

# making change happen: what programs can do to turn things around

by Roger Neugebauer



In the March/April issue of *Exchange* we challenged readers to make change happen. We invited you to share your ideas on the little steps your program can take to start reversing the downturn — one family, one neighborhood at a time. And, we announced the Exchange Stimulus Package: We will be giving away \$10,000 in gift certificates from *Exchange* and loyal advertising partners — Community Playthings, Kaplan Early Learning Company, and Teaching Strategies, Inc. to 10 programs sharing the most creative 'Make Change Happen' stories.

We received many great and inspiring entries that demonstrate the creativity of our field. *Exchange* and our advertising partners reviewed all of these submissions and narrowed the list down to the top 20. Then we invited *ExchangeEveryDay* subscribers to vote for the top 10 submissions. Each of these 10 programs will receive \$1,000 in gift certificates from the four sponsors.

We have printed some of the ideas from these 10 programs below. In addition, on our web site you can view the top 20 submissions as well as 50 honorable mention entries that also received votes from the reviewers. We hope these ideas will inspire you to make change happen in your community!

## Sound Child Care Solutions

Seattle, Washington

"Every person needs a place furnished with hope." — Maya Angelou. Founded in 2006, Sound Child Care Solutions is a young non-profit consortium of centers joining together to share the business and professional development functions of child care while preserving our own identities and unique cultures. We are better together as we gain economies of scale and direct savings to improve our classrooms and serve more low-income children. With the recession it's tempting to contract and put the brakes on our big dreams. But, ultimately, we know that holding back won't bring out the best in our teachers, or reassure families that we can all pull together and be creative, rather than fearful and depressed, in these difficult times. An opportunity to be creative and generous came when we responded to a center in our community that needed a temporarily classroom to allow repairs of the extensive damage from a burst pipe in their building.

Due to parent layoffs, the enrollment at one of our centers was down so we offered this center a room. It was tempting to charge rent for this space, but we knew they were financially struggling as much as we were. As it turned

out, the six-week experience of having some new teachers and children in our building became a valuable experience for our staff; others see the gifts differently that we each have, and sometimes better than we can see them ourselves. The visiting teachers, too, got expanded perspectives from the diversity in our center, which they took back to their coworkers as they returned to their repaired classrooms. Our enrollment and finances continued to decline, but we wanted to keep spirits up and build on this experience of seeing new possibilities. We asked two local early childhood consultants to volunteer time to help us rethink our use of the again vacant space to be more nourishing for kids, staff, and families in these difficult times.

We used our staff and team meetings to spark ideas from teachers and our consultants, and then with a meager \$300 budget (and several trips to the thrift store), began to transform our temporary spare room into a beautiful new environment to nourish our spirits. In three short days our consultants, staff, and other volunteers cleared out the room, painted walls, and carefully set up new areas to demonstrate the values and principles we want to be influencing our time together in our early childhood center. We are trying to avoid laying

off teachers, so some teachers who are temporarily not needed to maintain ratios helped make this all a reality. During the 'room make over process' our consultants brought teachers in for dialogue about how they were thinking about the space; why certain lighting, colors, and arrangements were used; and the social-emotional, dispositional, and cognitive outcomes the room was being designed for. They especially focused on the role of de-cluttering and creating possibilities for focus and relaxed engagement. And, especially in these times, they considered the importance of focusing on relationships rather than possessions. Over a few days, as she listened and looked on, one teacher reflected on a shift in her thinking, "In our child development classes we were taught to have more of things so kids didn't fight over stuff. Now I'm understanding that maybe all this stuff is too stimulating and causing some of those fights." A child walking through the room exclaimed, "Hey, this place is beginning to look like an apartment." Our consultants ended their volunteer time with us by leaving photos and little signs around the room with simple reminders of the principles at work in its design. Within hours some of our teachers began reassessing how their rooms could be more nourishing and calm in these difficult times for families. The creativity and inspiration of the consultants and the teachers using our classroom temporarily, who saw our space in a different way than we do, inspired us further.

