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## CASE STUDY: LEADERS MATTER – EARLY LEARNING

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### ANN ARBOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

ANN ARBOR, MICHIGAN



**DR. JEANICE KERR  
SWIFT  
SUPERINTENDENT  
OF SCHOOLS**



**DAWN LINDEN  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
ELEMENTARY  
EDUCATION**



#### DISTRICT WEBSITE

<https://www.a2schools.org>

#### DISTRICT DEMOGRAPHICS

<https://www.mischooldata.org/Legislative2/LegislativeDashboard4.aspx>

#### NCES DATA

[https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/districtsearch/district\\_detail.asp?ID2=2602820](https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/districtsearch/district_detail.asp?ID2=2602820)

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## EARLY LEARNING IN THE ANN ARBOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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Under the leadership of Superintendent of Schools, Dr. Jeanice Kerr Swift, Dawn Linden has been empowered in her role as executive director of elementary education to challenge the efficacy of delaying until as late as grade 3 to benchmark student readiness and literacy when so much research supporting the development of those literacy skills actually occurs from birth to three and beyond.

*I think it is easy for folks to see preschool as “play-based and fun and becoming social with each other” but those experiences really do impact a child’s literacy development in powerful ways, and those experiences in early learning with preschool and early learning junior kindergarten or what we call “Young Fives”- are the true precursors to children learning and becoming literate. (Linden)*

One of the early investments Ann Arbor made was to expand options for their very young kindergarteners who may not be as ready for the kindergarten experience because their social/emotional, academic, or for other reason, are not poised to have a “strong start.” Through Dawn Linden’s leadership, the district has expanded its Young Fives program (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d4hXeWZ0fI0>) to every elementary school. Instituting that program has come with a significant monetary investment along with associated professional development for the teacher, para pro, and administrator workforce. Concurrently, the district staff worked diligently to help the community understand the long-term benefit of the investment. The Young Fives program now serves almost 350 students, with a diverse representation of students who enroll in that program. Some view the program as an extra year of childhood that fits well with the family’s cultural goals while for others the program is really about building the maturity necessary to succeed in future schooling. Many of the children enrolled in Young Fives have never had a preschool experience, while some students have not been academically successful getting initial letters, sounds, and those essential elements of learning that are precursors to literacy that most kindergartners come in already knowing. The design of the program is to give these children another year that is slow-paced/low-pressure and dedicated to developing those math and literacy skills which are a vital part of the design to “help students develop a self-image as a learner.”

The State of Michigan does provide some support through programs like the district’s Young Fives, which are also commonly referred to as junior kindergartens or developmental kindergartens. These programs are considered kindergarten and are funded accordingly by the state. In Michigan, to receive full funding, all kindergartens must be full day. While a handful of Michigan districts do operate half-day programs, they receive only half funding. From a programmatic standpoint, Ann Arbor has concluded that given the rigor of the kindergarten standards, it would be difficult to meet the targets in a half-day program.

Dawn Linden is quick to mention that early learning programs represent an investment as well as a potential cost savings for later remediation. Catching students early and closing gaps pays off later with less remediation, special education, and behavior issues.

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## LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT NEEDED TO SUPPORT EARLY LEARNING

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*I will tell you, very little of my knowledge in early learning has come from my formal schooling - it comes from on-the-job experience, digging into our data, and really looking into what we are trying to build in our district. (Linden)*

In reflection, the leadership of the Ann Arbor Public Schools credits the existence of a vibrant Head Start/Great Start Readiness programs ([https://www.michigan.gov/mde/0,4615,7-140-63533\\_50451---,00.html](https://www.michigan.gov/mde/0,4615,7-140-63533_50451---,00.html)) for addressing the needs of many four-year-olds. In addition, the district also offers tuition programs for families who want to take advantage of evolving programs for early learning. These are non-grant funded, tuition options and have resulted in a waiting list every year resulting in significant expansion of the programs.

When Dawn Linden arrived in Ann Arbor, she acknowledged that she had to build her own knowledge of early learning. As a result, she committed to spending a great deal of time onsite at the district preschool center. This was complemented by spending a significant amount of time talking directly to the teachers and the administrative leadership. While she reports that this approach contributed significantly to her own knowledge, she also recognized that being a part of the AASA Early Learning Cohort (<http://www.aasa.org/early-learn-cohort.aspx>) contributed significantly to building her leadership skill in early learning through the interaction with similarly-situated leaders from across the country.

