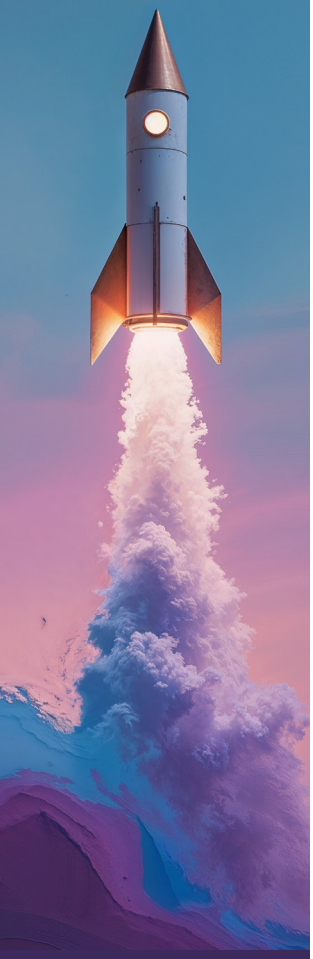
How to Develop a Competitive Benefit Plan Offering
- Understanding of employees' demographics and needs
- Benchmarking
- Competitive, modern, and unique benefits

Retaining Key Employees
- Employee Retention
- Honoring employees
- Team building
- Coaching and employee reviews
- Creating culture

Good Leadership Lessons from "Bad" Kids: Insights from a Child Therapist on Leading Well Under Pressure

Stuart "Mr. Stu" Perry, LCSW, ASDCS
Child Therapist, Motivational Speaker, Worship Leader, Author, Television Personality

When people don't cooperate, emotions run high, and the usual strategies stop working — leadership gets exposed. In those moments, what we often label as "difficult" behavior isn't defiance. It's information. Drawing on decades of experience as a child therapist working with individuals others are quick to label "bad," Mister Stu reveals what human behavior under pressure teaches us about leading well. Through compelling stories, humor, and practical insight, this keynote reframes resistance, emotional reactivity, and disengagement as opportunities for stronger leadership — not failures.



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Brian Brutzman, Ph.D., LBA, BCBA is a psychologist and licensed behavior analyst with more than a decade of experience as a behavioral consultant. He has previously served as clinical coordinator for the Global Psychiatric Epidemiology Group at Columbia University and the New York State Psychiatric Institute. His published research spans various topics such as early childhood social skill development, mental health during disasters, knowledge brokerage, and school-based intervention. He is passionate about helping students achieve their potential in school and specializes in the mitigation of complex and challenging problem behavior in the home, school, and community settings. Brian holds a bachelor's degree in Psychology from Loyola University Maryland, a master's degree in General Psychology from New York University and a doctorate in Social-Personality Psychology from Michigan State University with a specialization in Quantitative Methodology and Evaluation Science. He currently serves as the Director of School-Based Services for BK Behavior, overseeing school-based services in multiple states.

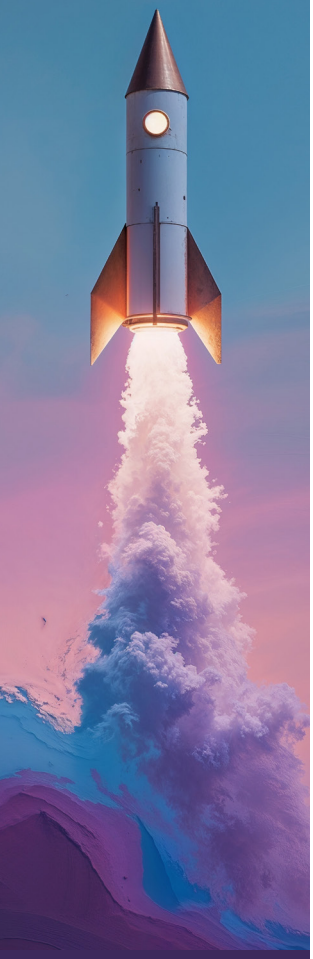
Amber Buchheit holds a degree in Child Development, has comprehensive experience in Early Education & Head Start/Early Head Start, and is a certified coach. Through her own process of transformation and a career change after twenty years, Amber is showing up as her truest self these days—a perfectly 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 and reflection with her team, 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 with joy and fulfillment.

