

To: Whom it may concern

From: Gina M Cappel, Director
Jerusalem Child Care and Learning Center
252 Dock St.
Schuylkill Haven, PA 17972
570-385-4244
jccckids@yahoo.com

Re: Testimonial

Our early learning center has been providing quality early learning, preschool, child care and school age programming for more than 50 years in the Schuylkill Haven area community. We have grown and expanded our programming over the past 27 years. We employ more than 25 people under normal circumstances, every year. Our enrollment under normal circumstances is 130 students ages 2-12 years old. We are a half million-dollar local business in the area. Studies have proven for decades, the importance and positive impact of the benefits of a quality early learning experience.

Unfortunately, over the past 4 years our ability to continue to provide services to the community has been greatly compromised. We have had to close 1 school age classroom, going from serving 40 students to, now, only 20. We have also had to go from caring for up to age 12 to now age 10 years old. Our Preschool only program, Little Critters Preschool, is now becoming nonexistent. This program was serving 30-35 preschool age students for the past 27 years. It is now being dissolved, leaving an entire classroom empty. Other classrooms remain at less than capacity.

The reason for all of this..... LACK OF STAFFING!! We have had tremendous difficulty even getting real applicants to walk in the door for an interview. We paid for services like Indeed. Most of those interested people were "fake". They applied with no intention to actually work for us. Interviews were scheduled and no one showed up. We utilized Facebook to advertise openings. This gave us 1 or 2 real applicants and resulted in 1 hiring. I have reached out to Penn State, Alvernia, Career Link and local newspapers with little success.

We have always maintained the most quality for the most affordable prices for parents. We participate in the Child Care Food Program. We receive very little reimbursement to cover our breakfast, lunch and pm snack that is served to all of our students year-round. I don't have to tell you how food costs have strangled budgets of centers and families alike. But here is something to ponder and question: How can the government provide funding to feed the ENTIRE Schuylkill Haven School District FREE of charge to every student while we are reimbursed peanuts to provide the same quality nutritious meals? We are in the same socio-economic area! We are both governed and regulated by the Department of Education and the USDA!

We are now at a breaking point! We had 2 months in 2023 that we made a slight profit. Our committee struggles to increase the weekly tuition to parents. Our staff averages \$13.00 per hour. Most have been working for \$12.00 per hour for the last 2 years.

The child care/early learning industry is one of the foundational components to a healthy, thriving work force and economy. We need help!!! We need funding!! Attention and research needs to be given to this essential work force. So many of our local centers have closed! We are still here, for how long, I can only guess: a year maybe. Other states such as Maine have found ways to provide funding, attention and advocacy in the child care industry to create a solid foundation in their state's economy. Let's bring Pennsylvania to this level in regards to our child care/early learning industry!!!

We are a STAR 4 early learning facility in the state of Pennsylvania!!! We worked hard for that designation and continue to do so and maintain it! It's difficult to maintain without staff. I encourage you to use your position to create a better Pennsylvania by focusing on, acting on and bringing awareness to this situation.

Serving our Community for 33 years,
Gina M. Cappel, Director
Jerusalem Child Care and Learning Center

February 2nd, 2024

To the JCCC Committee,,

Come June 1st, 2024, I will be ending my career at Jerusalem Child Care and Learning Center after a little over 14 years of service. I thank each and every one of you for the opportunity to grow into the adult woman that I am today, because I can never replace what you have done for not just me, but my family.

To say this place has been like a second home to me would be an understatement. I have made memories that will last a lifetime. I have learned how to deal with differences in human opinion, trust myself, and build lasting relationships with my fellow teachers, community, and beyond. I have spent over a third of my life working with the families who trust us to watch over their children—sometimes for 11 ½ hours—every weekday. All this is because you took a chance on an 18-year-old woman in college earning her Associates Degree in Early Childhood Education and allowed her to substitute.

And while working here has been beneficial, it has not come without its hardships. I stayed to continue helping families through the 2020 COVID-19 crisis, when no one knew for certain what the next day would hold or if they would see the person standing beside them the next day. I have worked 11 hour days to fill in spots that needed to be filled due to a medical emergency, scheduled day off, or illness. I have come home with bruises from children who could not yet regulate their emotions. And I have cried myself to sleep over not one but three fathers who took their life before their sons were even in Kindergarten.