### **Early Childhood Center**

*Greensboro, North Carolina*

We had a little brainstorming session at our staff meeting and the staff came up with several good ideas. This one is my favorite. We are a downtown urban center where events are offered on Friday nights once the weather warms up in the center city park downtown. They offer music and a place for people to gather. Our teachers have agreed to volunteer to keep the children here in the center

so parents, who can't afford a babysitter or money for a date, can have a night out. The concerts are free and the child care will be too.

### **The Sunshine House**

*Greenwood, South Carolina*

The Sunshine House has implemented a program in selected markets that we are calling 'Families First.' This program is geared for our families who have experienced a lay-off or reduction in work force due to the economy. The program allows a family to continue their regular enrollment at 50% of their weekly tuition for a set period of time. This allows the family to adjust to their situation and gives the parent(s) time to work on their job search.

It's beneficial to the children, too, since they have the continuity of care and can continue attending school with their friends. It also keeps the families in touch with the parents of children in their child's class. The support that it offers the families has proven to be greatly appreciated, and we have had families who are participating in this program tell us what a difference Families First has made in their lives.

We have also called parents who withdrew their children due to a lay-off prior to the implementation of this program to extend the benefit to them as a former member of The Sunshine House family. We have systems in place to verify that families have experienced a lay-off and we also have policies related to the program that we make the parents aware of before approving their discount.

### **Jewish Community Alliance**

*Jacksonville, Florida*

At the JCA, we took steps to prepare for this economically challenging time last year. I don't know how much we are stimulating the economy, but we are certainly saving money at school and in homes. Here are some of the ways we are saving money at school and in homes and being planet savers:

- Drink filtered water (not bottled) at snack time and at home! Ten years ago, we served canned juice for our snack beverage. When one of our moms (who is a dentist) told us that juice was empty calories and just causes dental caries, we simply switched to bottled water. Even though Ms. Sheila used the empty jugs to build an igloo for her students to play and read in, we felt badly about all the plastic we were using. A year ago we installed inexpensive filters on our kitchen sinks. The filters paid for themselves in a matter of weeks; and now if we need plastic jugs, we ask our students to bring them from home.

- Start gardening — in a big way! With the assistance of a parent work group and donated rich soil from MulchMasters, we built a large, elevated working children's garden. We consulted with the University of Florida Extension Program regarding what to plant and when. All plants were donated by the community and preschool families and were planted by the students. Each class painted their own stepping stones (they know to stay on the stones when watering, weeding, and harvesting) and they grew enough strawberries to feed the school for snack one day each. We have also planted an ABC garden that beautifies our playground wall and we are making some very rich soil in our composting pile that we use for container gardening. We aren't saving a ton of money, but a number of our students have started their own gardens at home and we eat all the food we grow.

- Establish a recycled materials lab! Encourage families to donate select recycled items for use in art and curriculum activities in your classroom. This movement to using recycled material saves us money on school supplies and encourages students to use recycled materials at home.

- Save electricity! We are housed in a 100,000+ sq. ft. community center. Our

electric bill can exceed \$18,000 per month. We set all thermostats at 68°F in the winter and 76°F in the summer and stick to it! We turn lights off whenever possible and don't prop doors open. We encourage students to do the same at home.

### **Good Shepherd Child Care Center**

*Milford, Pennsylvania*

Since our center is a non-profit agency we are always looking to stretch the proverbial dollar. We have instituted a few of these ideas and are planning to have them all in effect by May 2009.

■ Staff swap meets. Staff bring in items they do not want or no longer use and swap them for things other staff members have brought in. We do this for the first 15 minutes of staff meetings.

