



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
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**MINNESOTA EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONALS RECOGNIZE INNOVATIVE PROGRAMMING**  
**The Minnesota Association for Family and Early Education (MNAFEE) presents the Innovative Programming Award to the Support on Site (SOS) Employee Engagement Partnership**

St Paul, MN, April 11, 2024 – The Minnesota Association for Family and Early Education (MNAFEE) announces an Innovative Programming Award winner. The award is presented to acknowledge MNAFEE's appreciation of contributions to children, parents and families and/or the publicly funded programs that serve them.

The Support on Site (SOS) Employee Engagement Partnership was chosen as a winner of the MNAFEE Innovative Programming Award for 2024. This is a collaborative effort that came about as Willmar Public Schools Early Childhood programs identified service gaps in their programs, particularly for working parents and those from diverse cultural backgrounds. An educator, and Spanish and Somali liaisons from Willmar Public Schools arranged meetings with the Jennie-O Turkey Store Human Resources Department to articulate the vision and emphasize the significant positive outcomes associated with early intervention and family engagement. Jennie-O Turkey Store shared the vision and worked with Willmar Schools to ensure family participation. Barriers were removed, trust was built, and relationships developed that supported families. The district became familiar with the protocols required to comply with health and safety measures, guaranteeing a seamless integration of the SOS program within Jennie-O. This collaboration laid a solid foundation for the successful implementation and ongoing refinement of the program.

The program was launched in 2020 on a trial basis. It has grown into a program with visits two to three times per month and quarterly family events. In the past two years, family events have been added to visits to the work site. Jennie-O Turkey Store supports bi-monthly lunchroom sessions which connects families to resources, and enhances ties with Willmar Public Schools. This initiative allows employers to give back to their employees and support family networks within and beyond the workplace. Jefferson Learning Center co-sponsors events with Jennie-O and community bonds are fostered through school supply giveaways and family-oriented events at child-friendly locations. Numerous children have enrolled in the Dolly Parton Imagination Library, parents have increased awareness of community and educational services, and family engagement in education is strengthened. Approximately 100 families have benefited from participation in Dolly Parton's Imagination Library. Co-sponsored events that have attracted significant participation, with up to 100 families from Jennie-O attending each event.

Evidence of the program's impact is clear. Upon arrival at Jennie-O, the educational team, composed of teachers and cultural liaisons, is consistently sought out particularly when employees require assistance. Children experience enhanced social integration and a sense of belonging through increased participation in community events. Parents are more engaged in community activities and their children's lives, fostering stronger bonds and support networks. Moreover, newcomers to the Willmar area can readily access resources made available through the program, facilitating their sense of belonging. And educators have enriched their skills and their ability to support diverse learners through interaction with a variety of cultures. These collective benefits underscore the program's impact on the formative years of many young children through fostering a vibrant, inclusive, and supportive community environment.

The successful partnership between Willmar Public Schools early childhood programs and Jennie-O Turkey Store is a testament to utilizing an alternative approach to ECFE, which is family and culturally-driven. This would not have been possible without the commitment of Jennie-O Turkey Store and the efforts of Willmar Public School early childhood programs. It has made a significant impact in west central Minnesota.

The Support on Site (SOS) Employee Engagement Partnership was recognized at the MNAFEE Annual Conference in St. Cloud on April 11, 2024. Hunter Pagel from Jennie-O Turkey Store and Jodi Wambeke and Vicki Henle from Willmar Public Schools accepted the award.

**About MNAFEE:** The Minnesota Association for Family and Early Education (MNAFEE) is a non-profit association promoting parent education, Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE), and early childhood programming in public schools.

**About the Innovative Programming Award:** The Innovative Programming Award is presented to outstanding projects that exemplify the vision/mission of MNAFEE and are innovative approaches to addressing a community need through cooperation and teamwork amongst individuals and/or organizations, and use of resources. The project could be a one-time event or an ongoing activity that is associated with a parent education, Early Childhood Family Education and/or public school preschool in Minnesota. Its focus could be on children, parents, families or professionals.

**Nominees for the MNAFEE Friend of the Year Award must:**

- Include at least one member of MNAFEE
- Exemplify the vision/mission of MNAFEE:
  - Vision:** All families have access to comprehensive, high quality parent education and early childhood programming in public schools.
  - Mission:** The mission of Minnesota Association for Family and Early Education (MNAFEE) is to promote, advocate for, and strengthen parent education, Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE), and early childhood programming in public schools.
- Address a community need
- Demonstrate cooperation between individuals and/or organizations
- Enhance the lives of young children, parents, families or professionals