I was, however, willing to put up with all this, because I love my career, and I wanted to see this place continue to support families in the community for years to come. I considered it to be a necessary evil of my chosen career. After all, no job is all sunshine and rainbows, even as a preschool teacher.

Unfortunately, my breaking point was due to both internal and external forces. My family moving out of state was one. This left me with little support outside of my career and fellow teachers. However, as long as I could justify living on my own, I chose to stay here and continue to affect

lives—both young and old—for the positive. I knew this is what I was meant to do. I'm not going to lie, this is only half of why I have chosen to leave.

The other half is I am simply burned out. I have canceled dentist and doctors appointments because we are understaffed and I could not take the day off. I have come to work exposing children to a stomach virus because too many people were already out for that day. And once in a while, I would be willing to put up with this, but it has been an ongoing problem for the past 4 years, long before the hiring crisis after COVID-19.

And I know I am not the only one who feels this way. I have noticed the people I work with—good, dependable workers with the same passion as I have for this line of work—get worn down by the rigorous work schedule. Some of them have been here over 20 years with experience no new hire could ever replace. I've watched them take work home—unpaid—to prepare for the coming week. I have watched them buy items for their classroom—without being reimbursed—to make sure our children have a little extra magic in their learning experience. And unfortunately, I have had many talks with them about finding a new career, and have them echo my concerns and reasons for why I am leaving.

The biggest problem, however, is I cannot support myself on my own for \$13 an hour. The house that I live in is over 70 years old, and to repair it on my own would put me in years of debt that this job alone could not cover. I can skip a meal to save money, I can run on empty in my gas tank or walk to work if need be, I can stay home on a Friday night instead of going to the mall with friends. However, I find it hard when my sister—who is making \$22 an hour without college education, without having to do 12 hours of mandatory classes for the state, without having to pay for 5 background checks, without having to pay for a physical every 2 years, but with health insurance and retirement—works the same number of hours I do with half of the responsibility outside work.

I understand it is hard to ask families to pay more for tuition. I know I am not the only household struggling, and I do not know how families can afford child care for not just one but multiple children. That's why I know that more children in the classroom has been pushed. After all, according to the state, a teacher can legally watch 10 3-5 year olds—6 if they're a 2-year-old. And having 2 teachers in the room means, theoretically, we should be able to have 20 kids in a room. It looks like unrealized profit. It is an idea easier said than done. The one time I had 17

kids in the classroom back in 2019, I was so stressed over being in such a tiny space with multiple children—some that needed more help than I could give them on my own—that both I and the teacher in my room considered quitting. Mind you, we were only being paid \$9.75 an hour at the time, but my answer would still be the same at \$13 an hour. And it would still be the same at \$15 an hour. You cannot offer quality childcare when both your teachers are unequipped to deal with 20 kids at a time and children are not getting the proper care they need because they are competing for attention with the teachers in the room.

Raising tuition feels like an impossible task. However, I want to reference the water crisis the west is now facing. If you do not know, the groundwater in the western states is dangerously low, so they are proposing a water tax on the farmers who grow our crops to help water conservation. People have argued that this will raise grocery prices, which is true. However, it will be hard to grow crops without water when it runs out and prices go up because we have to rely on other countries for food, leaving our farmers high and dry. Consider teachers as your crop. Without accurately compensating your teachers for their work while adding to their workload, surely all your teachers will quit, and then where will our families be left?

It is, unfortunately, too late to change my mind. However, you have some good people here, people you are in jeopardy of losing. I pray that you decide to take care of your teachers just as much as the families that come here. Perhaps some will leave because the cost is too high, but I know parents have echoed the teachers as one of the reasons they are keeping their children enrolled here. I don't want to see this place fall apart. It's the reason I've struggled financially and lived alone for the past 4 years. However, I do not see this center lasting longer than another year if more teachers decide to quit.

Thank you for taking the time to read my letter. I hope you consider my words, and understand that this is one of the hardest choices I have had to make, but it was one necessary for my future. All I can do is pray you look after your future as well, student and teacher alike.

Kristi Selbig