Jenika Carmouche is a dedicated professional with a passion for early childhood education. She began her career as a Head Start teacher, where she built a strong foundation in developmentally appropriate practice and family engagement. Driven by a passion for continuous improvement and leadership, Jenika advanced into roles as an education coach and later as an Early Head Start/Head Start Center Administrator in the Houston area. In these roles, she led program quality initiatives, supported instructional excellence, and fostered collaborative professional learning environments.

Currently, Jenika serves as an Educational Consultant with Teaching Strategies, where she partners with early childhood programs to deliver high-quality professional development and implementation support. She holds a Bachelor's degree from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette and a Master's degree in Early Childhood Education from Grand Canyon University.

Rachel Gast leads Bukaty Companies' Human Resources Consulting department, providing ad hoc or ongoing support to Bukaty Companies' Benefits clients through the free HR Help Desk, retainer engagements, or individual project engagements for handbooks, training, FMLA administration, or policy development. With 20 years in Human Resources and Business Administration, Rachel's experience in Employee Coaching & Performance Management, Payroll, Workers Compensation, Benefits, Policy & Procedures, and Recruiting enables her to support Clients across multiple HR disciplines.

Patti Greenstein is a Consultant specializing in grant writing, strategic thinking and planning, organizational development, and early education and care, including Head Start Preschool and Early Head Start services. Since joining Foundations for Families in 2017, Patti has successfully written competitive applications that have captured more than $86.3M in federal funding for clients from a variety of entities (e.g., Community Action Agencies, school districts, nonprofit organizations). She has supported many more with strategy sessions, quality assurance reviews, and technical assistance.



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Patti brings more than 25 years of experience in the for-profit and nonprofit sectors to her work. She is a seasoned early education expert, program leader, and former owner of a successful small business. Prior to joining Foundations for Families, she led teams in designing and delivering high-quality products and customer service; developed systems to improve operations, sustain organizational infrastructures, and ensure effective client services; and provided leadership to teams tasked with providing professional development and coaching to support workforce development.

Patti holds an M.S. in Curriculum and Instruction from the University of Wisconsin/Madison and a B.A in Political Science and French from the University of Michigan/Ann Arbor. She also earned a Strategic Thinking Professional Certificate from Arizona State University and is a member of the International Association for Strategy Professionals (IASP).

Katie Hamm is a nationally recognized leader in early childhood policy, with over two decades of experience shaping programs that support young children and families. A passionate advocate for equitable early childhood systems, Katie support the field through policy advising, thought leadership, and public commentary. She is currently a Visiting Professor at the Erikson Institute, where her work focuses on the intersection of policy and research as well as supporting local and state organizations navigate the current federal landscape.

She served as the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Early Childhood Development at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families (ACF) during the Biden Administration, where she oversaw $25 billion in federal early childhood funds, including Head Start and the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF). In this role, she played a pivotal part in advancing inclusive, high-quality early learning systems nationwide. Katie began her tenure at ACF during the COVID-19 public health emergency, leading efforts to distribute federal relief funds, provide access to vaccines for early educators, and She led efforts to improve wages for early educators and improve the affordability and accessibility of early care and education programs.

