

Setting Up Children for Success

Consortium delivers in-home support
for three-year-olds

SESSION *A Collaborative Approach to Serving Our Youngest Population* | **Presenters**
Barron Area: Craig Broeren, superintendent; Amber Carlsrud, teacher; Katrina House,
director of pupil services; JoAnn Lystig, teacher; Mariah Millerman, teacher

Research shows that the first four years are the most important developmental years in a person's life. Many of the issues and challenges that students bring to school begin well before kindergarten. For schools, the more investment put into its youngest learners, the better those students will be as they progress through school. For schools, this equates to lower special education rates and a reduction in its achievement gap. However, providing an effective early childhood program for three-year-olds in a small, rural school district like Barron, located in northwestern Wisconsin with an enrollment of about 1,400 students, can be challenging.

Craig Broeren, superintendent of the Barron Area School District, said the first idea the district had was to place three-year-olds in its four-year-old program. However, this idea was scrapped as it was determined it wouldn't be good for either the three-year-olds or the four-year-olds.

Instead, to really help students, the district determined that it needed to get into the homes of students and assist parents. To accomplish this, the Barron Area School District reached out to four area districts — Turtle Lake, Clayton,

Cumberland, and Prairie Farm — and formed a consortium to share staff.

"If we are going to address the need, we're going to have to do it together," Broeren said. "We can't support a full-time or even a part-time position by ourselves, but it starts to make sense with a consortium."

Before the consortium started, Broeren had to convince his school board. Even with the consortium model, the district was going to be spending more resources on supporting three-year-olds in the district.

"The thought is that early intervention specific to their needs is going to provide you more bang for your buck," Broeren said. "Over time, this will provide more benefits to our students."

Once the consortium was established and had a mission and vision developed, staff began going out into parents' homes. Some cases can be very challenging, but staff focuses on helping and supporting parents.

"Some parents had a bad experience at school," said Amber Carlsrud, early childhood teacher. "Our job is to be there for them, not to tell them what to do."

"We're trying to provide parents with the strategies when we're not there," said Mariah Millerman, early



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— Amber Carlsrud,
early childhood teacher

education teacher. "So when their children come into school, they're ready."

Early in the process, parents are asked what they think staff need to focus on and from there a plan is developed. Katarina House, director of pupil services, said this parent-led approach is crucial to getting the parent to buy-in, "When we get to setting up an IEP (individualized education program) the parent has been part of it from the beginning."

Although the consortium isn't in full implementation, the member districts have begun to see the impact of this work. One student who was supported through the consortium as a three-year-old was out of special education by the end of Pre-K.

"How long would she have been in special education if she had started in the classroom?" asked Carlsrud. "How long would we have been paying for those special education services?" ■