

Program Evaluation and Recommendations for Little Dippers Learning Center 2023-2024

Introduction

Alaska, often called a "child care desert," faces significant challenges in providing adequate child care services, which are crucial for the state's economic and social well-being. The scarcity of child care options profoundly impacts the workforce, as reliable child care is a significant economic driver that enables parents to participate fully in the labor market. This challenge is exacerbated by a statewide declining population of families and children, leading to workforce shortages across all sectors. The early years of a child's life, from birth to age five, are marked by rapid brain development, making quality early childhood education and care essential for laying a solid foundation for future learning and development. The health of a community can be measured by how well it takes care of its children, and in this regard, Alaska faces significant hurdles.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light and intensified the issues plaguing the child care system and infrastructure. With many child care centers struggling to stay afloat due to financial constraints and health regulations, the pandemic has underscored the fragility of the existing child care framework. Families have faced unprecedented challenges in securing reliable and affordable child care, impacting their ability to work and contribute to the economy. The profound impact of the pandemic on the child care system has highlighted its fragility and the resilience and adaptability of those involved. As a result, the need for a robust and sustainable child care system has never been more urgent.

Little Dippers Learning Center (LDLC) is vital to the Skagway community in this challenging landscape, striving to provide high-quality early childhood education and care despite these adversities. This report evaluates the center's alignment with industry best practices and regulatory standards, assesses its financial viability, and examines consumer and stakeholder satisfaction. By identifying strengths and areas for improvement and offering actionable recommendations, this report aims to support LDLC in enhancing its services and ensuring long-term sustainability. In doing so, it contributes to addressing the broader child care crisis in Alaska. The decision of the Skagway Child Care Council to evaluate and improve services offered by the LDLC will help build a stronger, healthier community by prioritizing the well-being of its youngest members.

Best Practices & Regulatory Standards

Strengths:

Regulatory Standards Compliance:

LDLC demonstrates substantial regulatory standards compliance by adhering to mandated child-to-staff ratios, implementing safety protocols such as regular fire drills and disinfecting protocols, having secure entry and exit points, and maintaining up-to-date health records for all children, including immunization records. The center undergoes regular inspections and certifications to ensure compliance with all regulatory requirements. Additionally, the staff at LDLC possess a thorough understanding of state child care licensing regulations, which enhances their ability to maintain a safe and legally compliant environment for the children in their care.

Center employees regularly meet or exceed annual training requirements.

Industry Best Practices:

Learning Environments: The physical environment at LDLC is well organized and maintained to ensure cleanliness and safety. Classrooms are thoughtfully equipped with a wide array of learning materials that cater to various developmental stages, fostering individual exploration and social play. The setup is designed to encourage curiosity, creativity, and collaborative interactions among children, promoting learning experiences that are both engaging and educational.

Daily Schedules and Routines: LDLC follows a daily schedule that balances active play, quiet time, instructional periods, and free play. This approach promotes emotional and psychological well-being by providing a predictable and secure routine. Activities are developmentally appropriate and designed to stimulate learning and growth while ensuring children have ample time for rest. Consistency in daily schedules helps children feel safe and nurtured, supporting their overall development.

Business Practices: The center practices transparent financial management and regularly communicates with parents about fee structures and policy changes. This transparency builds trust and ensures that families are well-informed about the center's operations and any adjustments that may affect them. By providing clear and consistent information, LDLC fosters a sense of partnership with parents, enhancing their confidence and satisfaction with the services offered.

Family Relationships and Communication: High engagement with families was observed, as staff members interacted warmly with parents during drop-off and pick-up times, creating a welcoming and supportive atmosphere. Using an app for sending pictures and messages further strengthens this connection, allowing parents to stay updated on their child's day-to-day activities. This level of communication ensures that parents

feel involved and informed, fostering a strong sense of community and collaboration between the center and families.

