

Senate Education Committee Testimony
Joan Cavallo
Principal, St. Albans City School
April 1, 2016

I'm Joan Cavallo, the principal of St. Albans City School. I'm here to share our experiences this year with Act 166. I want to explain how we made this work for us and what we need to support programs like ours moving forward.

It was this time last year when Michelle Spence, our early childhood coordinator, talked with us about expanding our capacity for Act 166 and asked if we were willing to expand our PreK options to include a full day program.

For so many years I would listen to our kindergarten team tell me at the end of the year, "if we only had one more year...". All-day PreK would provide that extra year, without considering retention, we could just start earlier. We knew we needed to try. So my response was that we would find a way.

We were lucky, Franklin Central Supervisory Union decided to adopt Act 166 early. We were able to add the incurred actual costs to serve our three year olds. We had the infrastructure to support the demand for PreK. In fact, we have offered universal PreK for four year olds since 2001. We had established programs and partner providers. We had an Early Childhood Program that was ready to take the lead and make it work. There were grant programs and opportunities to support us. It was something we knew we wanted and it was time, so we went all in.

Michelle Spence had designed the full day Pre-K program to meet the requirements of the Federal PreK Expansion Grant, and using researched best practices. My role was to use the resources of the school to find a room (which meant moving things around) and make sure we could support our new students at the same level as our other 700 students. For us that meant busing, food and unified arts. Our request was that these would be St. Albans City School students, because that would give us the benefit of our investment.

We also wanted to learn everything there was to know about closing the gap for our students, so we applied to be part of the First School pilot. This program included every teacher being scored on the environment they create for children and the way a child sees the learning experience. When we called a meeting of all PreK, kindergarten and first to third grade teachers, they all wanted to do this. With that commitment, we applied and were accepted.

By May of 2015, we were concerned that our incoming kindergarten class would be smaller than previous years. We could have an extra Kindergarten teacher and a room. Michelle had a huge

waiting list for the all-day PreK, so we went for two all-day PreK. Even with the second class we still have a waiting list of eligible students for an all day program.

In FY 15 we had a PreK that ran two 10 hour programs each week and a 6 hour playgroup. They provided access to 36 students. It was a very high quality program, and we partnered often, but it ran independent. They didn't receive busing or unified arts, but they did get the universal breakfast program and snack we offered, and many students qualified for lunch.

This year, FY16 we are running 2 all-day PreK programs and three 10 hour programs each week. We are providing access for 77 students, 32 4-year olds have all-day PreK. We are working together and together we are looking at how to best close the achievement gap by third grade. Our full-day students are bussed to school and have full unified arts access. Our 10 hour programs get art or music but they do not get bussed. All students get breakfast, lunch and snack because we are a universal meals school this year and we receive the federal Fresh Fruits and Vegetables Grant.

As we look to FY17 we are working to make sure we can keep running 2 full service, all-day PreK programs and two part time programs each week. This will require an expansion of our offerings, because our kindergarten class for next year is already larger than this year and will require the classroom we used to get to the two all-day programs in PreK.

We are really proud of what we have accomplished this year. Yet, we are taking a risk. Our program can only work because of the Federal PreK Expansion Grant. It pays for the cost of the program beyond the 10 hours that we are required to provide. It makes it possible to create robust Pre-K offerings that have the potential to close the achievement gap. This is a 4-year grant. We have only three years left. After that the 0.46 will not support a full day program. If a full day PreK student can count as a full time student, we will be able to continue beyond the grant.

We are reaching the children whose families cannot afford full day programs for their preschool age children. Our program is reaching children who are homeless, in DCF custody, and all are less than 200% poverty, which is required by the grant. We are reaching an important target population both by the nature of the grant, and by the knowledge base of our team. We believe that the children in our full day program this year will be more prepared for kindergarten next year. We are already seeing the following results from this high quality, intentional, early intervention;

- One child who was originally in the 10 hour program came for 12 of the 89 sessions (13%). That child is now in the full day program and being bussed to school - and has been here every day since.(100%) .
- Speaking with the technology education teacher, I learned that at this point in the year, children can sit for 20 minutes and take turns with peers, that was not possible when we started.

- Children know the adults in the building, feel safe and can navigate school surroundings with confidence. They have access to the gym teacher, music teacher, art teacher, technology education teacher, librarian, home school coordinator and behavioral support. They know the adults that will support them for the ten years that they are in our school,
- Children are learning to regulate themselves and get their needs met in acceptable ways.
- Children recognize their name and many letters of the alphabet. They are starting to understand the concepts of numbers - they will be more successful in kindergarten.
- Kindergarten and preK teachers are working to leverage their resources to ensure that each classroom has full access and support to implement the evidence based practices that we know are predictors of positive third grade outcomes. We are designing learning communities that serve 3-6 year olds, enrolled in preK and K that will have access to the best that the early education and primary education world can provide. We are frontloading family engagement supports, and ensuring that teachers have the support to implement evidence based strategies with fidelity.

There are several places where schools are making all day PreK programs work using the Federal Expansion Grant. I am asking that we consider that a full time student at any age deserves to be counted as a full 1.0 ADM. Then these programs, that are meeting the needs of the children Act 166 intended to support, will continue and grow.

Thank you