*There are some really good things going on around early learning and prior to becoming a part of the cohort there really wasn't any platform to connect with those doing really good work nationally. The AASA Early Learning Cohort has been an incredible resource to me in increasing my knowledge. (Linden)*

According to Dawn Linden, the cohort opened the opportunity to visit other districts and see first-hand what districts are doing to support early learning. The cohort also had the opportunity to interact with national leaders from Head Start who were really knowledgeable in what the data shows, what "levers" have the most impact with practice, and a little bit of theory.

Another important resource reported by Dawn Linden was the work of Dr. Nell Duke, from the University of Michigan, who has recently published a series of articles and books on early learning ([http://www.soe.umich.edu/people/profile/duke\\_nell/](http://www.soe.umich.edu/people/profile/duke_nell/)). The impact of her work enabled the leadership in Ann Arbor to identify some strategies that are research-based and known to have a positive impact on student learning. She has also co-published a series of books on a variety of teaching practices called "Not this, but that." Several of these publications became

important in guiding Ann Arbor early learning school leaders in program design such as *Not this, but that: No More Taking Away Recess* and *Not this, but that: No More Teaching a Letter a Week*.

Finally, Dawn Linden has identified a recently published document of the General Education Leadership Network (GELN) that merits consideration by early learning teachers and leaders. "Essential Practices of Early Literacy" (<https://memspa.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Booklet-FINAL-9.14.17.pdf>) provides a theory of action and instructional strategies that have been researched and what work with students.

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## ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF EARLY LEARNING PROGRAMS

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Essentially the Young Fives program takes the foundational standards of kindergarten and focuses on those elements necessary to build the students' core literacy skills. The goal is that when students leave the Young Fives program and enter kindergarten they are poised and ready to be successful, with many coming in "kinder-advanced" and demonstrate leadership in the classroom. What Ann Arbor is attempting to do is take students who would have, in many cases, entered kindergarten in deficit mode and turn that situation around - eliminating deficit mode - so they have a different story ahead of them; that's the goal (Linden). The district's early learning leadership wanted to make sure that what they did in the Young Fives program was research based. Admittedly, they did a lot of cobbling together; they had creative teachers but they needed to provide them with some core materials specifically designed to build literacy. Those came from work including the Fountas and Pinnell publications (<http://www.fountasandpinnell.com/intervention/>) like *The Literacy Continuum*.

In addition, alignment with the kindergarten content became a priority.

Finally, in the Young Fives program, it is essential that Ann Arbor students understand that mindset and way of thinking that underpins early learning. Over the past few years, the district has begun to build the capacity of their early literacy teachers in mastering the *Essential Practices of Early Literacy*, which are the teaching and learning strategies that lead to research proven results. The *Essentials* was developed by a team of educators including Dr. Duke and it supports teachers' intentionality in using specific teaching moves and practices to build a strong literacy foundation for early learning; for example, the use of interactive read-alouds with specific moves to support the building of vocabulary and skillfully extending conversations with and among peers.

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## ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS THAT SUPPORT EARLY LEARNING

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Dawn Linden identified two elements that formed the necessary support for early learning program development and operation in Ann Arbor:

- A school board that supports and invests in early learning and understands the impact that early learning has all the way through college;
- A superintendent who is invested in this work. Dr. Swift makes a point of speaking frequently around the community promoting the benefits early learning has on the community and in particular promotes the merits of preschool and Young Fives. She is methodical about speaking of the power of early learning programs.

Another important and somewhat unusual element regarding the structure underpinning the early learning programs is that Ann Arbor preschool teachers are part of the teachers union in the same way that high school chemistry teachers are. That professionalizes what they do in a way that is seen as very important. It also makes the programs expensive. The board and superintendent support for this professionalization of the teachers is an important element driving success. Additionally all of the Ann Arbor preschool teachers are certified and highly qualified. Likewise, para-pros have to be certified para pros ([https://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/Paraprofessionals\\_Requirements\\_545704\\_7.pdf](https://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/Paraprofessionals_Requirements_545704_7.pdf)). As a result, the Ann Arbor staff has the workforce stability so important to maintaining continuity in the program.

The structural pieces of strong board/superintendent support and professionalism and stability of staff contribute to making early learning programs work. In addition, Ann Arbor has parent-teacher organizations that fund and support district programs. There also are active partnerships with the University of Michigan and Eastern Michigan University. This is augmented with a number of community networks that support students who are experiencing poverty. While the needs are greater than existing structures can support, the Community Action Network (<https://www.canwashtenaw.org/>), a non-profit, operates several outreach community centers that serve Ann Arbor students and their families. The district students also benefit from the work of Peace Neighborhood Center (<http://peaceneighborhoodcenter.org/wordpress/>) and the Family Learning Institute (<http://familylearninginstitute.org/>). The district participates with cross-training in those centers along with after-school programs allowing for the training of tutors in the use of and access to school resources. The connection has mutual benefit with community center staff – teaching things about families that district staff might not know. That exchange is a partnership of growing importance and impact.

