

August 31, 2020

SCHOOL SPOTLIGHT | RED CABOOSE CHILD CARE CENTER

Red Caboose Child Care Center adapts to COVID-19 pandemic with eye on future new home

PAMELA COTANT For the State Journal 16 hrs ago



Jason Anderson, the new executive director of Red Caboose Child Care Center, says: "We are adapting and improving what we do to keep up with challenges that COVID-19 is presenting families and businesses in our community."

ANDY MANIS, FOR THE STATE JOURNAL

As the new executive director at the Red Caboose Child Care Center, Jason Anderson is managing its response to the COVID-19 pandemic while looking ahead to better times when the organization moves to a new location.

Anderson came on board Aug. 3, about seven weeks after the center reopened after closing because of the pandemic.

“Change is our new normal now,” Anderson said. “We are adapting and improving what we do to keep up with challenges that COVID-19 is presenting families and businesses in our community.”

At the same time, Red Caboose is on track to move to a new location at the corner of East Washington Avenue and Sixth Street. The current timeline is for a grand opening in the fall of 2022 when the center also will celebrate its 50th anniversary.

The project is in partnership with Movin’ Out, which would operate affordable housing on the building’s second, third and fourth floors, while Red Caboose occupies the first floor, where it could serve 50 percent more children.

Normally this fall, Red Caboose would have served children up to age 5 at the child care center at 654 Williamson St. and then operated an after-school program for children in kindergarten through fifth grade at both Lapham and Marquette elementary schools.

Starting Sept. 8 this year, the center will operate its child care program at the center and a full-day program for elementary school-age children consolidated at Lapham. The children will take part in the online learning curriculum offered through the school they normally attend, supplemented with other activities organized by Red Caboose.

Two children who normally would be in kindergarten will stay in the 4K program at the child care center. It's a choice Mike Parsen said his family chose for Junia, 5, who had been enrolled at Lapham Elementary School and will attend there when possible in the future. The decision came down to wanting a place for Junia that will reduce her screen time and give her some socialization while her parents work from home.

"We really like (Red Caboose's) approach to education, especially at those ages, it is play and hands on," Parsen said.

Parsen, whose 17-month-old daughter, Rona, also attends Red Caboose, said the decision was made after considering other options, which included hiring a nanny and private school enrollment.

"We just did not want (Junia's education) to be completely virtual," he said. "No matter what option you choose is an experiment."

Anderson said Red Caboose has instituted a number of protocols. Those include having a staff member bring children to and from the classrooms after they are dropped off by families and taking the temperatures of children and staff each day at the entrance.

Cheryl Heiman, 63, began working at Red Caboose as an East High School senior 46 years ago as of last week. She is now the lead teacher of the 1-year-old program and has some other duties because of her tenure.

Because of the pandemic, she said, classrooms can no longer intermingle on the playground, and that was a time when staff members could share information.

“Staff morale is affected a little bit right now,” she said. “It’s tough on parents, too, as they can’t just come in to see how their children are doing during the day.”

Maggie Porter Kratz, whose 4-year-old daughter, Nora, had been at Red Caboose since she was an infant, chose to have her children, including 2-year-old, Jack, return to the child care center when it reopened.

Her husband works on site, while she works out of her home, and also caring for the children at home was difficult, she said. And, she said, the socialization of being around other children is especially important for Nora.

“There are teachers that have been there for such a long time. Our kids have been so well supported,” she said. “It was a hard decision. It is a challenging time, and there are so many unknowns.”

Anderson has more than 20 years of experience in managing licensed child care facilities and operations in the Madison area. He spent almost 20 years with the Wisconsin Youth Company, previously known as After School Inc. Most recently, he and his wife, Kim, were the operations managers at Cave of the Mounds.

At Red Caboose, 80 percent of the children receive tuition scholarships and other support because of partnerships with more than 40 local organizations. Tuition for Red Caboose is on a sliding scale.

Lower enrollment numbers because of the coronavirus pandemic make the financial assistance more of a challenge and it is difficult to plan because the number of admissions have the potential to keep shifting, Anderson said.

“The biggest uncertainty will be how will (the pandemic) affect the enrollment patterns,” he said.