



Our Deepest Gratitude & Next Steps: A Thanksgiving 2021 Statement

Today, Thanksgiving Day of 2021, is a big day in our community and for our organization. This American holiday is a day of deep appreciation for the food, community, and gifts we have in us and around us. It is also a holiday with complicated implications and some rocky, if not violent, roots. For Soaring Starts, this means it is also an opportunity to reflect on past actions and renew our commitment to growing a safe, strong, and accepting community.

From the moment of our founding, we have believed that *everyone* is entitled to a quality education and to rich arts experiences. Soaring Starts strives to foster a culture that is accepting, warm, communicative, mindful, and professional in *all* that we do - for students, families, and faculty alike. With your help, we have started to create just that. This year, we have built a community of thoughtful, creative, and mindful students and families. Together we have soared regardless of pandemic, weather, and more.

But the best part? This is only the beginning!

There is still work to be done, and this work demands big next steps to help secure a brighter future for our children. With thanks in our hearts, we could not think of a better day than Thanksgiving day of our inaugural year to share some of these next big steps with you.

Early this past summer, our Founder called together **The Soaring Starts Founders Circle**, a compensated committee of educators, advocates, and industry professionals to help us ensure Soaring Starts had more than just a strong start. This dedicated group of passionate experts dove right into the hard stuff with us, combing through our Employee Handbook, helping create inclusive policies and procedures, and brainstorming access points for our whole community. Once fall hit, we started to integrate the Founders Circle's work directly into our organization. Like anything worthwhile, this process took a bit of behind-the-scenes work and time, but from now until the end of 2021, you can expect to see many expansions to our website, in addition to several statements that define our organization and culture.

We would be remiss if we did not start this journey with showing a deep thanks for the very land we have had the opportunity to build upon, so today on Thanksgiving 2021, we publicly state:

Soaring Starts stands behind Indigenous Peoples as inheritors and practitioners of unique cultures and practices. Our use of land to conduct programming is seen as a privilege and not a right, and we hold deep respect and gratitude for all that served this land long before our arrival. We acknowledge that we are settlers on the ancestral, unceded lands of Indigenous Peoples, including the Piscataway, Nacotchtank (Anacostan), and Doeg First Nations, in what is colonially known as Arlington, Virginia. We value these peoples' unique contributions to our community as artists, creators, and innovators, and strive to bolster their often ignored voices in an effort to understand, repair, and grow. We acknowledge their grief over loss of land, life, and culture due to colonial practices, and remain open to their thoughts, advice, and concerns on how to best move forward as we grow and serve our community.

We have already begun to weave the above beliefs into our programming, starting with what we lovingly call our "Land Chant." This chant goes like this: "My body stands on this land, but this land is not mine. It's been loved and lived in for many years, so to it, I'll be kind." This short and sweet chant is designed to be thought provoking but age appropriate, is accompanied with movements, and every drop-off program does it with our instructors when discussing our rule about respect.

We know that some may view the above statements, and some more of our statements to come, as political, or acts that alienate certain populations and belief systems. We assure you this is the direct opposite of our intention. We have no interest in politicizing an environment designed for our youngest citizens. Our intention is to create a safe and welcoming environment for *all*, encouraging our community to work, play, and learn together with intention and respect.

We are so, so, **so** very grateful to each and every one of you that has helped in this journey so far. Thank you, thank you, thank you for sharing your child and your hearts with us. Every giggle, wondering, and "lightbulb moment" in our classrooms has brought us tremendous joy, and we are so honored that you have selected us to help your children soar.

We hope that you will continue to join us in our next big steps to soar together.

With deep gratitude, respect, and thanks,

Stacy Steyaert

Founding Director

Soaring Starts Early Learning & Arts

ssteyaert@soaringstarts.com

202-964-0860