

Ensuring best practices in early care and education

Diana Singer is quick to say that she loves to learn new things and try new ideas. That's why it's no surprise that this former civil engineer turned child care director jumped at the chance to pilot the new Pathways: National Early Education and Care Accreditation developed by Children's Institute.

"It's important that Pathways be user-friendly as well as rigorous," explained Connie Valk, early care and education specialist at Children's Institute. Singer tested Pathways at Kids First Childcare Center in Webster, NY, to make sure it is easy to use, critiqued the written support and helped to ensure that the process is fair.

Singer knows that there are other accreditation programs available. Pathways was the most attractive to her because of its high standards, affordability and responsiveness to directors and staff.

Pathways assessment covers four comprehensive areas of child care programs: education and care, wellness, safety and administration. Centers need to meet or exceed 484 criteria to meet the national accreditation standards.

Singer's hard work on the Pathways pilot has begun to pay off. While most of the recommendations validate what she's already doing, the process of formalizing procedures across all levels has produced the most pervasive change. "We're recording what we're doing because Pathways has given us the tools and guidance we need to prove that we provide quality child care," she said.

As a result, communication with parents also has improved. "Now we're certain that they know what's going on here, so they're more comfortable, which rolls down to the children and how happy they are," she added.

In addition, Singer has also formalized communication with her staff. "Employee longevity has been good



Diana Singer meets with Maureen Janish and her son, Jack, at the Kids First Childcare Center.

at Kids First, so we've implemented routine ways to gather ideas and input from our staff in an effort to build on the center's record as a great place to work," Singer said.

According to Valk, completing the accreditation process should take Singer about one year. During this time, she completed a self-evaluation online, which she



Valk

noted was "as easy as taking an online survey." Staff and parents also filled out surveys. Then a number of trained early childhood evaluators from a variety of disciplines will observe and assess their program and interview personnel during on-site visits. All input, which is confidential, is considered before awarding

accreditation. Pathways is being tested at Kids First and Park Ridge child care centers. Pathways accreditation started accepting applications from child care centers in fall 2008.

For Singer, the Pathways accreditation pilot to date has been open and transparent: "It's not a pass/fail test. We're working together, and the lines of communication are open to facilitate genuine sharing and dialog in the interest of validating that we're providing quality child care."

Pathways news appeared in editions of the Rochester Association for the Education of Young Children (RAEYC), Early Childhood Education Quality Council, Unity Health Foundation and Child Care Council, Inc. newsletters. Also online in the Rochester Business Journal Daily Edition in March 2008.