**Good morning, everyone.** It is an honor to be here with you—the leaders who are shaping the future leaders of our community. The work you do is deeply needed, and I am glad to see so many of you answering this important calling at *Cultivating Strength in the Practice of Early Childhood Education.*

Everything… has a beginning.
 And leadership… is not always something we choose.
 Sometimes… it is leadership that chooses us.

There are moments when the role of leader arrives unexpectedly in our hands. And in those moments, we face a decision:
 Do we take control and step into that role?
 Or do we hand it over to someone else… without knowing if they will do better… or worse… than we would?

Sometimes we hesitate.
 We stop out of fear—fear of not knowing what to do, fear of failing, fear of entering unfamiliar territory.
 But in early childhood education, leadership is often a leap into the unknown.

### **The Leadership Test: Navigating the Storm**

It’s easy to appear as a great leader when the waters are calm, the sun is shining, and the waves are small and gentle.
 Anyone can hold the wheel of a ship when the sea is calm.

But the true test of leadership comes when the waters grow rough.
 When the waves rise high and the wind roars, you’re not just steering a ship—you’re keeping your team safe. You’re providing direction. You’re finding solutions while the storm rages.

You cannot allow panic to take over.
 Your job is to keep your mind focused and delegate tasks so that everyone knows what to do… until the storm passes.

A true leader is one who can cross those turbulent waters while keeping trust intact—with their team, their community, and their colleagues. Because it is in those storms that trust is not only maintained, but strengthened.

How does this look in practice? It’s not about having all the answers. It’s about being the anchor.

I remember when we opened our child care center. As many of you here know, things are not always easy in the beginning. We went months without a single child enrolled. My mom felt discouraged at times, but I didn’t give up because I still had another job while going to school.

Everything changed with the arrival of our first child: my nephew. Soon after, we had our first child who wasn’t family. We began going to the park, where we met other families in the community who didn’t even know this type of service existed. It was a surprise for them to learn that family child care was an option.

We explained how it worked, how they could enroll their children, and that they might even qualify for child care assistance. We gave them the information they needed to find the forms and who to call for more support. Through those conversations, our center began to grow.

I always tell my nephew he was like our lucky charm. His arrival was the start of our success, because over time, we grew to full capacity. That was my greatest lesson: sometimes leadership is simply about having faith and pressing forward.

### **Reflection #1**

Before we continue, I want you to pause and reflect.
 Think back to a moment in your work when the “waters” grew turbulent.

* What did you do to stay steady?
* Who did you lean on?
* And if you could go back, what would you do differently?

### **My Path into Leadership in Early Childhood Education**

Now, I want to share my personal story.
 I believe sharing our journeys helps us understand how leadership develops—especially in early childhood education.

My path into ECE was not a straight line.
 As a child, I didn’t dream of working in early childhood. I had other dreams—police officer, firefighter, astronaut.
 I liked variety. I liked trying new things.
 But I never had that one thing I could say: *this is mine.* I was good at many things… but not an expert in just one.

This brings me to a question I am often asked: *How do you find your passion?* The truth is—passion is not something you “find.” It’s something you cultivate. It grows through curiosity, experimentation, and the vulnerability of trying new things—even when you’re not sure you’ll be good at them. For me, early childhood education wasn’t a sudden epiphany; it was a series of small discoveries that grew into a flame.

My introduction to ECE came through my mother.
 She was studying for her associate degree in ECE and working in a child care center. One day, she told us she wanted to open her own family child care at home.
 Our family supported her. And I offered to help—learning more about ECE along the way.

At the time, I was a bit lost—studying abroad with no clear direction.
 I decided to take a couple of ECE classes, not knowing they would change my life.

I remember learning about child development theorists. I was fascinated—not only to understand children, but also myself. Why I thought the way I did. Why I made certain decisions.
 That became the foundation of my passion.

At first, I wasn’t someone who spoke much. I was introverted, reserved, and had trouble networking. I needed a push to work in groups.
 But I had instructors who encouraged me, saw my potential, and created a safe space for me to grow.

Something interesting happened—I became the “tech guy” in my classes. If a video didn’t play, a cable was loose, or the computer wouldn’t connect, I fixed it.
 That was how I showed up—how I built relationships and demonstrated value.

Eventually, that led to being hired as an Educational Assistant at MATC, helping integrate technology into ECE classes.
 That… was my first moment of leadership.
 I didn’t plan it. I didn’t seek it. Leadership found me.

### **Reflection #2**

Before we move on, think about this:

* Did you step into leadership because you pursued it… or because it landed in your lap?
* How has that shaped the kind of leader you are today?

### **Leadership as Collaboration, Not Competition**

During my master’s program, I had a moment of deep learning that completely reshaped my view of leadership—and I believe it’s crucial for our profession.

I want to take a moment to recognize someone who opened the path to this new route of leadership for me. This person gave me a connection that allowed me to take on leadership roles in several projects. We both helped each other grow, learn, and discover new things. We collaborated, encouraged one another, and found our own paths.

Today, we continue to support each other. This very event is the product of that ongoing trust.
 It doesn’t matter how different our experiences may be from those we work with; there is always something to learn from each other and ways to encourage one another on the journey.

Here’s the truth: leadership is hard. It never comes alone—it comes with responsibilities and the image of authority. It’s easy to want control over everything to reach goals. But that illusion of leadership is unrealistic.

Leadership is not learned in a classroom the way math is. Often, we assume that the authority we saw in a teacher or school principal is the model to follow.

I served on committees working to create policies and achieve big goals. There, I discovered that leadership isn’t about having the loudest voice or imposing your will. It’s about making sure *every* voice is heard.

