

Creating a Sustainable Model for Licensed Child Care Centers in Rural Areas



Rural coalition connects with experts to address need

Adam and Carlee Alson had no plans to become early childhood education advocates. The couple, who live in Rensselaer, are grain farmers and Carlee works as a communications freelance writer. But in May 2018, they learned the child care center their son attended – the only licensed center in Rensselaer – was going to close.

Carlee, who was pregnant with their second child, contacted the Child Care Resource Network and connected with program director Victoria Matney.



“Victoria gave me a crash course on what I needed to know about coalition building. It was too late to save the center from closing, but the information she provided planted a seed.”

Carlee Alson, Co-founder of Appleseed Childhood Education

That seed eventually grew into Appleseed Childhood Education (ACE), a nonprofit the Alsons co-founded in January 2020. ACE provides support for new and existing programs that serve young people from birth through high school in areas of quality child care.

ACE’s approach is two-fold. The organization is focused on coalition building, advocacy and awareness. ACE has partnered with the Jasper Youth Center and the Jasper County Economic Development Organization to share the importance of early childhood education.



“The other thing we are doing, more internally, is putting all the pieces into place to create a financially stable model for a licensed child care center in Jasper County”

Adam Alson, Co-founder of Appleseed Childhood Education

Currently, there is only one licensed child care center in Jasper County: The Growing Patch Learning Center in Remington opened in March 2018. Families in Rensselaer and surrounding areas turn to home providers for care.

“The role of in-home providers in our area is absolutely crucial, because if they didn’t do their work we’d have absolutely nothing,” said Carlee. “They are superheroes on many levels.”

Through their experience with their son’s center, the Alsons got a glimpse into why licensed centers have not been successful in their community.

“One of the challenges in making centers sustainable in rural areas is a lack of operating expertise,” Adam said. “Everything is about keeping the center open and operating on a daily basis, with little time devoted to strategic planning, marketing or larger-scale fundraising.”

“We asked ourselves, ‘How do we reestablish a licensed center and how do we make it successful?’” said Carlee. “We can’t expect to replicate old models and get different results.”

In order to circumvent stumbling blocks, ACE is planning to partner with Right Steps Child Development Centers in Lafayette, a connection that was made through the Child Care Resource Network. Right Steps currently operates six state-licensed, Paths to QUALITY Level 4 child care centers. It will be responsible for day-to-day operations while ACE operates as a nonprofit board. ACE hopes to have the center operational by the end of next year.



In the meantime, ACE will keep advocating for the importance of quality child care. The coalition regularly connects with local businesses and government leaders to talk about early childhood education as an investment that can help mitigate other social challenges in rural areas, including child abuse and neglect, addiction and substance abuse, and lack of economic growth and stagnation.

“Let’s invest on the front end so we don’t have to continue to pour increasing amounts of resources and time into mitigating the problems that happen when kids and families aren’t supported,” said Carlee.

The Alsons know it takes a community to sustain early childhood education and create more high-quality child care options.

“If we all decide this is an issue, we will have this problem solved in Rensselaer for the next 30 years – not one or two or three years, but for 30,” Adam said. “That is the end goal.”