

From Mars to TOPGUN: WINGS 2026 Puts Six Bold Child Care Solutions in the National Spotlight

Starting Point wins the Platinum WINGS Award as leaders rethink how the industry responds to its toughest barriers

SAN DIEGO, CA, UNITED STATES, September 30, 2026 / EINPresswire.com/ -- SAN DIEGO, CA — [DATE] — What can Child Care leaders learn from landing a spacecraft on Mars or flying into combat? At the [2026 TOOTRiS WINGS Summit](#), the answer was clear: when the pressure is high and the obstacles keep changing, progress requires new thinking, honest evaluation and the courage to act.



TOOTRiS Attendees surround Retired TOPGUN Pilot Jim "Guido" DiMatteo

“

The goal isn't to have the perfect plan...the goal is to adapt faster than the problem.”

*Captain Jim "Guido" DiMatteo,
Retired TOPGUN Pilot*

More than 250 leaders from over 40 states and Washington, D.C. gathered in San Diego to exchange proven ideas, examine what has not worked and find new ways forward. Attendance more than tripled from the inaugural Summit in 2025.

To challenge an industry that has faced many of the same barriers for decades, [TOOTRiS](#) brought in leaders who built their careers solving complex problems under intense

pressure.

Former NASA/JPL engineer Tom Rivellini, who worked on six Mars missions and helped pioneer landing systems that put the Spirit and Opportunity rovers on the planet, shared how tight budgets and failed missions pushed teams to abandon old assumptions.

“The biggest breakthroughs often come from accepting a smaller budget as a constraint that forces better answers,” Rivellini said, “not as a compromise that produces worse ones.”

Jim "Guido" DiMatteo, the most experienced TOPGUN Adversary pilot in U.S. Navy and Marine Corps history, challenged attendees to act without waiting for every condition to be perfect, then evaluate the results without ego.

"The goal isn't to have the perfect plan," DiMatteo said. "The goal is to adapt faster than the problem."

Their lessons reinforced the Summit's call to pair long-term advocacy with action leaders can take now.

"There's the long game and there's the low-hanging fruit. Let's do both in parallel," said Alessandra Lezama, CEO of TOOTRiS. "Let's take charge of change. Let's stop waiting for tomorrow because the system can't wait."

Six Solutions Take the Stage

In the months leading up to WINGS, TOOTRiS invited organizations nationwide to submit innovative ideas they were already putting into practice. Six finalists were selected, each receiving seven minutes onstage to present the solution and its impact.

Attendees then voted to determine the WINGS Award 2026 winners, with more than \$10,000 in funding and support awarded to help advance their work.

Platinum — Starting Point: Its Child Care Benefit Fund matches employer contributions with funding from the Ohio Department of Children and Youth, helping families afford care while simplifying participation for employers.

Gold — The Wells Community: The Well combines coworking, onsite Child Care, parent education and community in a model now being licensed in other markets.



NASA Engineer, and Mars landing pioneer Tom Rivellini speaks on about "Making the Impossible Possible."



Retired TOPGUN Captain Jim "Guido" DiMatteo hosts a roundtable talk with select WINGS Guests

Silver — Early Learning Coalition of Duval: Help Me Grow Duval, Clay and Nassau connects families with developmental screenings, Play & Learn Groups, provider support and coordinated referrals.

Bronze — Hello Nanny, in partnership with the Workforce Infrastructure Institute: The Career Pathway Launch combines accredited education, W-2 employment and advocacy to strengthen careers for in-home caregivers.

Honorable Mention — Child Care Aware of Kansas: The GO-Team mobilizes partners to help Child Care programs recover from emergencies, overcome local barriers, expand and avoid closure.

Honorable Mention — Valley National Group: Jump the Curve uses employer and private investment to develop near-site Child Care facilities, reduce provider debt and strengthen workforce compensation.

Moving Forward Together

WINGS also brought influential Child Care stakeholders to the same table. TOOTRiS invited Susan Gale Perry, CEO of [Child Care Aware of America](#), and Michelle Kang, CEO of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, to join Lezama for an open, candid discussion about where the field agrees, where perspectives differ and how organizations can move forward together*.

“Our partners may also be our competitors,” Perry said. “We may disagree from time to time, and we have to be transparent and honest about that and still move forward with these partnerships.”

Kang urged leaders to keep educators at the center of that progress.



TOOTRiS CEO Alessandra Lezama, NAEYC CEO Michelle Kang, Child Care Aware of America CEO Susan Gale Perry host CEO panel on Tech, Innovation & Strengthening Child Care



Tom Cruise, Maverick Impersonator Jerome Leblanc poses with WINGS guests and staff

“We should do everything possible to protect and support the amazing early childhood educators who work with children every day,” Kang said, “and enable them to do their work with joy in a way that honors and respects the skill and expertise they bring.”

Chris Cate, President and CEO of the San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce, reinforced why the stakes extend beyond Child Care.

“Employees throughout every sector of our economy cannot do the work they do if they don’t have Child Care,” Cate said. “If we don’t have a sustainable population of Child Care providers, we cannot compete with other regions around the country.”

From Mars landings and fighter jets to funding models and family support, WINGS challenged leaders to rethink obstacles, learn from one another and return home ready to act.

About TOOTRiS:

TOOTRiS is the nation’s largest Child Care platform that partners with employers, providers, government agencies, and Child Care Resource & Referral (CCR&R) organizations to strengthen local Child Care ecosystems, amplify the impact of community-based initiatives, and make care more accessible, equitable, and sustainable — empowering parents, supporting providers, and fueling economic growth. Learn more at tootris.com

* - <https://www.naeyc.org/>

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