

# Community-Based Efforts to Open a New Child Care Facility: A Case Study

Believing in the Power of Play, Community, and Kindness

## South Dakota Child Care Workforce Study

Developing Practical Strategies to Strengthen the Workforce and Support Economic Growth

### Initiative Highlights

- New state-licensed child care facility for up to 60 children
- Drop-in care available to accommodate larger number of families
- Strong emphasis on community building and support

### Contact Information

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## The Panther Cubs Academy

Tyler Samuelson, the Visionary and CEO of Summit Contracting, a commercial construction company, is a leader in Platte's business community. When he realized Platte needed additional child care to meet the needs of families in their fast-growing city, he wasted no time in putting together a plan. He reached out to people he believed wanted to help the community and also had the necessary skills to expand child care options in Platte. Within two months, a newly created Board of Directors for the Panther Cubs Academy hired Rachel Lampy as the Director. "Once we had secured a director, that's when it really kicked things off because we didn't want to start something without having somebody good that was going to be able to run it," said Mackenzie Van Zee, Board of Directors Secretary. As the new Director of the Panther Cubs Academy, Rachel consulted with the Board of Directors about plans to build a new child care facility in Platte while she continued working as a child care provider in Pierre. Construction on the facility started in April 2023, and the facility doors were open to families in August 2023.

One year in, the Panther Cubs Academy believes in the power of play, community, and kindness as it operates at full capacity to care for 60 children. They're not stopping there, either – they're working to remodel the building to accommodate up to 75 children. "Our main focus is teaching children and giving them the stepping stones they need going forward into elementary school," said the Director. "Our mission is built on community. In Panther Cubs, it's a three-fold support. First, we have our team of teachers and staff, secondly our Panther Cubs families, and thirdly we have our Platte-Geddes and surrounding community."

## Community Partnerships

Initially, the Panther Cubs Academy Board of Directors bought a building to remodel for a child care center. When they discovered that the building was not structurally sound, they got to work build a new facility for the Academy. The Summit Contracting President, who started the conversation about Platte's growing need for child care, serves on the Academy's Board of Directors.





Through Summit Contracting, they built the facility at cost; and his expertise helped them to troubleshoot issues as they surfaced. He also contributed the idea for the Academy's first major fundraiser, which secured donations from individuals and the business community.

The Panther Cubs Academy has recruited child care providers through the Department of Labor, resources such as newspapers and Facebook, word of mouth, and connections with colleges and universities. When it is fully staffed, the other local licensed daycare facility referred high school students to the Academy to assist with filling openings. The Director also contacted the Platte School administrators along with South Dakota State University, the University of South Dakota, and Southeast Technical College to recruit child care providers.

## Benefits for the Program's Staff

The Panther Cubs Academy offers its staff six paid holidays and one floating holiday as well as a 50% discount on care for their own children. With the help of a one-time grant from the Economic Development Board, the Director's goal is to offer bonuses to staff that have worked at the Academy for at least a year.

The Panther Cubs Academy also fosters a warm, welcoming culture of strong support for both the children and the child care providers and staff. A committee of parents whose children attend the Academy coordinate monthly staff appreciation activities. The Director noted that one of her staff said to her, "I look forward to and enjoy coming to work, and I love the people I work with. It feels like a family." She said this makes all the difference.

## Benefits for the Community's Families

The Director noted that she closely tracks enrollment and families' schedules to offer care to larger numbers of families when able. "For instance, in our infant room, we have families that are part time, and their needs are on opposite days. So I am able to offer care to a greater number of children because their schedules are compatible. Families in the community know they can call and see if we are able to do a drop in for the day because this is another service we provide depending on our daily numbers."

## Supporting Strategies and Resources

- **Strong partnerships** – The Panther Cubs Academy Director and the Board of Directors utilize existing relationships and are constantly working to develop new associations with organizations and stakeholders to recruit child care providers and continue ongoing fundraising efforts.
- **Utilizing community-based resources** – Summit Contracting built the Panther Cubs Academy facility at cost. Platte's businesses and community supported a large fundraiser just prior to the facility's grand opening. The Director and Board of Directors also sought guidance from a well-established child care business in another small town to discuss facility floor plans, administration, and program implementation.





## Implementation Facilitators

### Fundraisers, Donations, and Grants

Fundraisers, donations, and grants have been helpful in getting the Panther Cubs Academy off to a good start. The Platte community showed strong support for the Panther Cubs Academy at their first big fundraiser, the 'Golden Days of Summer,' which included a banquet, a live auction, a raffle for four months of free child care, and a concert, an effort the Board of Directors may replicate.

In addition to hosting fundraisers and receiving donations, the Panther Cubs Academy also received a one-time grant which contributed to building the facility as well as purchasing materials such as furniture, classroom shelving, storage equipment, and playground equipment. In addition to these one-time grant dollars, the Academy received an economic development grant from the Platte Development Corporation, a non-profit organization of local community business members, and an infant and toddler grant from the State's Division of Child Care Services in April of 2024 to purchase additional materials.

Now that the facility is up and running, there has been a lot of discussion around the best way to use fundraisers, grants and donations to continue to meet child care needs in the community and the facility's needs to manage operating costs.

### Long-Term Planning and Consultation

To set the Panther Cubs Academy up for long-term success, before the Panther Cubs facility was built, the Director and Board of Directors toured the Blue Dragon Academy, a child care facility in Garretson, to learn what staff liked and what they wish they had done differently. They had many discussions that were integral in creating the Panther Cubs Academy floor plan. The Blue Dragon Academy put a lot of time and effort into their administrative policies and procedures and developing their own family and staff manuals, which have become the backbone of the Panther Cubs Academy manuals as well. Blue Dragon continues to be a resource for the Panther Cubs Academy.

The Director is also honing her leadership skills to set the Panther Cubs Academy up for long-term success. In August 2023, she began working with the Sanford Children's CHILD Services, one of South Dakota's five Early Childhood Enrichment providers. "They have been great with assisting with enhancing my own communication skills, especially when discussing hard topics with families to keep everyone on the same page and focused on the best interest of the children, families, and staff. The engagement with these providers has been great and a real inspiration to how I can be the best leader possible," she said.

## Indicators of Program Success

- **Full enrollment and a wait list** – “That’s our biggest evidence: that we are needed and that we are doing what we set out to do and are making an impact for the community,” said the Director.
- **Family input and feedback** – The Director conducted a survey of families requesting feedback, and families voiced no concerns.

## Considerations for Replication

- **Obtaining leadership commitment and dedication** – The Director noted that any similar initiative must have “the right people and community driving it.” Strong leadership is crucial for starting the child care conversation, facilitating fundraising efforts, securing key donors, and recruiting and hiring a qualified and dedicated Director of the facility. The Board of Directors ensured that it hired a director with the right credentials, passion, vision, and dedication to the program.
- **Conducting child care needs assessments** – The Panther Cubs Director initially conducted a parent survey to determine what services were needed and what hours those services were needed. She plans to conduct another survey in 2024 to connect with current families, assess their satisfaction, and ensure that their voices are heard.
- **Conducting ongoing fundraising** – According to the Director, any community wishing to replicate this initiative will have to pursue grants and other funds through philanthropy.
- **Fostering a collaborative and supportive community mindset** – Rather than seeing other local child care facilities as competition, the Panther Cubs Academy wants to collaborate with them. “We are trying to think of a way we can do something with the other child care businesses to make sure the whole town feels we are supporting each other,” she said. There has been discussion about hosting a community event with another child care organization in Platte. She also noted discussion about developing a plan with the local hospital to advertise child care for medical professionals to help recruit doctors and nurses to the area.

