

Annual Forum October 20, 2005
Making the Most of our Early Education Investments

Independence (Missouri) Public Schools: Jim Hinson, Superintendent

It's a pleasure to be here this afternoon. Please allow me to review the creation, evolution, and intelligent design of our Child and Family Learning Centers in Independence, Missouri.

In 1979, we started Head Start services where the school district is the implementer of Head Start services. We started a new program, now called "Parents as Teachers." In 1987, we worked with Dr. Zigler and the Schools of the 21st Century. As a result of funding from the greater Kansas City Community Foundation, we were able to start Schools of the 21st century. The following year, in 1988, we started two preschools, before and after care, and kindergarten. Now, what we have full-day kindergarten and child and family learning centers operating twelve months a year. All elementary schools operate from 6:30 am to 6:00 pm. In 1990, we started a Family Literacy Center and then in 1995, we partnered with the Local Investment Commission, which is part of a caring community's program that was established in our state by an individual who went on to become the United States Attorney General and adopted the program.

In 1997, we implemented Head Start services in five schools. What this means is the school district is the dedicated agency implementing Head Start services. During this time, the programs were only in five schools. We took a bond, levy or mill issue, if you will, to our voters in 1998 asking for the approval to go into debt to construct early education facilities at all elementary schools. In 1999, we not only brought in Head Start, but also the Early Head Start collaboration. In 2003, we started offering comprehensive Head Start services in all our schools so each elementary school provides Head Start services.

In 2005, we partnered with our Department of Social Services to try to prevent child abuse and neglect. Independence, Missouri has a population of about 113,000 and is better known as the home of Harry Truman. The city is also located across the street from Kansas City. What we found out is that reported cases of child abuse or neglect were happening to 4.5 children each day. In other words, substantiated cases were showing that 1,700 children were being abused or neglected each year.

The Missouri Assessment Program. Of course, we all have these wonderful programs in our states. These are communications art scores from the third grade. Notice the proficient line. We actually see our Head Start students in our proficient category nearing that of the state-level and in some cases higher than the district.

Today, 61% of our families are from single-mother households, 25% are on childcare assistance and the average family size is now 3.76. We're not going to talk about poverty training, but what we found was that our teachers didn't understand what was going on in the lives of low-income children and families.

One of the biggest issues is the staff collaboration and authentic assessment tools. This was a huge issue from our Child and Family Learning Centers. Our elementary schools are truly birth through grade five.

The building principal is in charge of all of the programs, birth through grade five. The early education through grade three is the focus that is aligned. Then we aligned early education after grade three with grades four and five.

This is one of my favorite pieces. Bailey is a little over two-years of age and she comes from a home of poverty. Bailey is writing to her teacher, and it reads, "I go to play in my house." She tried to draw a picture, but she's two-and-a-half.

After testing our own three and four-year-old kids, we found that their average vocabulary ranges between 300 and 1,000 words. These students are from low-income households. In contrast, children from middle class families' vocabulary average 3,000 words. This is quite a difference.

Early education, early childhood special education, before and after-school programs, Parents as Teachers, early Head Start, the family literacy component, the adult education, and the child welfare component: **all these programs operate in each elementary school under the supervision of one individual.** One of the things we've tried to do is eliminate bureaucracy so that a parent coming to us has one individual they deal with from the time the child is born, or actually pre-natal, through grade five. That's the Building Principal. There is also an individual in the building who is called the family-school liaison, also known as the social worker. That person is responsible for all elements of each family from the time that child is born through grade five.

Here's how we've braided our resources. We have received reductions by tens of millions of dollars from our state, so we've braided those resources in the programs that I just outlined for you. You can see the monetary amounts.

We do have parent fees for parents that don't qualify for any other subsidy. It's a sliding scale based upon their income. The district does not contribute any money to our early education programs except classroom facilities. We don't charge our early education programs for facilities, custodial care, utilities or anything like that.

Yale University evaluates our early education programs. We feel great pride and joy when the parents share their views of their children's potential for academic success. When a child enters an elementary school, their teachers do not know if they're funded by Head Start or Title I or if the parents are paying fees. The teachers don't have this information. We want to make sure that all children have the same advantages and expectations.

In Missouri, we have the early education curriculum through **Missouri PK standards and Show-Me standards.** Historically, in our state, early education standards have not been aligned to K-12 standards. I know that's not a shock to you. We've tried to align the standards so there is true continuity in scope and sequence.

In conclusion, regardless of where you live in Independence, from the time your child is born through grade five, you have a principal and a family school liaison. You have one site in your neighborhood and you have early education services; whether it's Title I or Special Education, whether there's a parent's fee, whatever it might be; it's in one location, at one facility. Thank you very much.