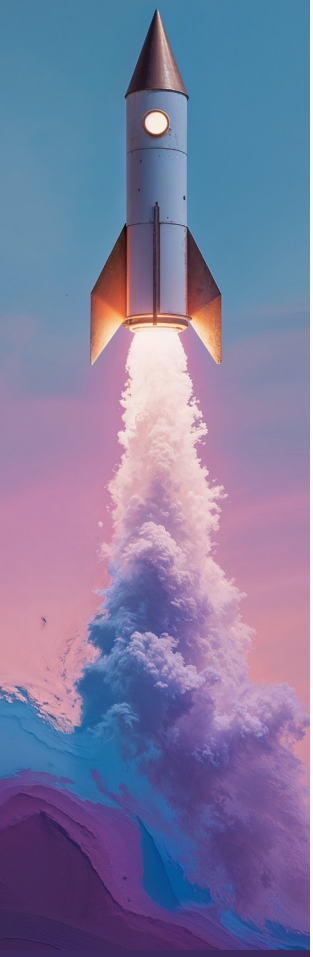
Prior to her federal leadership, Katie was Vice President for Early Childhood Policy at the Center for American Progress, directing research and advocacy efforts to expand access to affordable, high-quality child care and preschool. Her earlier public service includes roles at the U.S. Office of Management and Budget, where she served as a program examiner focused on human services programs.

Katie began her career as a Presidential Management Fellow, completing assignments at ACF's Office of Child Care and the OECD in Paris. She holds a Master of Public Administration from Syracuse University's Maxwell School and a Bachelor's degree from the University of Virginia.

James Heller For over two decades, James has been passionately solving complex technical and talent challenges for clients ranging from startups to Fortune 50 organizations across the United States. He is a recognized expert in the Information Technology sector with deep experience in new business development, customer relationship management, sales and marketing, solutions-based consulting, talent acquisition, and the successful delivery of strategic initiatives.

Over the past six years, James has become a trusted advisor in the rapidly evolving field of Artificial Intelligence, helping organizations navigate the opportunities and risks associated with AI adoption. His work focuses on guiding companies through the development of practical, secure, and business-aligned AI strategies that create measurable operational value while maintaining governance, human oversight, and data security.

James specializes in helping organizations design and operationalize safe and useful AI agents that can orchestrate people, systems, and workflows across the enterprise. His experience includes AI readiness assessments, workflow automation, enterprise orchestration, governance frameworks, and helping leadership teams understand how to responsibly implement AI technologies that enhance productivity without sacrificing control or compliance.



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Well-networked and highly consultative in his approach, James has built a proven track record of delivering innovative solutions, building long-term partnerships, and helping organizations bridge the gap between emerging technology and real-world business outcomes.

Dr. Michelle Lombardo is the President of The OrganWise Guys Inc. and the author behind the evidence-based educational series for young children and their families, The OrganWise Guys. This series creatively uses characters representing essential body organs to highlight the importance of good nutrition and preventive healthcare practices. Dr. Lombardo has delivered presentations at both national and international levels, focusing on leveraging technology to spread information that combats childhood obesity worldwide.

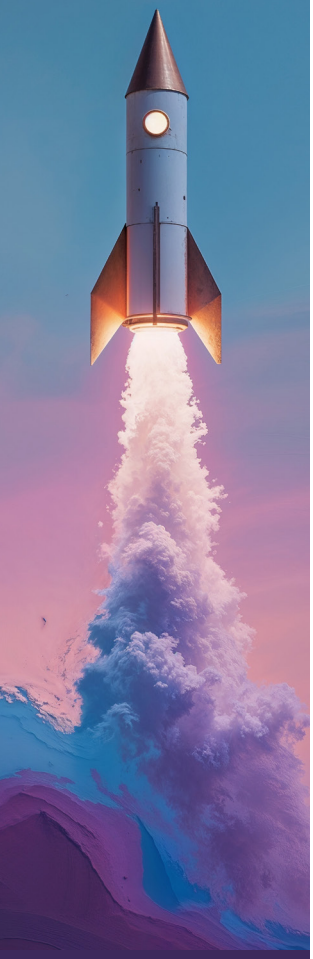
In addition to her leadership role, Dr. Lombardo was the Project Manager for the Thriving Communities, Thriving Children III (TCTC3) project, funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, which aimed to enhance health and literacy among young children. The OrganWise Guys Comprehensive School Program has been recognized in various esteemed journals, including the Journal of the American Dietetic Association, the American Journal of Public Health, and the Journal of Healthcare for the Poor and Underserved.

