

The Children's Academy of Southwest Florida, Inc. manages four child care centers which are currently dealing with the problem of an archaic data management system. Our mission is to serve the families of Manatee County, especially children of the working poor and families in poverty. Paradoxically, as our centers fill with at-risk children who require all the time and effort we can dedicate to their development, many of our staff hours must be committed to manually processing in notebooks children's check-in and check-out times, meal counts, maintaining children's health records, updating parent information, and billing and payment accounts. Our nutritional staff must hand-write orders and maintain a diligent visual count so that USDA food supplies do not run low. Additionally, we administer various federal and local programs including Head Start, Florida Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten, and Teenage Pregnancy Program (TAPP); staff members must keep hand-written records of important information regarding the children served by these funders.

Several agencies oversee our operations, including federal, state, and local licensing groups. Our collected information must be accurate, timely, and current. Yet on a daily basis, rushed parents fail to check-in their children and that creates ratio issues in the classroom. Other parents check their children in to the centers at various times throughout the day, requiring constantly updated attendance and meal counts. We calculate that each of our four centers spends 15-20 hours each week on the combined manual tasks of attendance and record maintenance. No measurements can effectively calculate what that deficient in time means to children needing and deserving every minute of teaching time we can give to them.

Children's Academy of Southwest Florida, Inc. must devote as much time and effort into the education of at-risk young children as possible. As noted by Lee and Burkam (2002): "It seems quite obvious that a major way to reduce social inequalities in children's cognitive status as they begin kindergarten is through disadvantaged children's participation in well-designed preschool preparation programs" (p. 82). Therefore, our goal is to reduce the time our 80 employees spend on daily data management tasks and devote that time to the 1200 children we serve.

In order to accomplish that goal, we must install a computerized data management system that is networked between centers and shares appropriate information between office managers, classrooms, the bookkeeper, and administrators. An integrated system will improve our efficiency, effectiveness, and, ultimately, our economy. That translates to time, energy, and money that can go directly to more services for the children.

With a centralized database and the hardware to access it, we can eliminate error-prone manual tasks, and streamline record-keeping. In addition to attendance, health records, family and emergency contact information, and billing, we will be able to maintain employees' records and payroll. Other features will include computer-generated alerts to center managers when children are not checked in, allergy warnings to teachers about the children, and notification to parents when their child's vaccinations and physicals are due. Food inventorying and ordering will be simplified; a welcome solution for a nutritional staff serving thousands of meals each week.

While an integrated computerized system will streamline the processes and reduce the administrative burden on the child care staff at Children's Academy of Southwest Florida, Inc., the greatest benefits will go to the at-risk children. Less time will be devoted to timely and inefficient manual administrative processes and more time will be devoted to providing quality care for children who need and deserve it.