



Early Education Programs Set Young Students Up for Success

**New School-led Programs in Rural
Communities are Thriving**

A few years ago, the Homedale School District saw a negative trend regarding kindergarten-readiness among students. Simply put, students were not prepared to learn and be successful in elementary school.

The issue isn't specific to Homedale. Research shows only 51 percent of Idaho's students are ready to learn when they enter kindergarten. Homedale's numbers were 40 percent or below for three consecutive years, which was a big reason the district launched its own early education program that began in the fall of 2022.

The program, now in its second full year, has 30 students enrolled in the part-time program, with 15 students in the three-hour morning session and 15 others in the three-hour afternoon class.

"It has meant much more than we ever could have imagined," Homedale Superintendent of Schools Rob Sauer said. "Everything we have received, from the data points from the kids related to assessments to the anecdotal data, has been positive."

Especially the test results. The state requires the Idaho Reading Indicator (IRI) be given to all K-3 public school students. The IRI is an early reading screener and diagnostic assessment. Homedale's proficiency rating for kindergartners was 46 percent in 2022, but its results shot up to 60 percent in 2023. The difference? Those students had attended the early education program and learned skills and behaviors to get them ready to learn.

"The early education program means we are able to identify student needs early on and allows for us to work with them at the pre-K level to help set them up for success," said Christine Ketterling, the Federal Programs Director, Curriculum and Instructional Specialist, for the Homedale School District.

SUPPORTING EARLY EDUCATION

The Blue Cross of Idaho Foundation for Health (the Foundation) understands the correlation between education and health outcomes, so investing in early education makes sense for the nonprofit organization that is focused on giving back to Idaho and addressing the root causes that impact health. The Foundation awarded grants to Homedale (2021) and the Castleford School District (2022) to launch early education programs. It also supported the Nezperce School District (2022) with a grant to expand its existing program.

Castleford, located in a rural area in Twin Falls County, wanted to offer an early education program for similar academic reasons to Homedale. But there was another reason – there are no licensed daycare centers in Castleford, meaning parents must travel about eight miles to Buhl or 20-plus miles to Twin Falls for childcare or early education opportunities.

The Wolf Pup Preschool Program, now in its second year, has been well received by the community.

"We have had so many people tell us how grateful and excited they are about this," said Rachel Puschel, a teacher in the Castleford School District who also serves as the preschool project manager and EL Coordinator. "I think parents are comfortable knowing their

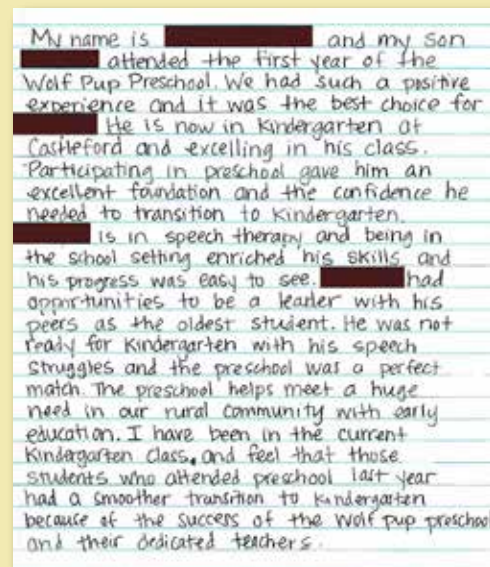
child is coming somewhere that is safe and to a place with a great academic background and doing something that is learning based."

Early education focuses on familiarizing students with school and learning how to perform simple tasks such as understanding numbers, letters, colors, etc.

"We do a lot of hands-on learning and skill-building," Puschel said. "We're doing a lot of practicing on being in a group and listening. We're working on those really basic fine motor skills that kids may be lacking when they come in."

The first year the program was offered Castleford filled 10 of the 16 available spots. This year, the half-day program is at capacity with two students on the waitlist. The program is for children ages 4-5.

"It hurts our hearts that we can't help everybody," she said. "We wish that we could have a full day so we could get more kids in." The district is exploring grant opportunities to increase capacity. It's considering adding 3-year-olds to the program and increasing the number of seats and offering a full-day program.



EXPANDING A GOOD THING

The Nezperce School District launched its early education program in 2012 as a part-time program as a needed resource in the community. Prior to its launch, students were being bussed 15 miles to a Head Start program if they qualified. There are no early education centers or daycares in Nezperce, a rural city in Lewis County.

