

## Head Start Forward: Montclair Child Development

Tabitha: We are excited to introduce to you Tanya Poteat, Head Start director with the Montclair Child Development Center. Tanya, today we'll share with our Head Start community your program's approach to supporting staff mental health and also retaining teachers. Can we start with, how does your program foster staff mental health and wellness?

Tanya Poteat: Thank you so much for this opportunity, and I would like to also thank the Office of Head Start in our region too for recommending us for this chance to share with you today. Everything that we do is guided by our mission. Our mission ... The three tenants of our mission is to embrace, to empower, and to strengthen. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we lead into our mission to do just that. Since no one had the PhD on how to respond to COVID, we immediately focused in on our staff and our families and our children as a whole. We thought to ourselves, "How do we approach this as a collective?" We recognized that our staff, just like our families, had challenges. They had the same challenges. Right? We're trying to figure out how to deal with our own children and our own families in this unknown called COVID. We recognize that staff was stressed and that they needed time, and they needed some relief, so we wanted to learn from them what they needed. That's the first approach to dealing with their mental health. We asked questions.

We immediately conducted a survey of our staff. We conducted the same survey of our families, and we asked the questions. How are you feeling? What are your needs? How can we help? What would make you feel safe at work? What are the tools that you need to do your job? What are some of the resources that you need to live, basically? Because at that point, as you may remember, we couldn't find toilet paper. We couldn't find Lysol. We couldn't find anything. Our staff was experiencing that just as our families were experiencing that. As we looked for resources for our families, we also looked for resources for our staff. That was our first approach to dealing with staff mental health and wellness.

I can elaborate, so I'll go even further. We knew that many team members felt isolation. They worked from home. They were separated from families. They were separated from friends. They were separated from the faces of their team members that they would see every day at work, and so we know that that felt like a loss to folks.

As we surveyed, and we learned these things and as we saw these things and as we experienced these things, we said, "Well, what can we do?" First thing we did was we opened communication. We opened our communication systems, and we enhanced our communication systems for our entire team to interact with one another, via either the Google Suite, via Zoom, or via ClassDojo. We sent supportive messages, we shared resources, how to access food, how to access different types of benefits that you may be looking for, how to learn more about COVID, and when the vaccine became available, how to learn more about the vaccine and where to go. We then ... As a team, we decided ... What else could we do? We provided a day off, a paid day off, for team members during this time, unexpectedly, but just to say, "Thank you. Thank you for showing up for our children. Thank you for showing up for our families." We provided gift cards for lunch and gift cards for a holiday. Our HR director made random visits to our team members just to check in on their well-being because we could tell when staff wasn't engaged. We could tell when they felt a little bit separated.

Our HR director and our leadership team members, they leaned into that space and they visited staff, socially distanced. They sent notes to staff. They called. I called, just to say, "We care about you. We value you, and we want to make sure you're OK. Just as we're taking care of our families, you're our family, and we want to take care of you as well. We want our team to feel seen in all of this," because there was a lot of attention about everyone else. We wanted to make sure our staff knew that we see them and that we value them.

We put together a health and safety protocols manual. In this manual, which was for staff and families, we trained both our staff and our families on the new protocol system. When you talk about mental health, one of the things that as a team member that works with younger children, of course, you think about, "Well, how can I do my job if I can't touch, if I can't touch my early learner?" That impacts my mental health, by the way, because I want to embrace – part of our mission – our early learners. We put together our health and safety protocols manual, and we outlined things that people could do so that they could feel as if they were still pre-COVID. We provided them with the PPE tools, as everyone else did. Through our CARES funding, we provide them with the PPE tools. We provided them with a desk for our children that were movable ... indoor, outdoor desks and chairs that our children and our team could move in many different ways to create the separation, but the togetherness.

It was very interesting because one of the days, when I was walking through the site with my mask on, of course, I looked through a class window and there was a teacher and the students, and they had created this elongated table with all the movable furniture, and the children were playing ping pong as they were learning how to count. Again, that helped with staff mental health because again, children were learning, they were happy, they were smiling, they were engaged. You didn't feel that you were trapped into old ... I don't want to say old, but former protocols or former furniture. We were able, through the Office of Head Start, to buy furniture, new furniture that would allow us to create this separate, but together space for our team that was onsite. That was something that the teachers really enjoyed, the staff really enjoyed, and that we too really enjoyed and appreciated. For our team, we did not force anyone to return back on site that had fears or concerns or other situations that would prevent them from being onsite.