■ Extending the swap meet idea to center parents. We would like to set up a swap meet closet where parents can bring in their unwanted items and exchange them for different items. We will also start a freecycle list of our own where parents can list their larger items for other parents to pick up outside of the center. We have partnered with a local bank to give parents great deals and interest rates when they open a new account or upgrade an existing account. This includes the opportunity to qualify for a rewards earning credit card.

■ We are upgrading our web site with a PayPal® account so parents can pay their tuition bill online. If they use their local bank credit card, they will earn reward points towards gift certificates/gas cards/cash back. Since they will need to pay their bill anyway, they may as well earn points for it!

■ We have allowed a few parents with serious outstanding balances the opportunity to work at the center as volunteers to help pay down their child care debt.

■ Our center recently hosted a census test site, making employment opportunities available in our community and to our parents.

■ We work with our local women's shelter to offer emergency child care at a drastically reduced rate.

■ We created our own 'giving tree' at Christmas time. We put up ornaments representing center children in need and have other parents, staff, and community members take an ornament and purchase gifts for that child.

These are small steps, but in today's economy every little bit helps! I hope these ideas may be of use in another center, because all our little steps add up to one giant leap!

### **Cornerstone Cooperative Preschool**

*Denton, Texas*

Our current garden project soothes the soul by getting in touch with nature. We recently built some square-foot gardens, where the children will soon plant the seedlings they started in the classroom. Some of the seedlings include lettuce, onions, and herbs that we hope to harvest and use for cooking. We continue to renew our compost pile every day by adding our snack remnants, which teaches the children about building soil and conserving resources. We have plans to add a xeriscape to our backyard, to teach the children and families about drought-resistant gardens during this year of record-low rainfall. It is extremely important for all families to gain an understanding of the concept of water conservation: the school is serving as both model and inspiration.

Each parent digging in our garden marvels at the calming effect of simply putting one's hands in the dirt, sifting through the clumps, and settling a young plant softly into its new home. Each child enthusiastically digging for critters and treasures of the earth exclaims anew with the sighting of bugs and worms, roots and bulbs. Newly-planted rosemary and lavender plants are lovingly stroked by 3- and 4-year olds: hands are sniffed and then rubbed on hair and skin "to make us smell so pretty!" These

activities serve as reminders of the simple joys in life.

The school's budget remains small, but revitalizing our playscape, building, and playing IN nature has a marvelous way of helping adults maintain a healthy perspective during rough economic times. Though we cannot directly change the direction of the economy, we can continue to find ways to find happiness and strength by working in the garden and staying close to nature.

### **Heart n' Home Family Child Care**

*Milwaukee, Wisconsin*

We are starting a grassroots bartering system within our family child care program. Parents who are out of work are posting what their skills are, both professional and personal, in our newsletter and on our family bulletin board. One dad is a web designer and another family hired him to do a web site for their upcoming family reunion. Because he was out of work, this gave him a chance to use his skills and bring in some income while helping the other family with a service they needed at a reasonable price. The same has been true of painting, snow removal, and other odd jobs.

There has been networking going on when one parent finds out that another is looking for work and they know someone who is hiring; they have connected and tried to help each other out. Other families have been able to go on field trips, help out in the program, and be involved in ways they weren't able to when they were working full time. They have dubbed this 'the silver lining club' and it has helped them find the positive in these tough economic times. Other activities that have helped build community are regular outings that let parents connect with one another on a more personal basis, rather than only having time to wave as they pass at pick-up and drop-off times.

Some have been at a local diner with two-for-one coupons, a park gathering to build snowmen and go sledding, and a harvest gathering where everyone brought soup or bread to share, and we all focused on gratitude instead of what we didn't have. All of these ideas have helped to strengthen the Heart n' Home family and reminded us that being there for each other, in good times and in bad, is what family is really all about!

