

Simple Fix Illustrates Effectiveness of KC Pre-K Cooperative

What does an undrivable car have to do with education? Everything, if it keeps a family from taking their child to preschool.

Administrators at Kansas City's Operation Breakthrough, a nonprofit that provides education, health, and parenting services to low-income families, faced just that situation when a student was often absent because the parents could not afford to replace tires.

"Once we knew what the problem was," said CEO Mary Esselman, "we were able to get a new set of tires and attendance popped up."

The solution was more than just a win for the family.

It was also a victory for the KC Pre-K Cooperative and a testament to legislative heavy lifting accomplished in Jefferson City by Shawnee, Kansas-based Aligned, a nonpartisan coalition of business leaders that works to improve education in Missouri and Kansas.

The cooperative, which includes 26 early childhood and K-12 partners, opened the early childhood classrooms in 2019 with new state education dollars. The cooperative has now brought in approximately \$10 million to the community through that education funding, which has added 700 new early education seats.

The new funding made school districts eligible for enough funding to create additional early childhood education slots equal to 4% of their students receiving free- and reduced-price meals. The aid funds one year of services to 3- and 4-year-olds.

Operation Breakthrough serves several hundred more students between the ages of 6 weeks and 5 years old through Head Start, and it is looking to add classroom space so it can take in more kids through the cooperative.

The demand is there. According to the cooperative, only about a quarter of the 5,000 Pre-K-aged kids in Kansas City attend free Pre-K programs.

Operation Breakthrough data illustrates the benefit of the cooperative funds, showing that 89% percent of its 2022 cohort entered kindergarten ready to learn compared with the national average of less than 50% for children in poverty. Assessments indicated that only about 5% of Operation Breakthrough's 2022 class entered the program prepared for kindergarten.

"So that's what I love about the cooperative classrooms," Esselman said. "We only get a year, but in that year, we can transform lives because we can send them to school ready."

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, Esselman said children are even further behind in areas like language and gross motor skills.

"I have always been an 'all means all' person," Esselman said. "So yeah, I know a lot of our kids will have barriers, but it's up to us to remove the barriers. The barriers don't mean kids don't have to be ready. It just means we have to work harder to remove them."

Data from this school year showed that kids in the cooperative classrooms advanced in the six areas measured in fall and spring assessments. For instance, kindergarten readiness in the health and physical development category increased from 35% to 95%.

Getting kids ready for school means a world of difference for early instruction, Esselman said.

“Teachers can actually teach kindergarten skills instead of teaching all those developmental readiness skills that we really want kids to go to school with,” she said.

Meanwhile, Esselman said, by partnering with schools “the kids are already seeing themselves as part of the school community” the year before they start classes. School officials facilitate that relationship by hosting parent nights and taking pictures of the 4-year-olds who will be coming to their school.

Operation Breakthrough receives approximately \$8,000 per child through the partnership program, but the organization solicits philanthropic support to fund wraparound services for these high-need 4-year-olds.

Last year, Operation Breakthrough raised about \$100,000 for those additional needs, which include a third teacher in the partnership classrooms. An anticipated bump in the state reimbursement could diminish fundraising needs, Esselman said.

“It’s amazing when you really have to cobble together multiple funding streams to make it work,” she said. But it’s worth the investment, she said, “because otherwise, the 106 children that are in those classrooms would all be coming in on the backs of the community.”

A small, but significant, change in state law allowed providers like Operation Breakthrough to utilize funds from the 4% provision. Aligned and its partners convinced Missouri lawmakers to allow school districts to contract out early childhood education services.

It took proponents three years to overcome some resistance within the K-12 community, but lawmakers approved the contracting language in 2019. The contracting provision was a game-changer because up until then, districts had struggled to draw down the money because they lacked space and qualified personnel.

One key ally in approving the change was state Sen. Gary Romine, a Farmington Republican, who served in the state Senate from 2013 until 2020 when he resigned his seat upon his appointment to the Missouri State Tax Commission.

A former high school teacher, Romine is a strong supporter of education. As a member of the Republican majority and leader on the Senate Education Committee, he embraced the idea of upping support for early childhood education.

“Understanding the need to make sure that kids have as much exposure to what it takes to be good readers or listeners, whether they’re read to or looking at books, the pre-K stuff just made a lot of sense,” Romine said.

He generally found his Republican colleagues receptive to the idea. “It doesn’t take a whole lot of explaining as to why the earlier kids get exposed to formal instruction and learning that they can do better as they go forward in school,” he said.

There were a few holdouts who fought against what they considered putting babysitting money into the education formula, but Romine said proponents neutralized the opposition enough to get the measure through the Senate.

Romine said Aligned Vice President Linda Rallo provided critical support in pushing the measure through by going into Senate offices to explain the value of the money.

“She had the personality and the skillset to talk with folks without creating a wall or barrier — just good communication, good education,” Romine said.

From what Romine has heard from his daughter, it seems as though the 4% program is making a difference in his corner of the state. She is a reading specialist in the Farmington school district, and “from my conversation with her,” Romine said, “Farmington has done a good job of working the program.”

As a cheerleader for the program in Kansas City, Esselman would like the state to make more slots available to communities. At Operation Breakthrough, not only do the children advance developmentally, but families also have access to healthcare, food assistance — and even occasional help with car repairs to ensure kids make it to school.

Operation Breakthrough stresses attendance because it is a strong predictor of academic success, and it also establishes good habits for the family.

“We know if you start building a routine where you're late all the time, then that's the routine that you're going to take with you to school,” she said, “and you might even miss the most important parts of the day.”