Health and Human Services

Iowa Department of Health And Human Services

CHILD CARE CENTER ANNUAL EVALUATION

Name of Center: Spring Ahead Learning Center

Provider No.: 18223

Address: 215 Clark ST, Lime Springs, IA, 52155

County: Howard

Director's Name: Sonda Stephens

On-Site Supervisor: Marissa Suess

Phone Number: 5635668058

E-Mail: springaheadlc@hotmail.com

HHS Visit Date: 03/02/2026

Licensing Period: 04/01/2025 to 04/01/2027

Fire Inspection:

Date Inspected: 10/14/2024

Comments:

Report Visit Type:

- [ ] PTO
- [X] Licensing Visit
- [ ] Drop In
- [ ] Administrative Change

License Type:

- [X] Full
- [ ] Provisional

Quality initiative:

- [ ] Accrediation

Program Duration:

- [X] Year-Round
- [ ] School Year
- [ ] Summer Only

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HOURS:	*Year-round*	*School-Year*	*Summer Only*
Sunday			
Monday	5:00 AM to 6:00 PM		
Tuesday	5:00 AM to 6:00 PM		
Wednesday	5:00 AM to 6:00 PM		
Thursday	5:00 AM to 6:00 PM		
Friday	5:00 AM to 6:00 PM		
Saturday			

Program Population Served:

- [X] Infant(0-<24 Months)
- [X] Toddler
- [X] PreSchool
- [X] School Age
- [ ] All Ages

LICENSE CAPACITY	Infants	2 Years	Preschool	School-Aged	Capacity
General	12	12	16	20	60
Summer					0

1. Basic Overview

On 03/02/26 I made an unannounced off year licensing visit to Spring Ahead Learning Center in Lime Springs. I met with Sonda Stephens, the director of the program. Ms. Stephens was hired as the director in September 2024. She was previously employed at this center and was the on-site supervisor for three years. She has an AA in criminal justice, a BA in corrections and one year in business administration. Marissa Suess is the on-site supervisor for the program. She started with the program in June 2023 and became an on-site supervisor in May 2025. The center employs seven staff members.

The program is in a free-standing building. The program opened on 02/04/13. The center serves infants through school-aged children and operates Monday through Friday from 5:00 am until 6:00 pm. There are currently 38 children enrolled in the center.

The center operates out of the following classrooms, Cuddles (infants, birth until 18 months), Tumblers (18 months through two-years-old), Explorers (three through five-year-olds) and a preschool and school-aged room. An inspection of each room was completed.

Windows provide natural lighting. The rooms are decorated with the children's art projects, and posters to assist the children with the learning process, such as the alphabet, shapes, colors and numbers. The children's birthdays were posted.

The centers observed on the day of the licensing visit include library, Lego/blocks, table toys, games, puzzles, transportation, play dough, art, dramatic play, writing, math, science/discovery, woodworking, sensory table and music. Centers were arranged in a manner that allowed easy movement between activities, but it also allowed for clear supervision by staff members. Materials were in good condition. The materials are located at child level, so they are easily accessible

to the children.

The program uses a variety of resources to create lesson plans. The preschool class uses the Creative Curriculum and completes assessments on the children. Activities are developed around weekly themes. A lesson plan was available for review in every room. There is an Epson projection board in the preschool room.

There was a phone with emergency numbers in the classrooms. The posting included the poison control number and the center's address and phone number. Emergency fire and tornado procedures and evacuation diagrams were posted by the main program doors and outdoor exits throughout the center. A daily schedule was posted for each room.

I reviewed documentation of monthly fire and tornado drills. I reviewed documentation of monthly playground inspections. The radon test was completed in July 2025. Results were within EPA guidelines and must be repeated in five years. The fuel burning inspection was completed and no concerns were noted. A carbon monoxide detector was on site in the Explorers room. Outlets were protected. The fire marshal inspection occurred on 10/14/24.

The program uses the Brightwheel App to complete daily sheets for children under the age of two. They app is used for communication with the parents of all enrolled children.

Cribs are used to nap for the infants. Mats are used to nap in the red and green room. Mats are stored correctly. Cots are used to nap in the blue room.

The program does participate in the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP). The program provides breakfast, lunch and an afternoon snack. Three staff members rotate turns cooking for the program. All staff members have taken the food training through CACFP. The program uses a monthly rotation of menus. Changes to the menu were noted. Menus and allergies were posted. The program serves the children their food dished out. Family style is not used.

I observed the kitchen to be clean and organized. There is a dishwasher and two small sinks available in the kitchen to wash dishes. There is an industrial refrigerator and an upright freezer and thermometers were present. Food items were stored according to NHSPS guidelines.

In the infant room the parents provide the formula and the center provides baby food and cereal. Bottles are washed in the room using the three-step method. There is a refrigerator in the infant room and a thermometer was present.