Dr. Lombardo is also a co-author of insightful textbook chapters, such as *Schools as Laboratories for Obesity Prevention: Proven Effective Models* and *School-Based Obesity Prevention Interventions Show Promising Improvements in the Health and Academic Achievements among Ethnically Diverse Young Children*, featured in *Global View on Childhood Obesity: Current Status, Consequences and Prevention*. This book, published by Elsevier in 2010, saw a second edition in 2019.

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.

Stuart "Mister Stu" Perry, LCSW, ASDCS, is a nationally recognized expert in children's mental health, author, and keynote speaker with nearly 15 years of professional experience helping kids and caregivers thrive. As an active child therapist, he brings a fresh, real-world perspective to his talks, drawing from his ongoing work with children and families in today's rapidly evolving environment. A lifelong advocate for kids, Mister Stu combines his deep understanding of child psychology with relatable storytelling and practical strategies that resonate with caregivers, educators, and professionals. Known for his humor, motivation, and actionable insights, his presentations inspire audiences to turn challenges into opportunities and create environments where children flourish. Whether breaking down complex concepts or sharing real-life experiences, Mister Stu brings clarity, connection, and lasting impact to every event.

Dawn Rieves began her career at the YWCA Head Start in 2001, having held positions as an Early Head Start teacher, Head Start teacher, Family Service Worker, Disability Specialist, Compliance Specialist, and currently Compliance Manager. Dawn spear headed the Family and Community Partnership monitoring review process to accommodate COVID regulations and restrictions in 2020, and the process continues to prove useful and beneficial. She believes compliance monitoring is far more than a check box exercise or a bureaucratic necessity; it is a vital, dynamic function that safeguards an organization's integrity, reputation and financial health so that children and families receive the opportunity to reach full capacity. Her passion for this field stems from the crucial role it plays in transforming organizational aspirations into evidence, acting as a proactive guardian rather than a reactive compliance monitor. Dawn is a graduate of the University of Missouri Saint Louis and is 10 years CLASS Reliable.



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Nicole Sallis is a leadership presence advisor, four-time author, and the creator of Influential Color Analysis(ICA), an innovative AI-powered tool that helps professionals understand how visual signals, especially color, shape perception, credibility, and trust in professional environments.

With more than 20 years of experience across fashion, style psychology, and brand development, Nicole has collaborated with globally recognized brands including Neiman Marcus, Macy's, Forever 21, and Champion, advising on visual strategy, consumer behavior, and brand perception. She is also the author of *The Art of Showing Up in Style*, a leadership framework that translates the psychology of visual communication into practical tools that strengthen confidence, communication, and professional presence.

Nicole has spoken at conferences, universities, and major venues including Madison Square Garden, and through her programs has supported hundreds of professionals and leaders navigating visibility, identity shifts, and evolving expectations of leadership in today's workplace.

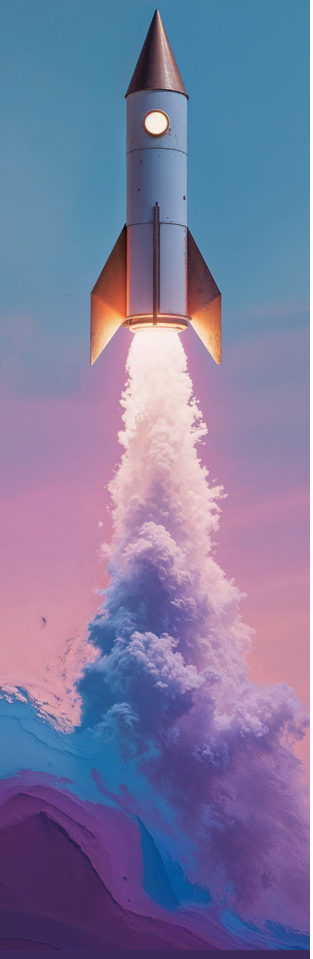
Colleen Schmit has spent 25 years in early childhood education as a teacher, consultant, program evaluator, and speaker. At the heart of her career is a deep commitment to serving children from birth through age five and supporting the families who love them. She is the author of *Crisscross Applesauce* and *Shut the Hell Up: 10 Reflective Lessons for New and Seasoned Teachers* and *The Burn Book: 8 Key Strategies to Recognize and Extinguish Teacher Burnout*. Colleen is passionate about sharing what authentic self-care looks like—rooted in self-love rather than quick fixes. When she's not working with educators, Colleen and her husband, Bob, can be found hanging out with their four kids and enjoying plenty of pizza nights.

