

When 17 directors, Southside Christian Child Care & Preschool assistant directors and staff signed up to participate in the KSSLA, it was up to mentor Sara York to figure out how to manage this unusually large group. Representatives from the 15 facilities in Louisville met with Sara, including director Brenda Bowman, and it was clear that the group was looking for help with the same things other participants had - better communications, help with staff training, ideas to make their organization run more efficiently and effectively.

I visited two of the 15 sites and was impressed with the organization's philosophy and deep affection these women have for the children they care for, their jobs and their director.

"Operating this many facilities and caring for children aged six weeks to 12 years old are certainly challenging," said Brenda. "But it's a passion for me and each of my directors to provide a safe, fun, loving and educational environment for our kids and every day is exciting and so rewarding."

The directors refer to their sites by number, so I visited with Michelle Seabrooks and Kenya Cooksey at #17 in the southwest part of Jefferson County. It was naptime so Sara and I crept quietly into the office, marveling at the size of their building.

As soon as she sat down, Michelle said "I just want to tell you this is more than a job for me. It's my life and I am so proud to be part of KSSLA. There aren't a lot of opportunities for professional development for child care givers and I have grown so much by being in this program. Sara has given me insight on how to address problems and communicate with parents and staff - I don't want the program to end."

Michelle and Kenya said they appreciate being treated like professionals by KSSLA personnel and have grown closer to other directors by how much time they've been able to spend together at the forums.

"When we go there, we're not surrounded by parents, children and staff and can talk freely about problems and ideas we may have," said Kenya. "We've worked out internal issues, strengthened relationships with our staffs and learned techniques from participants around the state."

Brenda met Sara and me at Southside #3 where director Amber Paulley greeted us at the door. Again, it was a big, bright building with babies and toddlers playing and getting ready for lunch. When asked what they had learned from the KSSLA, Brenda was very frank.

"I realized that I have failed my staff. Conversations with Sara made me understand that I wasn't supporting my directors and that I must take immediate corrective action," she admitted. This has been a life changing experience for me and an incredible asset for our organization."

Both women praised the content of the forums and the knowledge they have gained from the break out sessions and books they've read.

"I feel like I have become a better director for my staff and more in tuned to my kids because of True Colors. Brenda gives me so much support but even more so now that we understand the differences in our personalities and how we respond to situations and others."

The number one problem all of the Southside directors face is hiring and retaining good staff. They recounted recurring firings and staff no shows on a weekly basis. Through conversations with Sara and interaction at the forums they found better ways to communicate with "problem" employees. They admitted being too easy on staff out of fear they would quit. Amber recounted a situation where she

was having problems with constant disrespect from four employees, and because she'd been taught how to be more direct, she confronted them and said if they couldn't improve they didn't need to come back from their lunch break. Only two returned but came back with a new attitude and respect for Amber.

Kenya, who was also at this facility as she fills in when needed, agreed. "I also realized that I had to set the example. If I'm on my cell phone or not straightening a room, why should they? So I make a special effort for them to see me doing the 'right thing' as their leader. The leadership discussions, role playing and KSSLA materials made me open my eyes."

Brenda and the Southside directors said more training like the KSSLA is desperately needed and they would love to continue with the program. "I just cannot stress enough about the lack of quality programs for child care workers in Kentucky. Teachers in school systems get constant professional development, but the women who work in hundreds of child care facilities do not and that's a crime. We are spending these formative years with children and we need the respect and support KSSLA has provided on a yearly basis."

Sara York weighed in on this concept as well. "I have heard this plea from almost every one of my participants. They have been treated like royalty at our sessions, given excellent leadership training and materials and come away from the experience feeling like the valued professionals that they are."