

A Special Goodbye

“Good Management Begins with Good People”

by Dennis Vicars

Editor's Note: Forty-two editions and seven years later, *Exchange* bids one of our favorite people and writer, Dennis Vicars, goodbye. Roger and I have known Dennis for 20 years and have always appreciated his 360° knowledge of early care and education. He has been a teacher, ECE company founder, ECE lobbyist, ECE association CEO, non-profit and for-profit consultant, and recently CEO of the country's second largest corporate-sponsored child care company. An impressive résumé, but what has been more impressive has been Dennis' willingness to openly share his leadership experience and knowledge with the intention of making lives for young children better. With this being Dennis' last management article, I could not resist the opportunity to ask him a few parting questions, which will be helpful to us all as we work toward making the lives of young children, our teachers, and staff better. *Thank you, Dennis!*

Bonnie: You've had a long, rich career in early care and education. What advice would you offer to a person just entering this field?

Dennis: Find some great mentors. I was fortunate to have icons like Julie Sell, Judy Carnahan, Karen King, and Julie Wassom take me under their wings early. I had the education and management skills, but they taught me the nuances of our field.

Bonnie: Nuances? Explain.

Dennis: What we do in ECE is so unique. We are dealing with a parent's most precious commodity: her child. They come to us with anxiety, concern, stress, and the greatest negative emotion

of all — guilt. I have been part of a research study that discovered that even if a center is doing everything right, it takes a parent 11 months before they reach the trust threshold. That same research indicated that almost 50% of disenrollment occurs within the first 90 days of enrollment. Now think about that for a minute. We have done a great job with the child, which is why we were hired, but yet we haven't delivered to the parent's inner need of mitigating their guilt. What other enterprise has that challenge? None that I know of. That's the biggest reason why I've witnessed so many managers come from other industries and fail. They know all about return on net assets (RONA); return on investment (ROI); and 'positive drop through' on the P&L, but never understand the critical nuances that cannot be violated if you hope for success.

Bonnie: What are some of the other critical nuances for early care and education success?

Dennis: First, we are an emotionally driven group of 'do-gooders' and thank God for it. Regardless of organizational structure, whether a corporate for-profit center or a local small church non-profit, the foundational theme had better focus on the central question of whether the best interests of the child are being served. If they're not, you will never be truly successful due to lack of teacher/parent buy-in. It's our field and must be part of any successful human resource planning, training, and investment.

Bonnie: Any others?

Dennis: Well, yes, and the very reasons are why I created the acronyms SCOPE (Safe, Clean, Organized, Professional, Educational) and CARE (Customer Attention Retains Enrollment). Early in my ECE career, I had the opportunity to participate in 12 parent focus groups throughout the country with the major question being "What is important to you in an early care and education experience?" About halfway through my seventh



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session I looked down at all my notes and the same theme, regardless of whether we were in Philadelphia, Denver, or Phoenix arose: parents want an environment that is safe, meaning children are protected, fences are fixed, teachers have clean background checks, paint is not peeling, maintenance is budgeted, and so on.

Clean means hospital clean, with floors that shine and air that smells clean and antiseptic.

Organized means things are properly stored and children have access. As one parent said, "The place looks like it has it together."

Professional refers to the staff's dress, communication with children, parents, and their colleagues: "Do you know what you are doing with my child and do you treat me with respect (i.e., eye contact, greetings, written communications with proper grammar and spelling)?"

Educational means "Is my child learning, gaining confidence and working with others in a positive, constructive manner?" I can't think of too many priorities that do not fall within one of these categories for a successful early care and educational center. These are parent priorities and in that order.

Bonnie: How about CARE?

Dennis: CARE goes back to what I said earlier about the guilt factor. Successful early care and education goes beyond the child. We help families. That is part of being successful with the child. It's part of the magic triangle of child, teacher, and parent working together for success. I learned early on that the parent has to know you care about her and her child. Just imagine what it would mean to a school's financial success if they could retain half of the enrollment they lose in the first 90 days.

The same research I cited earlier also found that once parents get past the 90-day mark, they are usually with you for an average of 22 months. Doesn't it make sense to do all you can to make sure that parents are being reached out to daily in some special way in those first 90 days?

Bonnie: That goes along with your special customer service ideas too. What do you call it?

Dennis: Absolute Excellent Service.

Bonnie: That's part of your CARE program, correct?

Dennis: Yes, but it goes beyond that really. It's about building a culture of service to parents, staff, and each other. I've seen many great programs from any number of different pedagogies, whether it be Montessori, Reggio, or 'developmentally appropriate.' Unless there is 100% commitment to going beyond the expectations of your parent, your school will be average with a *culture* of average. There is a reason why Nordstrom's continues to be successful during a recession, even with premium prices. A total commitment to Absolute Excellent Service is that one halo that shines above the rest and in the parent's perception makes your school the best. It makes your teachers and staff take on a special motivation as well. It creates a special culture.

Bonnie: As you look back, what has been your greatest thrill?

Dennis: Helping to grow people. Teaching or mentoring someone and watching that special moment when the "aha" switch clicks on. I'm so proud knowing that I had some small role in helping some of today's ECE superstars, like Debbie Brown, Robyn Carrone, and Cindy O'Mare become successful. We, who have been in this field a long time, have an obligation to help our future

leaders be stronger than those of us who soon will be headed into the sunset.

Bonnie: Speaking of which, are you headed there?

Dennis (laughing): Well I certainly hope not. Have you heard something I haven't? No, in all truth, I plan to continue with my Arista Preschools and assist a friend of mine who has created a hi-tech solution to helping our schools be safer. No more Sandy Hook tragedies if we can help it. Only in America would techno-peasants like me be a part of a hi-tech startup. I am very serious about solutions to school safety and hopefully this is an answer. It would be a nice parting legacy.

Bonnie: Any other parting advice?

Dennis: Yes, two things. First, and again, a unique nuance for early care and education success, is that operations and marketing are two and the same; they cannot be separated. You can do all the social media, flyers, mailers, or door hangers you want, but unless your operation matches what you are trying to sell, you will not be successful. You can advertise 'quality preschool experience' all you want, but if a visiting parent has to move a partially downed gutter out of her way to get through the front door, your school will not prosper. You cannot continue to make cuts to the items of SCOPE and expect to have long-term success, regardless of the marketing hype.

Lastly, you have to have passion and enthusiasm for our field or you will fail. That's another point of failure I've witnessed from the 'know-it-alls' who have come from numerous other industries where loving the industry was inconsequential. Whether you are the aide in the three-year-old room or the CEO, you better love it when a three-year-old runs up to you with his gooey shaving-cream hands and rubs them on your pants and smiles and asks you to

come and play at his table. What we do is what will change our world and that takes a special love and passion.

Bonnie: You have always had that passion.

Dennis: Yes, I have and always will.

Bonnie: We all thank you for that passion, Dennis.