The program began as a three-day a week program, but the Foundation's grant allowed the district to offer the program five days a week.

"The benefits are that our children come into kindergarten ready to go," said Marietta Leitch, the kindergarten teacher at Nezperce Elementary. "They know the routine. They know how to go to lunch, how to line up and where their classroom is. They have social skills. They come in knowing their colors, their numbers from 1 to 10, how to read and write their names. They hold their pencils correctly."

Leitch, who was the preschool educator before moving to the kindergarten role, estimates the early education program allows her to spend about eight weeks focus on kindergarten learning as opposed to focusing on skills and abilities students should have mastered prior to enrolling in kindergarten.

Misti Cook is the principal at Nezperce Elementary. She is working on her Capstone Project at Boise State University on the impacts of the school's early education program. Her research showed that the Nezperce School District's IRI results were far superior to a nearby school district with similar demographics.

"I was wondering what the difference was, and once I looked into it, we saw the early education program coming through," Cook said. "It really puts us far ahead because kids are learning the basic skills in preschool."

SUSTAINING THE SUCCESS

The three school districts use different formulas for continuing their successful early education programs. For Nezperce, it relies on a bond that has passed each year to help sustain its program. Homedale charges a sliding fee based on income levels while also relying on small grants and funding it receives from the Idaho Association for the Education of Young Children. Castleford is in a similar situation.

Nezperce Superintendent Brian Lee is happy the community supports the bond as it sees the value of having an early education program.

"I think a huge selling point is the overall actual financial gain to the community with having this is greater than the output of funds you put into the program," Lee said. "It's not just for creating future learners and future contributors to society, but it's the opportunity to open that time for that parent who may be potentially looking for additional income."

All three districts have staff whose own children attend or have attended the early education programs, and the districts can use that as a recruiting tool or a way to retain teachers.

READY TO START A PROGRAM?

Perhaps your school district is exploring the possibility of launching an early education program. Here's some advice from the three districts running exemplary programs.

"Don't get caught up in the idea that the K-12 system has nothing to do with the 0-5 (years)," Homedale's Sauer said. "That's just not accurate. It's our feeder system, and it's important for us to be engaged and support 0-5 partnerships because they will impact K-12 and beyond."

"And don't be rigid or locked into anything. You have to be flexible and nimble and adjust as needed," Homedale's Ketterling said, adding that districts with programs are a good resource.

Nezperce's Lee agreed.

"I would recommend those districts thinking about doing this come look at successful programs to look at those who have been able to launch it and do it successfully," he said. "You'll have a model to go off, and you'll have the opportunity to see what it looks like so when you're taking it to the community, you'll have a better background and understanding of what this might look like if they start it within their community."

"My advice is just do it – just start the program," Castleford's Puschel said. "If you have this need and the desire, the kids will come and the money and resources will come. You have to be willing to take the time and be willing to get started. You'll have to be willing to make sacrifices because the kids need it, your community and families need it. You have to be excited and say 'you know what, I'm going to take the bull by the horns and make this happen.'"

DISTRICTS ARE INTERESTED

The Foundation launched an Early Education & Schools learning series in late 2023 and early 2024. The goal of the four-part series was to inform schools and school districts on best practices for starting or expanding early education programs. The Idaho Association for the Education of Young Children served as the subject matter expert.

Interest in the series was so high that the series was divided into two cohorts. A total of 34 districts participated, proving there is an interest and appetite for early education in the state. At the conclusion of the series, the Foundation opened a competitive grant process for districts to apply for funding to help start or expand early education programs.

The grants, up to \$50,000, had not been awarded at the time this article was submitted. Learn more at www.bcidahofoundation.org.

Feedback Received by Schools from Parents

"My son loves it and is looking forward to kindergarten. Every week he comes home saying he saw the bigger kids and one day is going to be one of them and stay all day. I think preschool was a great introduction for him to see what school was like and also interact with other students."

"When it's Sunday and we tell our daughter she's going to school tomorrow, she has the biggest smile and excitement explodes out of her for preschool Monday. She absolutely loves going to preschool and giving her this avenue to learn and interact with other kids in town has been huge for her."

"My daughter loves school. She's made so many friends and her interest in reading has increased every day. She talks about the things she learns, the kids she plays with, and the food she's tried."



**We engage and collaborate
with schools and community
organizations to ensure
Idaho youth thrive.**



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