Louisville-based national nonprofit names new leadership

Sep 21, 2021, 2:11pm EDT

The National Center for Families Learning has announced new leadership.

Felicia Cumings Smith, Louisville native, long-time educator and education executive, will replace Sharon Darling as president of the organization effective Sept. 27. Last month, Darling announced she would retire from the Louisville-based, nationally oriented literacy nonprofit at the end of 2021. Darling founded the organization in 1989.

Smith’s immediate past role was as a senior director for the U.S. regions at the National Geographic Society. She oversaw the development and implementation of National Geographic's education strategy for rolling out the organization’s educational resources.
“I think this role with NCFL will be an excellent fit for me primarily because I think it brings a lot of the skills and knowledge and talents that I've learned over the past 20 years to one place,” Smith said in an interview.

A few key roles Smith has held include senior program officer at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, associate commissioner for the Kentucky Department of Education and assistant superintendent of Jefferson County Public Schools.

She earned bachelor’s and master’s degrees from the University of Louisville and a Doctor of Education degree and superintendent certification from the University of Kentucky.

Darling will continue to serve on the board of directors for NCFL. The board also announced that it created the Sharon Darling Innovation Fund, which will enable NCFL to test new family literacy and learning innovations throughout its national network. NCFL has raised $750,000 through board leadership to kick off the fund, according to a news release.

“It has been my greatest honor to work alongside so many hardworking, inspiring families for all these years,” Darling said in the release. “Never did I expect my life to unfold how it has, but, each day, I am grateful to all those who believe in the tremendous power of multigenerational learning. I am incredibly proud of the work of NCFL, and I know the next generation of leaders will engage families in education like never before.”

Darling and Smith have said they’ve known each other for several years. Smith was on the NCFL board for a “short time” starting in January 2021. She knew well before the search for a replacement that Darling’s retirement was relevant.

Smith learned about the search in April and submitted her interest to Koya Partners, the search firm hired by the board to manage the search. She was offered the role of the president the day after her interview about four weeks ago.

“I think there are a couple of opportunities on the horizon for engaging and tapping new networks that I believe I’ll bring to the organization and use those networks to help further and spread education solutions and get into communities where NCFL is not
currently providing any support or services to families,” Smith said in an interview about things might change when she becomes president.

Chris Larson
Reporter
Louisville Business First