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## EXAMPLES, EVIDENCE, OUTCOMES, & PROMISING DEVELOPMENTS

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For the Ann Arbor early learning program, one of the most important results for which a great deal of pride and importance is exhibited is that the district is reaching more students than ever before. According to Dawn Linden, if one looks back on the successes thus far, one of those successes is serving more students each year. Four years ago the Young Fives program was offered in only one school with one half-day and one full-day classroom. If a parent could not drive there or was on the growing waiting list, the child likely could not participate. According to Linden, that did not feel good to anyone. Every subsequent year, the district has expanded the program to more schools, now in every elementary school.

The district has also sought to expand preschool opportunities for three and four year olds. By requesting and being granted more Great Start Readiness (GSRP) slots the District serves more of our youngest students every year. The district's service agency, the Washtenaw Intermediate School District, supports in building additional capacity and advocating at the State level (<http://www.washtenawisd.org/about-us/districts-and-academies-we-serve/public-schools/ann-arbor-public-school>). The district goal is for four-year-olds coming out of preschool programs and five-year-olds coming out of the Young Fives program to enter kindergarten kinder *ready or advanced*. According to Linden and her superintendent, there is no reason with the skill set district staff has and the resources made available thus far that the goal cannot be achieved.

This is the first year that third graders from this huge expansion of Young Fives will take the MSTEP ([https://www.michigan.gov/mde/0,4615,7-140-22709\\_70117---,00.html](https://www.michigan.gov/mde/0,4615,7-140-22709_70117---,00.html)) and the district is going to see the true impact.

*I can tell you that we've already seen the successes for those coming out of Pre K and Young Fives programs both in first grade and second grade. There have been some positive and unexpected outcomes for our English Language Learners that have excelled in ways we didn't anticipate. We knew that they would do well, but we didn't know they would excel in the ways they have. We have really seen positive data around having that extra year. Both language acquisition and overall academic performance has improved for the participating EL students. So when we are able to catch EL students early, they are more likely not to need services later on at the upper grades. That is huge – it's a costs savings for districts.*

*The social/emotional impact of early learning is something I don't think we can measure enough – we don't know if we have a good method of measuring that yet but what we see in the faces of our kids is that they are more interactive and engaged as a result of early learning. When they have early success with peers, they enter kindergarten with a confidence that lingers through high school. They are more confident learners, they take more risks, they exhibit fewer behavior problems. (Linden)*

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## SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES

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According to Ann Arbor staff, the biggest surprise came with the equity work. When the goal was set to expand Young Fives options, one of the goals this district was hoping for was closing the achievement gap. What district leadership wanted to see was that under-resourced students, students in poverty, and students of color were essentially getting a “leg up” and that families who were not able to access the same resources than parents of wealth could gain access to those resources. That was one intended outcome they hoped to achieve. What resulted was in

the first and second years of the expansion of Young Fives, families that were taking advantage of enrolling in Young Fives were NOT the district's families of color and that caused the district to pause and look at:

- How the district was marketing the programs to attract targeted students;
- How district staff was talking to families about this programs;
- How focus groups with the families were responding to the availability of the programs.

Staff found it fascinating to talk to families of color to find out why they chose not to enroll their child. Through this outreach, staff learned that using terminology like “give your child the gift of time” and using terms like “readiness” made some families feel their children being labeled. They tended to see those things as being remedial. As a result, the district has altered some of the materials distributed and personal contacts with families to address this issue.

*The big hurdle is helping families to understand that this is not a remedial program at all; this program is intended to create students who are kindergarten ready and advanced. (Linden)*

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### ADVICE/INSIGHTS FOR COLLEAGUES

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*Essential to program success is an investment of time and lots of focused attention on data. When students exit the preschool program after multiple years of attendance, we have to pay careful attention to that preschool data – in the same way we look at graduation rates as an element of the longitudinal data on students. There is too little attention paid to preschool data. More fundamental use of the preschool data helps determine if students are truly ready for kindergarten and should provide what we need to know to improve the preschool programs to produce students who are kindergarten ready or kindergarten advanced. In short, what are we doing to learn what we need to do to strengthen the preparation of 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds? My advice to district leaders is to invest in the early analysis of the data and make those “tweaks” to ensure that children entering kindergarten consider themselves capable learners. This is what we refer to as the “attitude gap” that so impacts the social/emotional development of Pre K students. I think we can increase rigor and maintain focus on social/emotional development. (Linden)*