Consistency in Child Care: Providing consistent care is a valued best practice at Little Dippers. In a small environment, children are in the care of the same group of educators each day, which research has shown to be highly beneficial for both children and parents. Familiar educators can build nurturing relationships with the children, understand their routines, medical histories, and allergies, and learn their likes and dislikes. This consistency helps children build strong, trusting relationships crucial for their emotional and social development.

Areas for Improvement:

Absence of Formal Curriculum. While the center provides a nurturing environment with ample learning materials, the lack of a structured, play-based curriculum means there may be missed opportunities to systematically support children's developmental needs. Implementing a curriculum, even one that is simple and play-based, is crucial in promoting cognitive, social, and emotional development in young children. A well-designed curriculum provides a framework for intentional activities and experiences that build on children's interests and developmental stages, ensuring a comprehensive approach to early childhood education.

Layout Limitations: The current layout of LDLC, with only two distinct rooms, presents significant challenges in effectively accommodating multi-age groups. This setup complicates the provision of age-appropriate care and activities, mainly when infants and toddlers are housed together. For instance, the developmental needs of mobile versus non-mobile infants are vastly different. Mobile infants require space to explore and practice their motor skills, while non-mobile infants need safe, contained areas where they can lie, roll, and begin to crawl without the risk of being inadvertently hurt by their more active peers.

The designated area for infants and toddlers is not sufficiently spacious to accommodate the needs of both groups comfortably. Cribs and other necessary furnishings for infants take up significant space, leaving limited room for active play and exploration, which are crucial for toddler development. Ensuring developmental support for toddlers, such as toilet training, becomes particularly challenging in a shared space. Toddlers require specific facilities and routines for toilet training that are difficult to manage when infants with entirely different needs share the same room. This situation can lead to an environment that may not fully support the developmental milestones of either age group.

Recommendations:

Develop and Implement Curriculum: Introduce a structured, play-based curriculum that aligns with developmental milestones and supports holistic child development. This curriculum should include planned activities and routines that promote cognitive, social, and emotional growth, ensuring all children receive consistent and purposeful learning experiences. Partner with the Learn and Grow Program through thread to get help with curriculum design.

Reconsider Facility Layout: To address these issues, it is essential to reconsider the current facility layout. Restructuring existing spaces or investing in renovations to create distinct areas tailored to different age groups would significantly enhance the children's learning and developmental experiences. Separate areas for infants and toddlers would allow for more specialized and focused care, ensuring that each child's needs are met appropriately.

Optimize Space for Infants and Toddlers: Enhancing the designated area for infants and toddlers is crucial. This could involve reallocating space to ensure both groups have adequate room to engage in activities suited to their developmental stages. For infants, this means creating safe, contained spaces with appropriate furnishings and plenty of room for cribs. It involves designing areas supporting active play, exploration, and toilet training for toddlers, with facilities catering to their developmental needs.

Specialization Consideration: Given the space constraints and the distinct needs of different age groups, evaluating the feasibility of specializing in preschool-age children or infants and toddlers may be beneficial. Specializing would allow the center to tailor its environment, resources, and programs more effectively to the developmental stages of the children in its care. This focused approach could lead to higher quality care and education, better developmental outcomes for the children, and increased satisfaction for parents.

By addressing these areas for improvement, LDLC can create a more supportive, nurturing, and developmentally appropriate environment for all children, ultimately enhancing the quality of care and education provided.

Business Viability

For this section, a variety of profit and loss statements for the past few years were provided for review and evaluation.

Strengths:

Revenue Generation: LDLC has demonstrated revenue generation through diversified streams, including contributions, daycare services, grants, and fundraising activities. This multifaceted approach to revenue supports financial stability and reduces dependency on a single source of income typically found in child care businesses. The center's ability to attract and secure grants and execute successful fundraising initiatives showcases its strong community support and effective financial strategies.

