



## Creating Successful Business-Child Care Partnerships



Polywood engages early education provider to meet employees' child care needs

Polywood is a popular manufacturer of outdoor patio furniture with a headquarters in Syracuse, Indiana. But in the community the company is not just known for its goods, it's known for its efforts to provide early childhood education to its employees.

"The cost of child care is just ridiculous for the general consumer. It's often more than state college tuition if you annualize it," said Ryan Zimmerman, Polywood's senior director of human resources. "We are in Small Town, America, and didn't have a lot of child care or preschool options."

So Polywood leaders set out to change that by partnering with Wawasee Early Learning and paying a percentage of their employees' child care costs. Polywood worked with the established early childhood education provider to open a classroom in Syracuse and paid for the seats upfront to keep the program stable. Today, as employees enroll their kids, the company still foots about 30 percent of the bill.

The classroom serves ages 3-5, and all students are children of Polywood employees. For younger children, the company also secured spots with an infant and toddler care provider and similarly subsidized the child care there.



“COVID disrupted a lot. Particularly in this area, there was one operating program in our town, which was full. Just seeing the needs not only of our employees but the community, we had to back it,” Zimmerman said. “We understand as an employer this is what we need to do and should do to offer this program.”

Since its inception, the child care has helped with employee retention and attendance, as well as brought an overall stability to care. Before Polywood opened the classroom, employees had to utilize a patchwork of care from a family member, neighbor or other provider.

Finding a partner like Wawasee Early Learning was critical to Polywood’s success, he said, since they are not an expert in the child care space. He recommends businesses whose leaders want to do something similar to partner with an early learning expert in their county or region. That allows them to work with someone who knows what they are doing and knows the ins and outs of regulations and best practices.

“The school was very experienced,” he said. “It wasn’t like opening up a whole new center. We had everything established from a safety and security standpoint. We had looked at opening a single standing facility at one point but then realized everything that had to go into it. It wasn’t the best route for us to go. We would have ventured into pretty unknown territory very quickly.”

Access to child care is a large problem in many communities, and businesses can get together to build opportunities, Zimmerman said.



“In small town communities, there are opportunities for multiple companies to come together to share the burden of that cost,” Zimmerman said. “Everybody is in this together, and everyone has the same problem. We can all put our heads together and come up with a solution that is mutual to everybody.”

**Ryan Zimmerman, Polywood, Senior Director of Human Resources**

