

BOARD MEMBER SPOTLIGHT:

Dannette Smith

Chief Executive Officer, Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services



Q: Was there a moment or event that inspired you to enter the early childhood education profession?

A: I entered the early childhood education arena inadvertently. Through a series of career advancement opportunities, I found myself working for a non-profit early education program called the Center for New Horizons, the largest subsidized agency in the city of Chicago. At that time, there were 702 subsidized ECE slots and 102 full day Head Start slots. The program was innovative in that the centers were embedded in the communities, most often in the public housing communities throughout the city. The curriculum was Afrocentric and focused on parent/child relationships, cultural heritage, and community engagement.

As the VP of Center for New Horizons, I was responsible for overseeing all programs. I thoroughly loved working in early childhood programs because I was able to see firsthand how instrumental early childhood programs can be as they serve to form a solid foundation for a child's educational attainment. The staff and I often would receive feedback from the kindergarten programs at the various feeder schools on the Southside of Chicago. One of the best commendations we would receive was that the children were more than prepared with their basic skills and well-positioned to begin a kindergarten curriculum.

Q: When did you first learn about / become involved with CCAoA?

A: A Child Care Aware® of America board member approached me; she believed that my practical experience and expertise would be an asset to the board. She also appreciated my passion for these types of programs. While I lead a state agency, I am still a social worker at heart. I personally felt that joining the board would allow me a unique opportunity not only to learn about the state of early childhood education in the country, but also to be a part of a group where thought partners and peers could share best practices for both theory and application in early childhood programming.

Q: What aspect(s) of early care and education are you most passionate about?

A: Center-based classroom settings excite me, as well as the ability to work directly with parents to enhance skills, as both are vital to improving educational outcomes for children. Additionally, opportunities

for technology utilization, foreign language development, as well as being able to provide exposure to innovative experiences for parents are very important. Once you get parents and guardians on board, it allows for greater engagement of children and families.

In Nebraska, we are working on an early childhood education continuum. As part of this work, we expect to involve interns and other young people to garner early interest and exposure to the many career opportunities within ECE. I believe when you can be creative in ways that enhance and embellish programming and work with center directors to provide necessary tools to support more than the minimal standard, outcomes can and will be improved exponentially for families.

Q: From your perspective, what is the single most important step we can take to build a better child care system?

A: Early childhood education is and will continue to be a necessary staple for communities. Aspiring professionals should consider this career path as one that provides stability and longevity. However, paying classroom teachers a wage that allows them to be able to support their families, as well as incentivizing credentialing/degree attainment, is necessary to allow these professionals to grow and develop. Buy-in for early childhood education is needed, so that legislators and others involved with setting pay rates understand the positive impact of retaining passionate and competent educators in this field. The ability to retain ECE staff should be viewed as an economic and educational imperative.



Welcome to the CCAoA Board, Dannette!

To learn more about CCAoA's Leadership, visit childcareaware.org/leadership.