Expenditures Management: Effective expenditure management is another key strength of Little Dippers. The center has maintained controlled spending across various categories, ensuring that resources are allocated efficiently and responsibly. The center has maintained a positive net revenue for most of the reviewed period by closely monitoring and managing costs. Prudent financial practices allow for reinvestment into the center, enhancing the quality of care and educational services provided to the children.

Operational Grants and Fundraising: Significant contributions from grants and successful fundraising activities are vital in supporting the operational costs and facilitating facility improvements at Little Dippers. Grants

often provide essential funding for specific projects or programs, enabling the center to introduce new initiatives and improve existing ones. Fundraising activities not only generate additional revenue but also foster a sense of community involvement and support. These financial inputs are instrumental in maintaining high standards of care and continuously upgrading the center's infrastructure and resources.

Areas for Improvement:

Revenue Model and Financial Stability: LDLC demonstrates strong financial management and diversified revenue streams, but the current hourly fee structure presents notable challenges. Charging hourly rates and allowing parents to reserve hours but only pay for what they use creates an unpredictable revenue stream. This model makes it difficult to forecast monthly income accurately, posing significant challenges for financial planning and budget management.

Staff Scheduling Challenges: The hourly fee structure complicates the staffing task. Administrators must adjust the weekly staffing schedule to match the fluctuating demand. This constant need for adjustment can lead to inefficiencies and increased administrative overhead. Moreover, the unpredictability of child attendance makes it challenging to ensure staffing levels are always appropriate. Overstaffing can lead to unnecessary payroll expenses, while understaffing can compromise the quality of care and lead to non-compliance with child-to-staff ratio regulations.

Financial Planning and Stability: The unpredictable revenue stream from the hourly rate model makes it difficult for the center to maintain financial stability. Without a consistent and predictable income, planning for future expenses, savings, and investments in the facility is challenging. This uncertainty can hinder the center's ability to invest in necessary improvements, staff development, and program enhancements. Financial stability is crucial for the long-term sustainability of any child care center, and the current revenue model at LDLC poses significant risks in this regard.

Governance and Objectivity: An area for improvement at LDLC involves the composition of its Board of Directors. Currently, the board includes members who are also parents of children attending the center. While having parent involvement can provide valuable insights and foster a strong community connection, it also presents significant pitfalls. The primary issue is the inherent lack of objectivity that these board members may have. As parents, their perspectives and decisions are likely influenced by personal experiences and immediate concerns regarding their children, which can lead to biased decision-making. This dual role can compromise the board's ability to make impartial, strategic decisions that benefit the center. Additionally, conflicts of interest may arise when decisions need to be made about policies, staffing, or financial matters that directly affect their children. To ensure balanced and objective governance, it is crucial to diversify the board by including members who do not have a direct personal stake in the center's daily operations. This can help maintain a clear focus on the center's long-term vision and overall well-being.

Recommendations

Transition to Monthly Enrollment Fees: To address these challenges, LDLC should consider transitioning from an hourly fee to a monthly enrollment fee structure. This approach would provide a more predictable and stable revenue stream, simplifying financial planning and budget management. A fixed monthly fee ensures a steady income, allowing for more accurate forecasting and better financial health.

Implement Consistent Scheduling: Adopting a monthly enrollment fee structure simplifies staff scheduling. With a more predictable attendance pattern, administrators can plan staffing schedules more efficiently, reducing the time spent on weekly adjustments. This consistency would ensure that staffing levels are appropriate, enhancing the quality of care and maintaining compliance with regulatory standards.

Parent Communication and Transition: Communicating the benefits of a new fee structure to parents will be crucial. Highlighting the advantages, such as a consistent schedule for children, enhanced quality of care, and improved facility resources, can help parents understand and support the transition. A phased implementation might also ease the transition for families accustomed to the hourly fee model.

Private Ownership Option: Consider changing LDLC's ownership structure by allowing it to be taken over by an independent owner or sole proprietor. This could enhance long-term sustainability because an owner would have more of a personal investment in the business's success and the autonomy to make decisions without needing board approval.

