



CASE STUDY: LEADERS MATTER – EARLY LEARNING

WICHITA FALLS ISD



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WICHITA FALLS ISD

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District Demographics

[About WFISD](#)

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EARLY LEARNING IN WICHITA FALLS ISD

Leaders need to get the right people in the right seats and then I, as superintendent, clear the barriers preventing principals, teachers, and paraprofessionals from doing their jobs for the benefit of all students.
(Kuhrt)

As a part of his role, Wichita Falls ISD Superintendent Michael S. Kuhrt sees a commitment to overcoming the barriers that restrict implementation of early learning for 3- and 4-year-olds and in some cases, 5-year-olds. The barriers often include family and society issues such as food insecurity, access to quality health care, dental services, vision exams, or steady work or employment for their parents. According to Mike Kuhrt, helping families overcome and resolve these social services barriers to early learning serves as a necessary precursor to successful delivery of services to early learners. Whether this includes providing for the physical needs, monetary needs, or emotional support that often plague single parents, young struggling families, and others, helping them to provide a safe comfortable environment for their family to exist has to be addressed as a prerequisite for students to be ready to start school and learn.

Under the leadership of Mr. Kuhrt, the Wichita Falls ISD arranged a summit to bring together all their social service organizations. By bringing together everyone in their community, the intent was to create a better network of wraparound support services for struggling students and families.

Anything I can do as a leader to help a mom who needs a ride to go to a job interview, we can arrange for that to happen. If she needs daycare so she can work, we can provide low-cost or no-cost daycare; we have programs in our community that can help her with that and she needs to know about it – those are barriers. (Kuhrt)

Wichita Falls ISD has both Head Start and Pre K. Head Start serves 3- and 4-year-olds. The district has a Pre K program that starts with children as young as 4 years old. In addition, Wichita Falls ISD has a state-sponsored Preschool Programs for Children with Disabilities ([PPCD](#)) that enrolls children as early as 3-years-old. In the state of Texas, Pre K is a half-day funded program for qualifying students. Low SES students, English Learners, military dependent children, homeless/migrant children all qualify for Pre K; however, the district decided to provide full-day services. Because it is easier for parents to have full day programs versus half day programs requiring additional daycare, the district picks up the additional cost.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT NEEDED TO SUPPORT EARLY LEARNING

Mr. Kuhrt has been a school superintendent for 13 years of which 3 of those years have been with the Wichita Falls ISD. Trained as a high school math and government teacher and a former

middle school principal, he believes his experiences more than formal training have contributed to his leadership in early learning. In the last year the [AASA Early Learning Cohort](#) has helped with more formal preparation. The AASA Early Learning Cohort has allowed Mr. Kuhrt to interact with colleagues from around the country and really get serious about studying Head Start programs, early reading, and literacy learning programs with the [National Association for the Education of Young Children](#), and the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study ([ACES](#)) sponsored by the Kaiser Foundation and CDC. According to Mr. Kuhrt, experiences like those were more important than formal experiences or training. Those experiences have helped him to develop his enthusiasm for early learning initiatives. To give students a fair start is essential to what he refers to as “getting them to the same starting line ready to learn.”

If we get them to the same starting line by first grade, I think we can take it from there and can get them where they need to go, come graduation. We have so many students starting first grade at so many different levels. Some have had weak vocabulary exposure growing up or limited quality interactions with caring adults. It's not that parents don't care for them – they might work all day or rely on older siblings to take care of their younger children – there are so many issues out there – that awareness of the adverse childhood experiences facing young learners, those are the experiences that have gotten me to this place. (Kuhrt)

ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF EARLY LEARNING PROGRAMS

The initial efforts in Wichita Falls with the network of community programs was designed to deal with students and their families before they entered early learning programs. As previously discussed, the district coordinates the operation of two separate programs: Head Start and Pre K. In the Head Start Program, if a family presents a 3-year old child with some identifiable disabilities, they go into the state funded PPCD program through Child Find and in compliance with special education laws. If a 3-year old comes into the program with a family at a certain income level, they start in Head Start; if they do not qualify for Head Start and the child is 4-years-old, they might qualify for Pre K. If a student does not qualify for Head Start or another qualifying program, the district has a program called [Waterford UpStart](#) that provides the family a Chromebooks, a wifi adapter, and online early literacy materials. The district asks participating families to spend 20 minutes each day with the early literacy program. This is a grant-funded program.

