

PROVIDER SPOTLIGHT

MEET THIS YEAR'S EXCELLENCE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD AWARD WINNERS!



(left to right) Cherie Johnson, Shakira Waples, Aaronasha Bruton-Gasby, Janiece Sugick, and Ugochi Akinmoladun

Written by Stephanie Thompson/ Photos by Courtney Foster, DIEEC

July 2026

DIEEC is proud to celebrate this wonderful group of early childhood educators, recognized for their impact on children, families, and the local early childhood workforce. Each of these educators was nominated for the award. After accepting the nomination, they completed an application that was reviewed by an external review panel using a rubric grounded in the NAEYC Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators. Utilizing responsive teaching strategies, each winner and runner-up goes above and beyond to design child-centered spaces where young learners are empowered to safely explore, build confidence, and grow. Their partnerships with families and mentorship of colleagues contribute to building the educational “villages” our children need to thrive. Read on to learn about each of this year’s Excellence in Early Childhood Award recipients!

Cherie Johson

Winner, Family Child Care Educator Award

Cherie Johnson has 31 years of dedicated service as a family child care educator, currently channeling her expertise into her program while pursuing her Associate's degree. Guided by the core values of connection, consistency, and respect, Cherie fosters a predictable and supportive environment where children feel secure and empowered to learn from their mistakes. She is highly intentional in her teaching methods, successfully using tools like the ASQ and Experience Early Learning curriculum to track milestones and adapt her approach. Whether implementing low-pressure, small-group activities to build social confidence, utilizing individualized patterning exercises, or supporting military families with creative spaces during deployment, Cherie continuously adjusts her practice to support the whole child.



Cherie Johnson (right) receives the Family Child Care Educator Award.

Beyond her home classroom, Cherie is a pillar of the Delaware early childhood education community. She actively combats the isolation inherent in her profession by creating and administering a supportive Facebook group for local licensed providers to share resources, tax-tracking tips, and policy feedback. Additionally, she mentors future educators as a community partner for a local high school's child development pathway, stays engaged with professional organizations like NAEYC, and participates in ongoing DIEEC conferences. Cherie's impact is best illustrated by her care for second-generation families in her program and high praise from parents who note that her unique ability to deeply connect with every child creates a strong foundation for lifelong learning.

Shakira Waples

Runner-up, Family Child Care Educator Award - Next Generation Childcare

Shakira Waples exemplifies excellence as a family child care educator, bringing 13 years of early childhood experience to her high-quality program. Operating with a center-based mindset, Shakira shapes her classroom around consistency, intentionality, emotional safety, and independence. Her teaching style relies heavily on meaningful observation and adaptive practices. For instance, when a student experienced developmental delays in engagement, she broke activities down into small steps, implemented repetitive routines, and utilized visual cues to foster the child's comfort and peer connection. Her curriculum builds early math and literacy into daily life, capturing student interest through creative journaling and highly detailed, rotating dramatic play themes like a Jurassic dinosaur jungle or an Arctic research lab.

Beyond her day-to-day routines, Shakira makes a broad impact on families and the wider Delaware education workforce. She maintains respectful relationships with parents through robust tracking tools, mutual routines, and celebratory family events. She connects her program directly to the community by utilizing Child Find speech resources and partnering with local small businesses, such as children's yoga instructors. Deeply dedicated to continuous professional learning, Shakira serves on the DIEEC Early Childhood Leadership Board and uses her business consulting service to mentor new providers through the complex licensing process. Shakira represents the peak of professional family child care.



Shakira Waples (left) and family child care educator, Stephanie Jackson celebrate receiving awards.

Aaronasha Bruton-Gasby

Winner, Center-based Classroom Educator Award - The Preschool at St. Georges

Distinguished by a decade of experience and a newly acquired Delaware initial teaching license, Aaronasha Bruton-Gasby is a standout center-based classroom educator. Operating with the belief that play is the foundation of early learning, Aaronasha designs immersive, child-centered environments that foster confidence and language development. Her intentional pedagogy is highlighted by highly creative setups, such as transforming her dramatic play area into a realistic auto shop, complete with specialized vocabulary like “engine” and “inspection,” to naturally embed critical thinking and social skills into children's play.



Aaronasha Bruton-Gasby shares a joyful moment with one of the event's youngest attendees.

Beyond her classroom routines, Aaronasha serves as an impactful leader, mentor, and trusted advocate for families. She excels at building strong, reciprocal partnerships by establishing a culture of care, consistency, and professional transparency that parents rely on deeply. Her unique ability to combine professional rigor with genuine heart ensures that every student feels safe, valued, and excited to learn, establishing a powerful baseline for their future academic and life success.

Janiece Sugick

Runner-up, Center-based Classroom Educator Award - Delaware State University Early Childhood Laboratory School

Bringing an impressive 19 years of experience to her classroom, Janiece anchors her approach in the core belief that it takes a village to raise a child. Grounded in deep care, integrity, and patience, she builds a secure foundation for young learners while intentionally teaching them to face life's daily obstacles and disappointments with confidence. Janiece relies heavily on meaningful, responsive observations to adapt her instruction. For example, when observing a child struggle with separation anxiety, she created a specialized visual “safe place” schedule to help them process their emotions, and she utilizes structured choices—such as selecting a cleanup job—to successfully redirect children experiencing behavioral challenges.



All smiles! Janiece Sugick (far right) is joined by Dannaé Orisamolade (center), and Ugochi Akinmoladun.

Beyond the classroom walls, Janiece actively collaborates with families and the broader education community to strengthen her supportive village. She works hand-in-hand with parents to mirror positive behaviors at home, engages closely with center administrators, and acts as a collaborative teammate who elevates her colleagues. Described by her directors as an “atomic ball of energy” with a playful, interactive teaching style reminiscent of beloved children’s media icons, Janiece fosters a joyful, reciprocal circle of laughter and curiosity that ensures every child feels safe to explore and grow.

Ugochi Akinmoladun

Winner, Early Career Award – Delaware State University Early Childhood Laboratory School

Ugochi Akinmoladun exemplifies the spirit of the Early Career Award, quickly advancing from Teacher’s Assistant to Lead Teacher through her strong work ethic and commitment to young learners. Rooted in kindness and respect, her teaching is highly responsive to individual needs. For instance, she implements 5-minute transition reminders to build a child’s confidence, incorporates musical instruments to help independent children comfortably engage in group activities, and uses outdoor play to introduce science concepts.

Beyond the classroom, Ugochi has extended her impact by authoring and publishing a children's book on kindness to bridge the gap between home and school. She maintains respectful relationships with families, integrates evidence-based practices like purposeful free play into her daily routines, and conducts monthly family visits to support her community. Recognized by her directors as a nurturing leader who ensures every child feels valued, Ugochi truly represents the best of quality early childhood education.



Supporters celebrate as Ugochi Akinmoladun receives her Early Career Award.