Consider a Change in Board Structure: To address the pitfalls of having a Board of Directors composed of current parents, LDLC should consider transitioning to a Board of Trustees model. While both boards play essential roles in governance, they differ significantly in structure and function.

Board of Directors vs. Board of Trustees:

A **Board of Directors** typically involves members directly engaged in the organization's operations and often includes individuals with a vested interest, such as parents of children attending the center. This board is responsible for overseeing the management, setting strategic direction, and making critical decisions regarding policies and procedures. However, as noted, this model can lead to conflicts of interest and a lack of objectivity.

In contrast, a **Board of Trustees** usually consists of external members who are uninvolved in the day-to-day operations and do not have a direct personal stake in the organization. Trustees are generally tasked with overseeing and ensuring the organization adheres to its mission and goals. Their role focuses more on governance, accountability, and long-term strategy than operational management.

Consumer Satisfaction

In June 2024, a 7-question satisfaction survey was distributed to former and current families to gather valuable feedback on their experiences with services offered at LDLC. Five responses were received, all from current LDLC users. By measuring consumer satisfaction, LDLC can enhance the quality of programs, address any concerns, and ensure that they meet all families' needs and expectations. This ongoing feedback loop is essential for maintaining high standards and fostering a positive and supportive environment.

Strengths:

Parents expressed high satisfaction with the overall quality of care and education. They also praised the availability of diverse learning materials and the clean, well-organized, and safe physical environment. All respondents would recommend LDLC to other families, indicating high levels of approval.

Areas for Improvement:

Despite the overall positive feedback, there are notable areas for improvement. Communication between LDLC staff and families can be improved, with 40% of respondents rating communication as the bare minimum. Additionally, the current hourly rate model was mentioned as a point of contention, with some parents finding it less predictable and more cumbersome than a fixed monthly fee structure.

Recommendations:

Assign a 'Greeter': The staff should assign one person to greet parents at pick-up and drop-off daily. The designated staff member should prioritize a warm greeting and sharing information about each child's positive experiences that day. This would help ensure that the developmental needs of both infants and toddlers are adequately met, providing appropriate environments for mobile and non-mobile children.

Transition to Monthly Enrollment Fees: Implement a monthly enrollment fee structure to provide a more predictable and stable revenue stream. This change would simplify financial planning for the center and the parents, reduce administrative overhead, and ensure consistent staffing levels.

Maintain Strong Communication Channels: Continue to use and enhance the daily communication from staff to parents, so they receive timely updates and feel connected to their children's daily activities. Consider adding a weekly newsletter and improving the applications currently used for daily communication. For example, Tadpoles and Brightwheel offer features that allow staff to send photos of what each child was engaged in at the center, tied to the curriculum, daily or weekly.

Direct Comments from Satisfaction Survey:

My child is very excited to go to Dippers each day. I was hoping more outside activities and outings would be offered though. Also, don't be afraid to greet parents and kids at the door. Sometimes it feels awkward dropping off my kiddo and no one is around to greet us. All good though!

I believe there could be better communication with parents about the day-to-day activities at the daycare. In other daycare experiences I've had, the teachers typically have a monthly theme for what the kids are learning, a schedule posted on the wall detailing the daily activities, and a snack schedule for parents to reference. This helps parents stay informed about their child's schedule while at the facility.

Currently, this is a great daycare, but I don't see how it functions as a learning center when there is no visible learning material or lessons being administered. If lessons are being planned or administered, it would be beneficial to communicate this to the parents. In my past experience the teacher would have a whiteboard with yearly themed decorations and lessons planned out for the toddlers, songs they would sing or who's birthday it was etc. More of a preschool setting for the preschool aged kids. At this point it just feels like they free play most days.

Additionally, the billing process is quite different from other daycares and poses challenges for both parents and administrators. If parents are billed at the end of the month based on their reserved schedule, regardless of late or early drop-offs, why not bill at the beginning of the month when the schedule is submitted? This approach, common in other childcare facilities, seems more straightforward. The hourly breakdown is also unusual, as most daycares charge a flat rate. It was a huge challenge when I was receiving CCAP.

