

This week has been one of the toughest I have experienced in my 14 years of owning and operating an early learning center. My accredited early learning center serves 150 students aged 6 weeks-12 years old is located in a Maryland suburb. On Thursday, March 12th, at around 4:00pm, Governor Hogan announced by way of press conference that K-12 schools would close on Friday at the school day end for two weeks to help stop the spread of the Coronavirus. This announcement happened right at parent pick-up time as I was scrambling to find-out what it meant for childcare. I had multiple parents coming-in and out the office asking me if we were closing, too. Like most Center owners, we were reaching-out to Maryland State Department of Education (DOE) and our State early childhood advocates for guidance. We were told it was forth coming. We then learned it did not apply to childcare and we could continue serving students. We understand the Department of Education was scrambling, too. We decided to cancel our CPR/First Aid Training which was to take place on Thursday evening after the Center closed and canceled picture day that was scheduled for Friday.

The DOE then sent surveys on whether we would remain open and sent guidance from the CDC on universal precautions. The Governor enacted an Executive Order to expand childcare so that medical workers in need would have a place for their children to go and the Office of Child care temporarily relaxed regulations. We decided to remain open. That decision was based on two factors: we have parents that are essential personnel and still need to work and if we were to close what would that mean for parent pay tuition—how would we financially survive?

On Saturday and Sunday in anticipation of staying open, my husband and I changed air filters and disinfected the air ducts and items in the classroom. On Monday morning, we opened not knowing what to expect. About half of our students attended. While we were over-staffed, we used this opportunity to deep clean everything. I do mean everything. Classroom chairs were taken outside and bleached, center-time carpets shampooed, classroom manipulatives, cubbies, cots, crib and crib storage and strollers, common areas—like lobbies, computers, keyboards, telephone receivers, door handles were all disinfected. We then instituted a policy that after busy morning drop-off and pick-up times, the common area check-in station would be sanitized. We hung signs on the doors asking anyone who has a cough or is feeling ill not enter the Center. We made a policy to not allow in any outside visitors.

On Tuesday, our attendance dropped again as we were now serving about 1/3 of our students. Our families who are essential personnel stopped-by to thank us for staying open saying they don't know what they'd do if we aren't. Some of our parents are actively working on the COVID-19 response at FEMA and the HHS taskforce. Others are police, FBI, Defense, medical employees, and some work in the trades—where if they don't work they don't get paid. We have many students of County school teachers. Emails and calls started coming-in asking if they didn't bring their students did they still have to pay. The answer is yes as stated in our enrollment agreement, you are paying for your child's placement regardless of missed days. Parent pay tuition funds 98% percent of our expenses. The highest expenses being mortgage/rent & payroll. We told them that if a family is experiencing a financial hardship we would make those determinations on a case-by-case basis.

At night, I laid awake with anxiety trying to determine if we are doing the right thing. How do you balance serving children, fear of the children or your staff being exposed to the virus and keep the business afloat if you decide to close? Daily, these thoughts run through my head. We held a staff meeting and had our staff fill-out a survey—did they want to work or did they not feel comfortable and

want time-off. Almost all staff said they wanted to work. They too are grappling with the same conflicting decisions.

I was happy to see National advocates take these issues to Congress. We have participated in surveys and sign-on letters. A survey conducted by NAEYC of 6,000 childcare providers revealed 30% would not survive a closure of more than two weeks, 16% would not survive longer than a month.

By Thursday, families totaling 5 children have decided to withdraw. I am sure more are on the horizon. While we have an extensive wait list and are calling those on it, we anticipate no family wanting to make a commitment at this time. Without public support, our business will certainly have a financial loss. Some programs will be forced to close. Our County has its first confirmed case, what happens as it spreads? How long will we be able to avoid exposure?

While we are only a week into the new reality of social distancing, we are not sure what is ahead. We are taking it day-by-day and anticipate it will get worse before getting better. We hope in reading this you understand the importance and dedication of the early education workforce—now sharing the term of first responders. Don't let us be forgotten in decisions made on health and financial issues.

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