In any group, there will be differences of opinion—and sometimes conflict. A good leader doesn’t ignore conflict; they navigate it. They find ways to reach agreements without weakening outcomes. And when agreement isn’t possible, they ensure the process is fair—whether by vote or consensus—so that everyone feels respected and included.

Leadership isn’t about “winning” at the expense of others; it’s about keeping the group together, even when ideas differ. True leadership guides through respect and trust—not fear or blind obedience.

At the same time, we must recognize that sometimes we encounter leadership that doesn’t reflect these values. In those moments, we have choices. We can seek compromise, but never at the cost of abandoning our responsibility to advocate for children. We can also make evidence-based decisions, documenting effectiveness to show why certain ideas must be upheld or changed.

For example, in my first year teaching 4K, I had a director who trusted the teachers. She gave us freedom to implement different incentives and practices because she understood that we knew our students best. That trust allowed us to exercise leadership—making decisions that directly benefited children.

Because of that trust, and a close friendship with a 5th-grade teacher in the same school, we created a unique collaboration between older and younger students. At first, 5th graders were sent to my classroom when they struggled to focus—but we soon realized that wasn’t the best approach. Instead, we turned it into a positive opportunity.

We began arranging visits where 5th graders joined my 4K students to read books, play at recess, join free play, and participate in special events. Likewise, my 4K students joined 5th grade for science experiments, movement activities, or celebrations.

What began informally became an enriching experience for both groups. The little ones grew comfortable with the older students, and the older students developed leadership skills as role models.

The results were remarkable: we built a positive school environment where students felt proud to belong. That year, there were no behavioral referrals to the office. Collaboration and mentorship strengthened the school community. And all of this was possible because we were trusted to lead as educators.

But there will be times when higher-level leadership makes decisions that go against what we know is best for our classrooms and communities. In those cases, we must be ready to organize, raise our voices, and support causes that truly defend children. No matter how small we think our role may be, we each can take on leadership. It begins with ourselves and is reflected in our commitment to children and families.

### **The Three Spheres of Leadership**

Leadership shows up at different levels in our field. For me, there are three essential spheres:

**1. Leadership in the classroom** In the classroom, we are leaders for children. We guide them, set routines, model behavior, and involve them in decision-making.
 When children help create rules and activities, they feel ownership, and that increases motivation.

Most importantly, leadership in the classroom is where we first build trust and attachment.
 When a child feels safe, heard, and connected to us, we create a solid foundation for everything else. That trust is key to better classroom management and guiding behavior.

Children who trust us as leaders are more receptive to our guidance. They know we are there not to control them but to help them navigate their emotions and decisions.

I’ll give you a personal example.
 One day, while teaching preschool (4K), I returned to my classroom during prep time after dropping my students off at music. In the hallway, I saw a former student having an emotional crisis. The principal was trying to help him get to the office for a calm space, but the child wouldn’t respond.

I asked if I could try, and the principal agreed.
 I walked up and simply extended my hand—without saying a word.
 When the child looked up and saw me, he took my hand, and we walked together to the office. I didn’t speak because I knew he wasn’t ready. He just needed a connection.

Once we arrived, I asked if he needed anything. All he wanted was a hug. After that, he was ready to talk to the principal and eventually return to class.

That moment taught me that leadership isn’t always about words or the perfect solution. Sometimes, it’s simply a quiet presence, a hand to hold, and the trust built in the past.

**2. Leadership among colleagues** Leadership also means supporting colleagues—sharing our expertise and learning from theirs. I have turned to coworkers who knew more than me in certain areas, and they have turned to me as well.

This creates a network of leaders strengthening each other rather than competing.
 Too often, even in our community, we fall into a scarcity mindset—seeing each other as competition. But scarcity thinking limits us.

When we collaborate, we grow together. Our communities benefit with stronger, fuller services.

Let’s do a quick activity to illustrate this. Think of someone at your job who does something really well—maybe managing transitions, creative art projects, or communicating with families.

Now think about how you could learn from that person. And also, what could you offer in return?

These micro-collaborations form the foundation of leadership among colleagues.
 It’s not about big acts—it’s about small acts of humility and respect.

**3. Leadership in the community / advocacy** Finally, leaders also advocate—for children, families, and providers.
 We take on the responsibility of being the voice for those who cannot speak as loudly. We build trust, communicate clearly, and defend the needs of those we serve.

And this is where the two spheres—classroom and community—intersect.
 The same trust we build with children in the classroom is the trust we need in the community. It’s about connection.

Our actions must match our words. We’ll never be perfect, but we must follow through, show up, and be as involved as possible.

We all carry many responsibilities in life, but being visible matters.
 Just as we are visible for our students in the classroom, we must be visible for our community members.

It is in these consistent, visible actions that we build the trust to be true leaders—both inside and outside the school.

### **Reflection #3**

Before we close, think about your community:

* Who do you see as an ally?
* Is there someone you’ve seen as “competition” who could actually be a collaborator?
* How could that collaboration serve the greater good?

### **Call to Action**

When you leave here today, I encourage you to do one thing:
 Say “yes” to the next leadership opportunity that comes your way—even if you don’t feel ready.

Because leadership is rarely about being ready…
 It’s about being willing.

Remember, everything has a beginning.
 That beginning may arrive when you least expect it.

Your goal—your “ending”—is not perfection.
 Your goal is progress.
 Its impact.
 It is the trust you build along the way.

If you stay true to your passion, your motivation, and your purpose… you’ll discover that the path of leadership is not just about reaching your own destination. It’s about bringing others with you—so you arrive together.

**THE END**