As a former board member, I understand the structure and policies. However, I am concerned that voicing complaints might lead to negative consequences rather than fostering collaborative problem-solving for the benefit of all parents. Additionally, it is challenging to join board meetings to voice these concerns, as emails to the board often go unanswered and parents are not informed about meeting times. In the past when I have reached out to the administrator, it seems she lacks information on these matters and control on these decisions. I also fear that raising these concerns might unintentionally offend the administration, worsening the situation instead of being heard as constructive feedback from a parent.

This survey is a big leap as far as making positive changes and addressing concerns, I hope you have other parents submit their thoughts as well. Thank you

We have had a wonderful experience. Thank you!

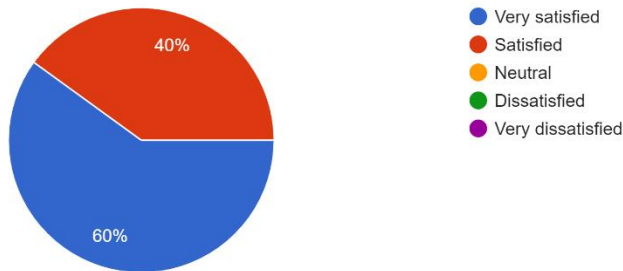
Outdoor facilities and play equipment need updating.

Survey Questions and Responses

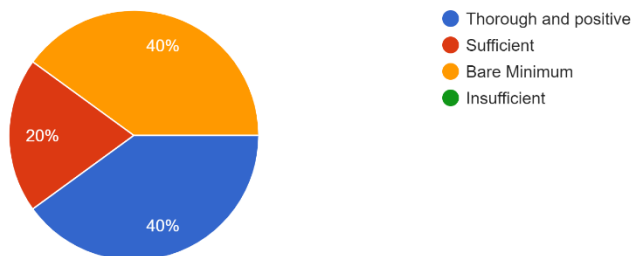
Describe your relationship with LDLC
5 responses



How satisfied are you with the quality of education and care provided at (LDLC)?
5 responses

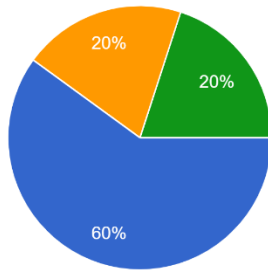


How would you rate the communication between staff and families regarding your child's progress, activities, and any concerns?
5 responses



Do you feel that the facilities and equipment at LDLC are adequate to support your child's learning and development?

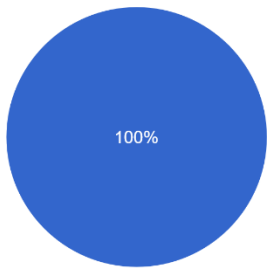
5 responses



- Yes
- No
- Maybe
- We do not receive updates on what the children are learning or the curriculum for the week or day, so we have no reference for what they are learning while at the facility. We also do not receive a schedule of their daily activities or information on what snack...

How satisfied are you with the safety and security measures implemented at LDLC?

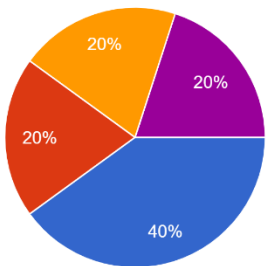
5 responses



- Very satisfied
- Satisfied
- Neutral
- Dissatisfied

How satisfied are you with the ability of LDLC to consider the individual needs of students?

5 responses



- Very satisfied
- Satisfied
- Neutral
- Dissatisfied
- Its hard to say as I do not have full context on what the other individual students need, and are being given. I will say one teacher in particular has made a huge difference recently in potty training our son and I am very thankful!

Would you recommend LDLC to other families looking for early education services?

5 responses