Lyz Schmitz is the Chief Financial Officer of Tri-County Head Start in Waterloo, IA. A dedicated advocate for access to quality early childhood education for all, Lyz brings experience from both the nonprofit and for-profit sectors. In addition to her CFO role, Lyz co-directs the organization's staff wellness initiative. Outside of work, Lyz enjoys new experiences, outdoor adventures, spending time with friends, and cuddling with her dog and cat.

Roxeanna Steiner'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.

Karen Thomson is a Licensed Professional Counselor and Registered Play Therapist with over 30 years of experience. She uses child-centered therapy approaches including EMDR, Parent-Child Interaction Therapy, sand tray, and mindfulness techniques. Karen teaches at local universities and specializes in working with children navigating grief, anxiety, family dynamics, and neurodivergency.



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Dr. Robert "Doc" Welch is the Executive Director of Tri-County Head Start, serving Black Hawk, Buchanan, and Grundy counties in Iowa. With a focus on building high-performing teams and sustainable systems, Dr. Welch is known for his direct, practical and progressive leadership style that challenges leaders to move from doing the work to developing others. He has led organizational growth through the Pandemic, significant staffing challenges, program redesign, and innovation, including Reggio-inspired practices and expanded family engagement initiatives.

Dr. Welch is passionate about strengthening the early childhood workforce by developing leaders at every level and creating cultures of ownership, accountability, and excellence.

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.

Frances Witt is an Outreach Specialist with the PAXIS Institute, bringing more than a decade of experience in behavioral health, prevention, and youth development. A seasoned leader and trainer, she has served as a PAX Partner, Program Manager, and facilitator of Ohio's statewide PAX Community of Practice, where she has guided hundreds of professionals in adopting evidence-based strategies. Before her work with PAX, Frances supported youth and families across the behavioral health system, strengthening access to care and prevention services. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Social Work with a concentration in mental health and addictions and is an Ohio Certified Prevention Specialist Assistant. Frances is deeply committed to equipping educators, caregivers, and community leaders with the tools they need to help young people thrive.

Cheri Wood. Let me start off by saying Head Start has changed not only my life but my family's life. Two of my four children have attended Head Start. One in 1996 at SENCA Head Start in Nebraska and one in 2009 with CAPNEMO.

I was supported and encouraged by my Family Advocate to continue my education, which I did. I was able to work and continue my higher education with the help of Head Start. I was employed by CAPNEMO in 2012. I started as a Teacher Aide then moved to the Teacher position. My Center Director and Head Start Director encouraged and supported me in furthering my education. After some time, an opportunity opened up for me to become a Family Advocate. I obtained my FDC and became the Family Advocate for one of our 8 Head Start Centers. The opportunity came open for the Center Director position in that same center, where I remained the Center Director for about 10 years.

In 2022, I had the opportunity to advance to the Nutrition Manager for our 8 centers and the CACFP Sponsor for Family Day Care Homes in NE Missouri. I have obtained my CDA, FDC, CCNP,CMP and I am currently finishing my Nutrition and Wellness Coach Certification. I am also a registered trainer through MOPD and ServSafe.

I have presented at the Conference of the Young Years for the last 2 years, at the National CACFP Conference in 2025 and will be presenting at the MCAN Conference in May 2026.