As I mentioned earlier, we surveyed. During the survey, we were able to find out the staff concerns and the family concerns. Then we matched areas where they could come together because we had families that didn't want to come back, just like we had teachers that couldn't come back. We were fortunate that it worked for us because there were teachers who really wanted to come back. Because we live in the community that we serve, I would go on walks, I would run into my team and they would say, "Mrs. T, we want to come back. Can we come back?" I said, "We're working on it. We're working on it right now." We brought that team back, and they came back, and we practiced our safety protocols. That helped with their mental health. For our virtual team, because they were able to stay home and work remotely, we provided laptops in the like ... Again, CARES funding. Their mental health was impacted positively. Their wellness was impacted positively. Those are just some of the things that we did, and we did so much more in the mental health space.

Marco: Hi, Tanya. It seems to me your strategies really resonate with a lot of the questions that we have been receiving about how to address where we're at, how to address the needs of staff who are also in the same place as our parents. It just always seems that in any natural disaster, we know that our Head Start staff will just do. They just put families and children first and they just do. It's really great that you were able to realize that our staff were in the same situation as our families that we're trying to serve

and our children, and we're just trying to do. I think building on your mission to embrace, empower, and strengthen. It seemed to me that it was really critical.

Then switching over to doing a survey and receiving that data to figure out what to do, but I'm really struck by your health and safety protocol manual because most people introduced that as a tool to just move forward. Sometimes it's introduced as burdensome. You took a strength-based approach to it. That became your critical tool to just build confidence. If people followed your training tool, your protocol, that they were able to do their job, but within the tool, I think that one of the questions that keeps coming up is, "How do we do our job if we can't do X, Y, and Z because of mitigation strategies?" It seems that you figured out how to do that, and you did that in a way that people felt comfortable, and let them to become with innovative strategies, such as the ping pong tables and using that to count, or the way that they set up the tables. Can you tell us about additional mental health strategies for your staff that you engaged in?

Tanya: Oh, yes. We are very fortunate to have a wonderful partnership with the Mental Health Association of Essex County, and that's in New Jersey. Through this partnership ... Really, they're more than just a partner. They are part of our MCDC fabric. When COVID hit, there was not a hesitation to what they could do and how they leaned in to help support our staff. On the onset of COVID, daily messages. At that time, we were using ClassDojo. We immediately pivoted to ClassDojo. They sent our consultant, partner, team member sent daily inspirational messages to our families, our children, and our staff, every day, on mindfulness, on how we need to practice self-care.

For our team in particular, she held weekly meetings with our team, anyone who wanted to come, and during those meetings, again, we did mindfulness sessions. We did a gratitude flag. We did art therapy in the sessions, tree of strengths. At the end of the year, we had a quilt made of the year, just of all the things as a team that we did during the year, so we have a virtual MCDC quilt.

This was an opportunity ... Well, a safe space, not an opportunity. A safe space was created, so that we could talk about how we felt burned out, how we felt anxiety, how we felt afraid, fearful, how we experienced loss. Then, it was a time for us to share, well, what things now are we doing to support that? Are we taking walks? I know for me, every morning I walked with my dog and that was a priority, and that helped my mental health every single day. Instead of separating it from the staff, I let the staff know. This is what I'm doing every single day. I'm lucky to live in the community where I work, so I walk past both of my sites on a daily basis, and I waved at the staff, and then I came, and I leaned on him. We all had to do the things that we needed to do for our own mental health to get us through the day. With the support of our mental health partnership, collaboration, we learned the tools. We learned the tools and we made time for the staff to participate in those strategies.

It's one thing to say, "Well, here are your strategies. Now, you figure out when you can make it happen." No. "Here are the strategies, and we're going to look at this day together and prioritize mental health because we know that if our team isn't strong, they cannot support the students." We would say, "Be patient and kind with yourself first. Be patient and be kind with yourself first, so that you can therefore be patient and kind with others. Focus on the reason why we're all here, and we're all here because of our brilliant and beautiful early learners to make sure that they're OK, and so we have to be OK. Our mental health has to be OK."

We also have just a treasure on our staff. Our former health manager has been with us since 1968, and she is an angel, and she's always been an angel. During COVID, she said, "I want to contribute." I said,

"OK, well, you cannot come on site, even masked up or anything. Let's think about what that might look like." She conducted weekly conference call inspirational sessions for our whole entire team. If you wanted to call in, you can. If you didn't want to call in, you didn't have to. But I will tell you that those sessions provided so much joy and relief for our team members and others because we had other team members in our extended Head Start family who were going through loss, sadness call in and just listen, just participate. Those things were very important to help staff mental health and wellness. Then, we have team members who feel more comfortable expressing and sharing in their home language. Forty-eight percent of our students are Spanish speaking and our staff is reflective of that, and so they wanted to speak in Spanish. We had a team member lead that session weekly, so that everyone would feel that they're seen. That they're seen, and that they're heard, and that they're valued, and that they're respected.

