

# Early Education in St. Johnsbury

Presentation to Legislature January 18, 2017

Michelle Fox  
Early Education Coordinator  
St. Johnsbury School District



# Portrait of Our Community

## I. Economics:

- The percentage of students on free and reduced lunch (FRL) in St. Johnsbury grew from 58% to 73% between 2008 and 2012. In comparison, the increase of students on free and reduced lunch in the state grew from 35% to 45% during the same period. **We have the second highest FRL percentage of any school district in the state.**
- 35.5% of families in Caledonia County live under 200% of the poverty line, the 3rd highest value in the state. The state average is 28.8%.
- 51% of renters in Caledonia County pay over 30% of their incomes on rent, the second highest value in the state.

# Overview of Our Community

## II. Substance Abuse:

- BAART, the St. Johnsbury substance abuse program, has had a 330% increase in the number of clients for their drug addiction treatment programs in the last 15 months, from 75 to 248 clients.
- Of the 248 clients served by BAART, over 45% have children between 0 and 6. This means that 111 parents of children under 7 in our region are being treated for a drug addiction problem. This is a staggering statistic, particularly in light of the fact that much addiction goes untreated.

## III. Abuse and Neglect

- While St. Johnsbury comprises 1.2% of the population of the state, we currently have 12.8% (43/336) of all children under 6 in DCF custody in the state. This is 10 times what we would have if our averages were proportional to our population compared to the state;
- From 9/20/2013 to 9/19/2014 the number of pending CHINS (Child in Need of Care or Supervision) petitions jumped from 11 to 31. Our neighbors, Lamoille and Orleans, had 16 and 13 petitions respectively 9/19/2014. This is a huge difference, given that DCF staffing in the St. Johnsbury, Lamoille and Orleans office is similar;

# Our Work in Early Learning and PreK

**Our Goal:** We want to offer the best available educational and social services to the youngest members of our community and their families so that our children meet grade level standards by Grade 3. We will do this by working as a professional community that reaches out to parents, children, and agencies providing support for early education.

## Our Strategies:

- Increase access to PreK in our community
- Nurture strong relationships between centers and the School District
- Provide professional development and support to PreK staff
- Provide increased individual supports for students
- Engage families and the community
- Support kindergarten transition
- Work with community partners to provide support for families



# History of our PreK Collaborative

- October 2013: First meeting of early education professionals to discuss challenges we are facing in supporting our community's youngest children
- Fall 2013: Formation of the Early Education Collaborative, which has been meeting monthly for 2 ½ years
- Spring 2014: Collaborative developed a work plan and applied for numerous grants to support our work in developing seamless support for children in our community to prepare them for school.
- Fall 2015: St. Johnsbury became an early adopter Act 166 (Universal PreK in Vermont)
- Fall 2015: St. Johnsbury began offering full day PreK for 4-year olds at 4 sites.
- Fall 2015: We begin a program of common curriculum and professional development at all centers, including Second Step (funded by Children's Trust Fund)
- Fall 2016: St. Johnsbury expanded full-day PreK for 4-year olds to a 5th site.
- Fall 2016: We begin professional development on Conscious Discipline, facilitated by a grant funded professional developer, Stevi Jackson.



# Early Education (PreK) Collaborative Brochure

The following local organizations participate in the St. Johnsbury Early Education Collaborative:

- The St. Johnsbury School District
- Building Bright Futures
- Umbrella-Kingdom Child Care Connection
- Catamount Arts
- Little Dippers Doodle Children's Center
- Cherry Street Child Care
- Children's Integrated Services
- Early Head Start / Head Start
- Department of Children and Families (DCF)
- ABC LOL Child Care Center
- Kids of the Kingdom Child Care and Pre-School
- New Beginnings Child Care Center
- Northeast Kingdom Community Action (NECKA)
- Northeast Kingdom Learning Services

If you are interested in our work and would like to learn more, please contact one of our associates:

**Dr. Margaret Ranny Bledsoe**,  
Superintendent, St. Johnsbury School District,  
mbleedsoe@stjisd.org

**Kim Buxton**, Kingdom Child Care  
Connection/Umbrella, kim@umbrellanek.org

**Dawn Powers**, Building Bright Futures,  
dpowers@buildingbrightfutures.org



There are two gifts  
we should give our children:  
One is roots.  
The other is wings.

