

NORTHWESTERN STATE

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NATCHITOCHEs – Northwestern State University’s Child and Family Network is overseeing a project to improve playground facilities at Natchitoches Parish childcare centers for children who may not be getting enough outdoor play or exercise. An informational meeting and recognition event, School Readiness: Why it Matters and How You Can Help will take place at the Natchitoches Event Center at 4 p.m. Tuesday, Nov. 13

According to Nancy Alexander, director of the Child and Family Network, obesity threatens young children not only because of nutritional habits but also a significant reduction in children’s active play. The Playground Project developed tricycle tracks to support physical development, enrich the preschool curriculum and build literacy skills.

“We’re finding that children today are not learning to ride tricycles because of electronic toys,” Alexander said. “There are 4-year-olds that don’t have the leg strength to pedal up an incline and we have anecdotal evidence and research to suggest that kids just aren’t getting outside frequently enough. There is additional education value built into the improved playgrounds.”

Outdoor time, when well-planned, can provide not only for children’s physical development, but also promote literacy skills and enrich the curriculum, but playground equipment is expensive and must meet high safety standards.

“Licensed childcare centers rarely have enough funds for these expensive undertakings,” Alexander said.

Every licensed early learning center in Natchitoches is receiving assistance and funds to improve their playgrounds to meet the specific goals. Trike trails include traffic signs to increase literacy and teach traffic safety, vocabulary and communication. The master plan for the centers includes areas for shade and for science and music enrichment. Provisions for infants and toddlers to benefit from being outdoors is also included in the plan.

The Playground Project and other initiatives are funded by donations from local businesses under the Louisiana School Readiness Tax Credit, which was established in Louisiana in 2008 to support quality early child care and education. The school Readiness Tax Credit provides a dollar-for-dollar refundable tax credit of up to \$5,000 for donations to child care resource and referral agencies such as the NSU Child and Family Network. Those agencies are contracted by the Louisiana Department of Education to provide information and guidance to families and child care providers to help build quality early learning programs. The

Northwestern State University Child and Family Network, headquartered in Shreveport, has served as the contracted agency for northwest Louisiana since 1999.

Funds from the Louisiana School Readiness Tax Credit are used to help centers upgrade their programs through training to improve staff effectiveness, learning materials, supplies and training to implement developmentally appropriate curricula and other efforts to improve the school readiness of children in northwest Louisiana. These goals are in keeping with statewide efforts to improve school readiness and education in Louisiana.

All businesses are eligible to participate in this tax credit program and can make contributions to the NSU Child and Family Network through the NSU Foundation. A donation to the Child and Family Network is a state tax credit, not a deduction. A tax credit reduces the taxes paid, dollar-for-dollar, in contrast to a tax deduction that only lowers taxable income. Furthermore, it is a refundable tax credit so that if the credit exceeds the tax burden, then the business can receive a check for the difference.

Information on contributing to the NSU Child and Family Network is available by contacting Alexander at (318) 677-3155 or nancya@nsula.edu or by contacting NSU Director of Development Jill Bankston, CFRE, at (318) 357-4241 or bankstonj@nsula.edu.