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Linda Vukelich
651-278-4241

MINNESOTA EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONALS RECOGNIZE INNOVATIVE PROJECT
The Minnesota Association for Family and Early Education (MNAFEE) to present the Innovative Programming Award to PEERFECT Connections on August 4, 2022

St Paul, Minn., August 4, 2022 – The Minnesota Association for Family and Early Education announced the Innovative Programming Award winner today. 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.

PEERFECT Connections was chosen as winner of the Innovative Programming Award for 2022. PEERFECT Connections and was developed by Dr. Susan Walker at the University of Minnesota. Ms. Walker says PEERFECT stands for *Parenting and Early Educators are Really Fabulous at Electronic Communications and Technology*, but honestly, the group has played with other words to fit the letters!

It started as a way for educators to support each other as they were integrating technology into their practice at the beginning of COVID in 2020 and has evolved into the "ECFE for educators". In the spring of 2020, while trolling Friends of Family Education on Facebook, Dr. Walker saw various questions being posed about how to 'do' ECFE online and tossed out the idea of getting together via Zoom. The first meeting was May 8, 2020. At the end of that meeting there was enthusiasm to continue and the weekly format was started...actually for the first 5 months the group met twice a week to accommodate schedules so that more could attend. Each meeting is videotaped with group permission and posted on a YouTube playlist so that others can listen to the conversation.

The effort is collaborative. The Friends of Family Education page on Facebook has been a good vehicle for posting the Friday "events." and the YouTube video link. The University of Minnesota Zoom account enabled more than 15 minutes of meeting time. MNAFEE invited Dr. Walker to present a workshop in the fall of 2020, which built on the spirit of community that the meetings possess. Dr. Walker says there were minimal resources needed to get the project moving, and "really it's the people. Those who attend, their energy, commitment, compassion, support to each other, humor and incredible experience is the engine".

The success of PEERFECT Connections can be attributed to having a consistent time, link, format...all this built trust. Also, the agenda flowed from the community based on whoever is there, even if that means 2 people or 22. Participants have seen the value of the group through the pandemic; ECFE varies so greatly in its size and location and many voices feel isolated, even if they are in a sizable district. Dr. Walker found that for some it was THE support that helped. And as individual educators have cared to share their stories and resources, others have benefited by their modeling, courage, and resources.

As for what next? The plan is to simply continue as is. As long as there is energy and interest to be there for each other as educators. A retreat took place a couple weeks ago providing an in person experience as an extension. Dr. Walker says, "In a way, PEERFECT Connections is the yin to the MNAFEE conference yang. As the conference is a significant presence for professional learning and development, PEERFECT Connections offers complementary continuing in the professional with major emphasis on personal plus community".

Heather Cline, nominator of PEERFECT Connections for the Innovative Programming Award sums it up, "PEERFECT Connections is one of the bright lights that came out of the pandemic and Susan is a bright light to all the educators involved".

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

PEERFECT Connections was recognized at the MNAEFEE August 4 Board Meeting.