## St. Johnsbury Early Education Collaborative



Serving our town's  
youngest children



## Who We Are

The St. Johnsbury Early Education Collaborative was formed in October of 2013 with the goal of coordinating, aligning and strengthening our support for young children and their families. Our work is aligned with the state and regional Building Bright Futures Councils and other local organizations serving children and families.

Our goals include:

- Developing aligned curriculum in literacy, numeracy and social skills for all early childhood centers;
- Strengthening the transition between early childhood programs and the St. Johnsbury School;
- Developing early intervention programs for children who need them and their parents;
- Increasing parent, family and community support for early childhood education.



The need for strong supports for children in their early years is clear from the numbers:

- National studies repeatedly show a return on investment between \$2 and \$7 for every \$1 invested in early education.
- 80% of the brain develops by age three and 90% by age five.
- There is an 8 million word gap between children from government assisted families and children nationwide. This is the precursor to the "achievement gap" between students from low-income families and students from middle and upper middle-class families.
- In 2014, only 49% of Vermont's children arrived at kindergarten meeting the criteria of readiness defined by the Vermont AOE.

## Our Mission

The Mission of the St. Johnsbury Early Education Collaborative is to offer the best available educational and social services to the youngest members of our community and their families. We do this by working as a professional community that reaches out to parents, children, and agencies providing support for early education.



There can be no keener revelation  
of a society's soul  
than the way in which it treats its children.  
Nelson Mandela

## What We Do



Currently we meet on a monthly basis to develop our infrastructure and support system. Our specific activities in the last year include:

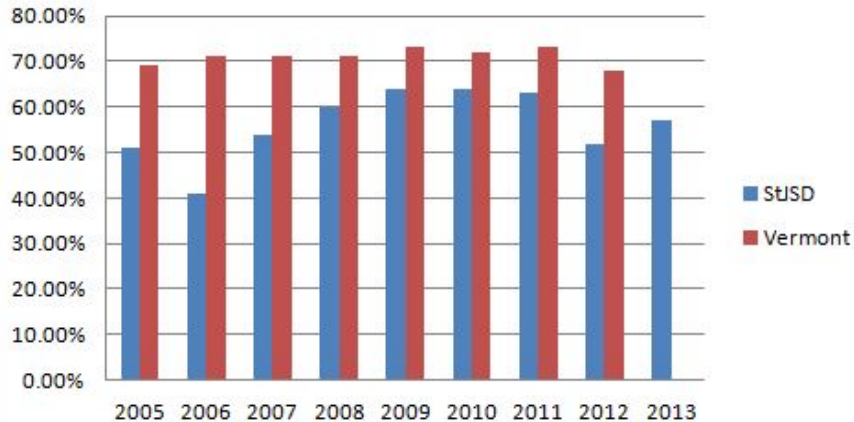
- A needs assessment of the challenges and strengths of our region in the area of early childhood programs and support for families;
- Preparation for the implementation of Universal PreK in 2015/2016;
- Holiday dinners for early childhood residents and their families in December 2013 and 2014;
- A Back-to-School event for families in September of 2014;
- Developing grant proposals for additional state, federal and private support for early childhood in our region.