I can't stress enough of meeting people, being authentic in who you are when you're engaging with your team. Everybody, everyone, at that point, when COVID hit, we were all trying to find out our basic needs. Maslow's Hierarchy, we were all at levels one and two. Everybody. We needed to be able to engage in that way to be supportive of one another, so that we can get to actualization, so that we can get there. We had to be able to ... We're fortunate because we've been intentional about creating a caring culture. That caring culture just goes beyond the work because for us, it's not the work. It's mission. Anybody in Head Start space knows that the work that we do is mission driven. Therefore, with our team, it was important for us to hear them, see them, and then react accordingly.

Marco: Once again, mission driven. Embrace, empower, strengthen, right? I've got your mission down.

Tanya: Embrace, empower, and strengthen. Embrace, empower, strengthen. Yes.

Marco: I know that the folks who are listening can really relate to being patient and being kind with yourself first, and I think that's a very, very powerful message that you're sending. The fact that you, once again, took that data, that approach, and looking at the survey, and we're able to match. Even the story that you had with your health manager, you basically matched where she was at in her desire to want to contribute and figure out a way that she can still be able to realize that her strength as what she's able to offer, but then be able to contribute to the staff and the families. I think that that's a really nice approach. That is a great example of caring culture, which is something that you mentioned. Can you tell us a little bit more about, did your mental health support influence staff retention?

Tanya: Yeah. As I shared earlier, we definitely used a multifaceted approach to mental health and wellness. This year, as opposed to in 2020 ... This year, our attrition rate was less than 5%. In 2020, it was about 14%. We didn't lose a lot of staff during COVID, and we are very happy. I will tell you that during our exit interviews with the team that did leave, everyone says, "We didn't leave because you didn't care. MCDC cares. I will always be MCDC. We left because either we got another opportunity that will advance our career, but we love what MCDC did, especially during COVID, because you never forgot about us. Everything that you did, be it with the Mental Health Association partnership, with the paid time off, with allowing me to have the space and flexibility to take a moment when I needed a moment, whether you allowed me to have evening meetings with my parents, because not only did that work better for me. That worked better for my parents too, to meet with them on the weekends, to meet with them in the evenings. You didn't force me into a box when there wasn't a box at that point."

Everyone says that it's the support, and that was given, but it's because we love MCDC. We love what we do, and every day, we have to actualize embrace, empower, and strengthen. We can't just do it out

there. We have to do it in here. We have to do it in the collective. The collective has to be supported, and embraced, and strengthened. It definitely did help, the things that we did during COVID. I pause because these are things that we plan on doing as we move into the 21/22 school year. Mental health is a priority, so we've already factored in mental health and wellness days, mental health and wellness activities that we plan on doing with our staff, bringing resources in virtually for our staff to really focus in on mental health and wellness. A few years ago, we did a green challenge with the team, where we all try to lose some weight, and we did yoga, and so those are all the things that we do that we were already doing.

COVID gave us the opportunity to lean in a little bit more and to look at it differently. I'll tell you, Zoom, and Google Meets, and Microsoft Teams, and all those things gave us an opportunity to come together, all of our centers. We have three centers, as was shown on the introductory slide, and we have a classroom that's part of a partnership with the Department of Education. We were able to bring everyone together. Do you know what beauty that is to say there are no walls? Bringing everyone together to talk, to share, to engage, that's what we were able to do during something that was horrible. Just imagine what we can do as we move beyond this time because we're just stronger together. We're just stronger. We're stronger with our families. We're strong with each other because of some of these things that we leaned into a learned about or just decided to do.

Tabitha: Tanya, thank you so much for sharing with us so many aspects of your caring culture. What we heard was that you were able to fund this culture. You provided guidelines in order to actualize this culture. Personally, I'm full. I'm full right now because of all of the strategies and the approaches that you shared with Dr. Beltran and myself today. Dr. Beltran, do you have any final words before we wrap up this discussion?

Marco: No, I appreciate your messages. A lot of them that are sticking with me. First, be patient. Be kind to yourself, and then I'm living your mission. Embrace, empower, strengthen. Those are really nice. I think you gave us a lot of really nice things to think about and just figure out how we move forward.

Tabitha: Yes. Tanya, thank you so much for sharing your experiences with us. We are so excited about your work.