### **Bethlehem Children's Center**

*Santa Rosa, California*

We have a dream — a naturalscape yard. We have unemployed construction workers, landscapers, and various professionals. We have the land, they have the skills, and now some time. We are organizing our own Conservation Corps as happened in the Depression. Some will work for tuition, all will work together as a community of caring families. An integrated multi-surfaced trike path will wind through one area. Some of our trikes are 20 years old; \$1,000 could make some nature riders very happy.

### **Child Care of Southwest Florida**

*North Fort Myers, Florida*

Pink Southwest Florida has been hit hard. Families have been struggling just to keep their homes, and child care has become a luxury. To help our parents and our community, we are offering after hours care from 5:30 p.m.-11:30 p.m. We have found that many families are working 2nd shifts or are taking college classes in the evening. We provide a nutritious supper and evening snack for the children. Children continue to receive the same level of quality care and developmentally appropriate activities that we offer as a Gold Seal program. We have found that many of our parents need only an additional hour in the evening that we offer for \$4.00. Parents are thrilled that their children receive a nutritious supper, which makes time at home less hectic.

We have also become family-friendly with our rate structure, offering daily

rates for families who have part-time jobs with varying schedules. We are fortunate that our community has provided some grant monies for families that are struggling, yet do not qualify for subsidized funding. We will continue to listen to the needs of our families during this economic downfall and make every effort to meet the needs of the 21st Century family in sunny Southwest Florida!

### **Pink & Blue Child Care & Learning Center, Helena, Alabama**

Pink & Blue Child Care & Learning Center is a family owned and operated child care center in Helena, Alabama. We are self funded, except for the preschool classroom. That room receives services from the United Way of Central Alabama's Success By 6 program. We serve children ages 3 weeks to 13 years. Our hours are from 6 a.m. until 6:30 p.m. Each staff member is hand selected to be employed by Pink & Blue. We are a small town center with a big heart . . . a heart that loves our children and our families. During this 'time of economic crisis' we have seen many families impacted financially, personally, and emotionally. We have children whose food is being rationed at home. Parents have lost their jobs — and some who have had their hours and pay drastically cut. I can't tell you the number of days that I go home in tears. Financially . . . there isn't much we can do.

Currently, it is all we can do to keep our doors open. But as we are watching and feeling the struggles, we are not just standing by. We do not turn children away — we just love them, hug the parents, and tell them that things will get better — it's just a matter of time. To help out the families we started a clothing swap. As one child grows out of their clothes, shoes, and accessories, the parents bring the old clothing to the center. We bag them by size and redistribute the clothing to other children who need them in the center. There is one stipulation: we

ask that parents do not point out when another child is wearing their child's used items. Some of our parents don't even know where the clothing comes from, nor do the children. We also have a baby food swap and formula swap. Again, when one child outgrows these items, we pass them on to another. We also make sure that our children are fed at the center and at home. We have contacts with Angel Food Network and a local church. We pass these contacts on to our parents for assistance. Angel Food is a low-cost food purchasing program that is administrated through a local church. I would like to also start a backpack food program where children are given canned food to take home for the weekend — just a thought for the future. I saw that a local elementary school was doing this and thought it would be a great idea for our center. We also serve as contacts for parents.

One parent needs a good or service, and another can provide it — we try to keep business, goods, and services within our center. In other words, we try to keep our parents working for each other. Most of our parents are just out of reach for financial assistance through the state subsidy program: food stamps or welfare. Through the United Way we are making sure that parents and children have access to medical, dental, and educational services they need. I can't tell you how much the United Way means to our center and family. We are blessed at this time. I only hope that we can continue to serve this community and its children. My heart hurts every time another child has to leave the center — either to stay home or to go to another place. No child should have to be pulled from his comfort zone because parents are not able to pay. Pink & Blue does work with every parent to make all possible efforts to keep their children in the child care setting. For some children we are their only stable environment. We love our children, but we cannot survive on love alone.

Go to [www.childcareexchange.com/stimulus](http://www.childcareexchange.com/stimulus)  
to read all the entries!