# Third Grade Reading Scores in StJ

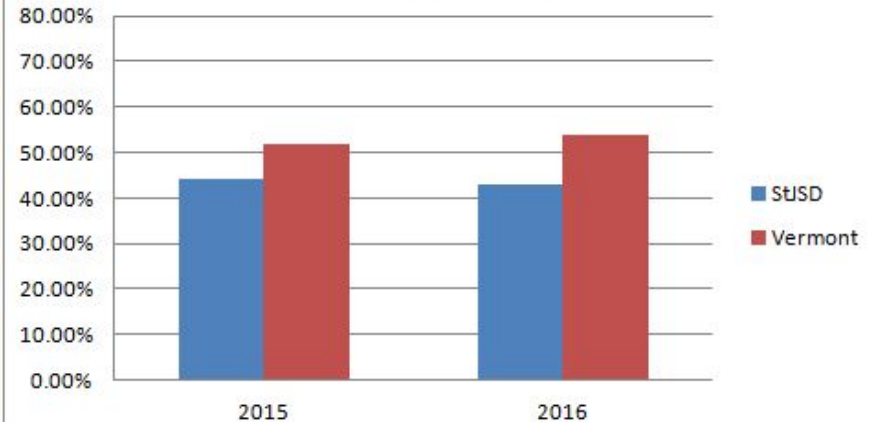
St. Johnsbury was one of the first Tier I schools in the state; we have historically had low scores on the NECAP and the SBAC. Scores rise slightly between Grade 3 and Grade 8, but we need to accelerate progress.



### NECAP Grade 3 Reading Scores



### SBAC Grade 3 Reading Scores



# Casting a wide net

- Early Education (now PreK) Collaborative
- Universal PreK (early adopters)
- Full Day PreK for 4-year olds through PDEG
- Support for students with disabilities
- Additional Initiatives with external funding
  - Professional development PK-3 - First School
  - Second Step - CTF
  - Licensure support for PK teachers - Turrell Foundation
  - Licensure support for PK teachers - VCPC
  - Parent Education - Merchant's Bank
  - Conscious Discipline - BEST, Innovation, PDG
- Promise Community
- Resilience Collaborative





# Our Experience with Act 166

- St. Johnsbury was an early adopter and so is in Year 2 of Universal PreK
- Currently we have 104 children in 8 PreK programs (St. Johnsbury School, Little Dippers, Cherry St., ABC-LOL, Kids of the Kingdom, New Beginnings, Balch Nature School, Head Start)
- Originally, we had 2 part-time teachers at St. Johnsbury School and PreK at one private center with part-time PreK programming for 75 children. With Act 166, we have 7 new centers serving a total of 104 children, many full-time.
- The percentage of students on FRL in all of our PreK programs is 58%. The percentage of students on FRL in our new PreK programs is 74%.
- Currently, we estimate that 67% of children in our town are enrolled in PreK.



# What has made PreK work in St. J.?

- A commitment to preparing all children in our community for success in elementary school, high school and beyond.
- A commitment to supporting our families and our centers in providing a diversified range of options for children.
- Having an Early Education Coordinator to work with centers and provide targeted support, as well as to insure good communication between centers and the District.
- Because we were early adopters, we have worked out kinks and can see progress.
- Additional grant support to focus on common curriculum, common professional development and support for PreK teacher licensure.
- Strong existing partnerships between the School District and private centers through the Early Education/PreK Collaborative.



# Current Initiatives to Support PreK programs

- **PreK Collaborative:** All of our Act 166 PreK programs meet monthly to plan events, reflect on progress and engage in common professional development. We also support 4 full days of professional development for PreK staff yearly.
- **Second Step:** Through the Children's Trust Fund, we are supporting a common social-emotional curriculum at every PreK site
- **Conscious Discipline:** With the support of PDEG, our BEST grant, our CTF grant and our Innovation grant, we are training all staff at every center in Conscious Discipline.
- **First School:** St. Johnsbury is an AOE-supported First School cohort, which supports PK-3 programs. Our school PreK and two centers are participating in this initiative.
- **PreK teacher licensure:** Through VCPC, the Turrell Fund and our PDEG grant, we are supporting 9 PreK teachers in obtaining permanent licensure.



Thank you for supporting PreK in Vermont!



It takes a big  
**heart**  
to help shape  
**little**  
**minds.**