



WESTHOPE PUBLIC SCHOOL

HOME OF THE "SIOUX"
395 MAIN STREET PO BOX 406
WESTHOPE, NORTH DAKOTA 58793-0406
(701) 245-6444 FAX (701) 245-6418



Superintendent: Martin Bratrud
Principal: Christy Lee
Activities Director: Garrett Wible

Business Manager: Barry Trottier
Board President: Liz Tofteland
Board Vice-President: Katie Ogaard

1-13-2023

To: Senate Appropriations Committee, Senator Brad Bekkedahl, chair
From: Martin Bratrud, Superintendent, Westhope Public School
Re: Westhope School Best in Class Preliminary Observations and Analysis

I am writing this letter to share with you our campus observations and preliminary analysis of the Best-in-Class Program at Westhope Public School. I would like to preface my comments to state this cannot be considered data as our sample size is small and because the observations we have collected are only 1.5 years old. However, I think we can definitively say we see some positive trends emerging.

I will also add as a school administrator I am a proponent of early childhood education but also realize there had been compelling evidence to suggest that early childhood program designs in the past have limited impact on later school achievement. A Brookings Institute report from July 12, 2018 (<https://www.brookings.edu/research/does-state-pre-k-improve-childrens-achievement/>) outlines good data to suggest that NAEP scores increase through early and middle elementary grades then that impact plateaus in later elementary grades into junior high age. This is specifically cited to be caused by the onset of adolescent impacts, especially social and emotional issues for economically disadvantaged students and families. I can concede that data is compelling in and of itself. However, what we are learning in our observations brings another piece to these questions. What does Pre-K education provide for more long-term impacts such as graduation rates, overall literacy rates, and increased family engagement? Considering these factors, I have not found any research or data to suggest positive, neutral or negative impacts on student outcomes. This is an area I believe the Best-in-Class Program may be able to help us by providing more long-term data to see if there are greater impacts than just NAEP Testing results or NDSA assessment results. I ask this question because these are the trends we are seeing in our school.

Trend 1: We are seeing significantly increased family engagement through the programs developed and implemented in the Best-in-Class program. Our parental engagement has increased at least 100% because we, as a school offer more programming to support parents. We offer more opportunities for parents to learn about early childhood education and how they can be a partner with us and help reinforce reading, learning through play, and other opportunities in their home. I could brag all day on the work our teacher, Samantha Koons, has done to increase these "touches" that bring the school, the child and their home together through weekly and monthly activities and outreach. This motivates and supports parents with resources and knowledge to increase engagement and encourage learning both in the school and home, especially for economically disadvantaged families. This in turn increases exposure and



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opportunities for their children that they would not otherwise have access to. We believe this jump is due to our staff training in the use of the Ready Rosie and Waterford Family engagement tools brought to us through the Best-in-Class Program.

Trend 2: Literacy gains. In the past year our kindergarten teacher has observed a significant increase in our kinder student's achievement and mastery rates of literacy outcomes for all students. She noticed during kindergarten screening all students in the class have full mastery of their letters, and almost full mastery of sounds as collected by the Brigance Early Childhood screening tool. Compared to previous school years, the data collected shows a 22-34% increase in student outcome range compared to school year data prior to Best in Class being implemented. At first glance we did not believe the results and after just a week of kindergarten classes our teacher had to adjust and advance her students into more complex literacy learning such as blends and beginning site words. She even had more advanced students begin books that were at higher levels than students in previous years had started with. Again, I caution that this is not definitive data by any standard, our sample size is small and only 1.5 years old, but it is a positive trend that could not be ignored and caused our kinder teacher to adjust her curriculum calendar forward due to the unexpected, advanced achievement scores of her students. We believe this is attributed to the implementation of the Best-in-Class Teaching Strategies Creative Curriculum. A middle of the year assessment just completed in December, collaborates the beginning of the year results and has given us high confidence that advancing the curriculum was the correct diagnostic decision for our students this past fall. We expect to see similar results in a mid-winter assessment and end of year assessment periods based on teacher observation and daily running records.

Trend 3: Student social, emotional, and medical needs are also being tracked. As a result, we see a trend emerging that early intervention with speech, vision, dental, hearing, and physical screenings are helping the school and parents identify barriers to learning earlier. We have also noticed a minor trend developing specifically in the area of speech, whereby services provided last year and the first part of this year have allowed several students to receive early intervention to correct minor speech deficiencies, resulting in some students being considered for early exit from speech services. We are expecting the first student to be exited from speech services this spring. Early intervention is having a positive impact due to the training our staff have received through the Best-in-Class program.

Last, I would like to share a question that I believe will be answered in coming years. If we provide early instruction, will this result in literacy being attained earlier? And if literacy is attained earlier, will the impact of the onset of adolescent issues have decreased negative impacts on future student outcomes? Literacy is a gift that cannot be taken away from a child once attained, regardless of the impact of negative influences in a child's life. Can this gift ensure



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more students can disengage from cycles of poverty, abuse, substance abuse and other negative impacts from their childhood to ensure more students have the opportunity to be successful?

This argument is appropriately used for the transition to Science of Reading curriculum. Could not the same argument apply to early childhood education? I do not know the answer to that question, but myself and other educators would certainly like to know. I have yet to find research one way or another on this subject as it pertains to early childhood programs, but I have to believe that literacy attained earlier can only have a positive impact regardless of barriers to a child's ability to learn.

Literacy is the foundation of success for all children and the Best-in-Class program is starting to demonstrate trends to be a step forward to that end. Based on my teacher's observations, my principals, and my own, I am seeing a program that makes a difference right now. I would ask the North Dakota Legislature to respectfully consider approving this pilot program to continue to ensure good data is collected and analyzed to prove or disprove the trends we are seeing in the small scale now that may be the link to ensure future success of our students beyond adolescence and into adulthood.

Respectfully Submitted,

Martin Bratrud
Superintendent
Westhope Public School
701-490-4071