The center uses bleach and water to sanitize the food tables and disinfect the changing tables. Bleach bottles are clearly labeled. In the Red room the staff member uses Lysol Disinfecting Spray on the mats. The mats must be cleaned with soap and water prior to sanitizing them. Handwashing procedures were posted near all the sinks and diaper changing procedures were posted near all the diaper changing tables. I observed diaper changes in the infant room. Staff members were only washing the hands of the youngest infants with wet wipes. I explained that all children must have their hands washed with soap and water. This was corrected for all the diaper changes that followed. This was corrected.

The parent information is located near the entrance door. The mandatory reporter, childcare consultant and the handbook availability were posted. The license was conspicuously hung. A no-smoking sign was posted at the entrance.

The center has three playground areas. The school-age children have a partially fenced in large space behind the center. Rubber tiles are used for surface cushioning. There is also a concrete area with basketball hoops and a grassy area. There is climbing equipment with slides and other activities. There are swings and a balance beam. There is a rope climbing piece of equipment. Trees are available for shade.

In the front of the center are two fenced in playground areas. There is an aera of the fence that is bent and Ms. Stephens has a plan to correct this. One is used for children who are two and older and one is for infants/toddlers. Rubber tiles are used for surface cushioning. Slides and playhouses are in both areas. There are small riding toys and a tree house in the infant/toddler area. In the other area there is a small climbing wall, sensory table, music center, teeter totter and basketball hoop. There is a bench and picnic tables for children to rest and trees are available in both areas for shade.

2. Identify Observed Strengths of the program

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The center was operating out of three rooms during my visit. The staff members in the two classrooms for the older children provided a calm environment and were patient with the children. In the preschool room the staff member held children on her lap and nurtured an upset child. She talked with children about sharing and she set a timer so the children could take times with a popular activity. In the room for children ages two through four, the staff member sat with the children as they ate lunch and assisted when necessary. She had great reminders for handwashing and assisted the children as they washed their hands. Positive redirection was used when necessary. She offered the children choices and modeled good manners. There were two staff members in the infant room and they had great teamwork. They were each doing necessary tasks without having to tell each other. They had a good routine for the children. Staff members worked on tummy time and rolling over.

Ms. Stephens states the center received grants and they used them to make improvements. They painted and purchased new educational toys, safety gates and wall pads.

Ms. Stephens states they had an annual fundraiser and silent auction with free will donations.

Ms. Stephens states the center has a good board and they have a good relationship.

Ms. Stephens states staff members receive free childcare using CCA funds. They also receive quarterly bonuses from Howard County Solutions.

Ms. Stephens states they may have field trips this year for children three and older. They may go to Cresco and hey will rent the local pool and have lunch there.

There is information about staff members outside of the classrooms.

Ms. Stephens states the center is a bus stop for Howard Winneshiek School district.

Ms. Stephens is a great fit as the director of this center. She has previously worked at the center and was an on-site supervisor. She has a great working relationship with the staff members. She is not afraid to make hard decisions. She wants to do what is best for the center and the children.

In the three-year-old preschool class the teachers do assessment portfolios on the children. And they use these assessments when they have conferences in November and May.

3. Identify the aspects that fall below the standard

109.12(4)b: Each infant and toddler shall be diapered in a sanitary manner as frequently as needed at a central diapering area. Diapering, sanitation, and hand-washing procedures shall be posted and implemented in every diapering area. There shall be at least one changing table for every 15 infants.
I observed diaper changes in the infant room. Staff members were only washing the hands of the youngest infants with wet wipes. I explained that all children must have their hands washed with soap and water. This was corrected for all the diaper changes that followed. THIS WAS CORRECTED.

4. Any corrective action plans, provisional license, and safety plans-steps to get into compliance

N/A

5. Special Notes/Recommendations

A full license is issued for the remainder of the licensing period. All DHS licensing standards and procedures must be maintained during the renewal period.

Targeted Assessment: Behavior Management:
I discussed with Ms. Stephens their oversight of behavior management related to helping childcare staff: 1) Understand

expectations, 2) managing frustrations, 3) monitor performance. Ms. Stephens states they have several non-verbal older children this year and they have witnessed more behaviors because the children cannot get their words out. They have a board member who runs a therapeutic play organization and she comes to the center and spends time with the children with their parents' permission. She then provides staff members with information on how to better handle behaviors. Ms. Stephens states they use a "tap out" system if staff members are frustrated or overwhelmed. If staff members are not comfortable talking with the director they can contact a board member directly. Ms. Stephens states she if she hears children crying, she will ask staff members if they need a "breather" or break. She states she talks with staff members about recognizing when they need a break so they prevent problems. She states they will also swap children to other rooms to give staff members a break. She states the staff members are open to changes and suggestions and try to be proactive.

Date: 03/03/2026

HHS Licensing Consultant: Becky Frost

Non-compliance with any of the mandated regulatory requirements listed above may lead to the cancellation or revocation of your Child Care License. Please take steps necessary to completely address each of the violations noted above.

Child Care Resource and Referral is an excellent resource for providers to access training options and support in your area. You can reach Child Care Resource and Referral at **https://iowaccrr.org**.