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# VOICES FROM THE FIELD

Christina Cultural Arts Center -  
Early Childhood Education Arts Academy



## Where Performance Pays Off in the Community



DELAWARE INSTITUTE FOR  
Excellence in  
Early Childhood

*Interview by Lin Nordmeyer*

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*Shysheika Edwards,  
ECEAA's educational  
director*

Market Street is a hub for Wilmington's cultural assets, with The Grand, The Queen, and The Playhouse on Rodney Square all located within a five block radius. Anchoring this lineup is the Christina Cultural Arts Center (CCAC), an integrated arts and academic program that uses the power of art to promote school success for Wilmington's youth, the most crucial asset for the city's future.

A part of CCAC's work is teaching and caring for the community's youngest members through the Early Childhood Education Arts Academy (ECEAA). The program serves three-year-olds through five-year-olds and employs the fine arts to teach educational concepts.



*ECEAA's community-integrated curriculum encourages creative learning and skill development, as shown in the photos above.*

Equally as important, the celebrations bring together the community. The academy provides its students a quality education with family engagement at the heart of their work. Their enrollment includes ECAP slots which provide state funding to programs, helping families living in poverty.

"Art is another teaching tool," said Shysheika Edwards, ECEAA's educational director. "We know the brain is developing quickly during the early years. Drama, dance, music, and art help us better address and connect with a child's potential."

This integration plays out in a lot of different ways. For example, educators use rhythm sticks to teach math, counting, and music concepts/notes. They utilize songs to teach social and emotional skills by acting out scenarios. When singing the "Going on a Bear Hunt" song, children express curiosity and fear while exploring movement and learning sequences.

In addition to the activities throughout the day, students participate in dedicated music and art classes during the week, culminating in three performances to celebrate Kwanzaa, Black History Month, and graduation.

"These performances teach children to work in larger groups, build confidence, and follow directions," said Shysheika. "The shyest students find their voice."

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ECAP funding requires the program to work toward Head Start standards. These standards, in part, focus on family engagement. Shysheika partners with Daphne Edwards, family services coordinator, who supports families through home visits.

"We empower parents through many initiatives," said Daphne. "Parents participate in the policy council, so they are invested in the program. We want them to know that their presence matters in children's lives."

To this end, the academy builds partnerships with families that often extend to many generations of the same family.

"We serve as a resource when a family has a need," said Daphne. "We are who they call." Shysheika echoes her thoughts. "We build a bond with a purpose. They know we are here to build a community founded on respect."



*Students at ECEAA are constantly encouraged to express themselves through a number of lessons and activities that enrich their creativity and individuality.*



*The center's various community and family programs involve self-care treatment events, dance classes, and more.*



*ECEAA parents are highly-involved and encouraged to participate in Head Start and ECAP initiatives, such as policy council.*