



Working Collaboratively to Meet Employees' Child Care Needs



Manufacturing leader creates child care opportunities in a small town.

Ashley Industrial Molding offers great benefits, great wages and a great workplace environment. But company leaders were struggling to fill openings because their small town of fewer than 1,000 people lacked another necessary ingredient for families - ample seats in high-quality child care.

Interview after interview, applicants asked about places to drop their children off during the work day. That's when the company decided to see an opportunity instead of a challenge and worked collaboratively to fill the community's early education needs.



A coalition of local employers led by Scott Pflughoeft, CEO of Ashley Industrial Molding, decided to invest in bringing high-quality care to families of Ashley. They leveraged the early childhood education expertise of a high-quality local ministry, Agape Child Care Ministry, and partnered with LaGrange First Church of God and town leaders to renovate an underutilized former elementary school and transform it into a child care facility to serve nearly 90 kids.

"It started in the craziest of times. Pre-COVID is when things started to come together," Pflughoeft said. "We opened in October 2020 with 16 kids and nine staff and really anticipated growth. Within three months, we filled all the open spaces and easily doubled the child care capacity of the area in a short period of time."

Throughout the process, coalition leaders focused on developing a fiscally-responsible model that didn't solely rely on grant funding but also charged affordable tuition to families. Community partnerships also were a necessary ingredient. Critical to launching quickly was LaGrange First Church of God, providing the ability for the center to become a registered ministry and nonprofit.

A big part of the success also came from the decision to help share the cost of Agape's child care director's salary. She came with deep knowledge of the child care industry and now runs Agape's current center and the new employer-led center in Ashley.

"We said, 'We need the right person to do it, and we can build it from there.' She was just super incredibly helpful with policies, procedures and filling out paperwork. Within the first year, we were Level 3 on Paths to QUALITY™," he said. "It's been amazing to see this happen and what a committed group of people and companies were willing to bring to the community and watch it thrive and grow."



Children now come to the center from a 20 to 30-mile radius. Ashley is located within a major industrial hotbed, and the center is conveniently located off of I-69 and a good drop off location for parents commuting between Angola, Fort Wayne and the Auburn areas. The center also has adjusted hours and is open earlier and later than a standard child care offering to help those working in manufacturing.

For employers looking to launch something similar, Pflughoeft's first piece of advice is not to overstudy whether there are existing barriers to accessing early childhood education.

"Someone has to step up, take the lead and put a team around it," he said. "The problem exists. You don't need to study it any further."

Finding a child care expert to bring their insider knowledge to operate the center is also important, as well as keeping overhead costs for the building down. The Ashley community benefited from being able to repurpose a current building instead of developing a new center from the ground up. Coalition leaders should also treat the child care center essentially as a start-up that might need two to three years to become sustainable. Upfront funding and support are key, Pflughoeft said.



"I liken the need for child care and early education to health insurance from an employer standpoint," he said. "You can see the benefit to the family and the improved employee participation."

Scott Pflughoeft, CEO, Ashley Industrial Molding,