In addition, the [Parents as Teachers](#) program is provided through the [Texas Home Visiting Program](#), which is a grant-funded program run through the local United Way. The district provides a director, Yolanda Lewis, and five certified teachers who visit the homes of children from birth to five years not enrolled in community programs or school and are eligible to receive services for up to 18 months. By helping these families, they become the child's “first

teacher” and connect families with social services. Regarding the district governance structure and community involvement associated with these programs, Wichita Falls ISD partners with United Way and the Community Healthcare Center (CHC). The CHC is currently building a clinic on one of the district’s elementary campuses to provide low-cost/no-cost health care services, dental coverage, and vision screening to students. That is a vital community organization for assisting in achieving the community wraparound services goal. The district also works with other organizations in the area that provide counseling and economic services, continuing education, and workforce development to help the parents in the district and others in the 100,000 resident community of Wichita Falls. Mr. Kuhrt and his staff have also engaged other nonprofits to help sustain the necessary infrastructure these programs require.

Another element of support by the district was to provide a director of early learning and an instructional coach. Dr. Travis Armstrong serves as the director of early learning and together with the regional service center, the Wichita Falls ISD operates the Head Start program. They provide instructional specialists who work with teachers to align the program. Currently, the Wichita Falls ISD runs one Pre K campus, 3 Head Start campuses, and Head Start or Pre K classes on 13 other campuses.



Dr. Travis Armstrong
Director Early Learning

Dr. Travis Armstrong – Director of Early Learning– his primary responsibility is birth through 6-years-old. He is focused on getting them to the starting line ready to run the race to graduation. He ensures that the transitions from home to school and kindergarten to first grade are seamless for families and students!

Yolanda Lewis serves as the Parents as Teachers program director. Through this program, Wichita Falls ISD has about 110 families served through the grant in their birth – 5 years program, providing up to 18 months of the program in their homes. The program is designed to give children the best possible start in life, and to support parents in their role as their children’s first and most influential teacher.



Yolanda Lewis
Parents as Teacher Program
Director

According to the superintendent, “The school board is all in. It was already funding full day pre K before his arrival 4 years ago. The board is very socially responsible and is really into taking care of ALL the children in Wichita Falls.” Finally, Wichita Falls has recently had some poverty summits

sponsored through Catholic Charities. The Wichita Falls ISD board is very encouraging and wants the superintendent to be involved in those summits as much as possible in an effort to get the word out.

EXAMPLES, EVIDENCE, OUTCOMES & PROMISING DEVELOPMENTS

No longitudinal data is available yet as the district has just finished its first year of UpStart. For these families with Chromebooks and wifi access in their homes, the children are just now entering kindergarten where the district will be doing assessments. District staff will then have the data needed to assess the success of the program. It is the intent of the district to compare the results of those who received no intervention from Pre K and Upstart with those who did. It is through those assessment efforts that Mr. Kuhrt will determine the success in the Upstart and Pre K programs.

With respect to capacity building, the district has had to add grant-funded staff each year. About 110 families are being served by UpStart, but 80 families are on a waiting list. The community acceptance of this program supports expansion to address this need. It is important to remember that this is voluntary on the part of the families. During the Kindergarten and Pre-K roundup, the district was able to help all families. Students who qualified for Head Start or Pre-K were enrolled and students who did not qualify were offered the UpStart program. There was no additional cost to families and no one went home empty-handed.

SUCSESSES AND CHALLENGES

To allow participation in the Waterford home-based UpStart program, WFISD required grant support. The only way the district was able to do that was with a matching grant from Waterford. The district still had to come up with \$125,000/year which came from a local grant through the generosity of the West Foundation. Additionally, to begin the Waterford SmartStart program, the district was delighted to receive \$60,000 in grant funding from the Perkins-Prothro Foundation.

The district also faced challenges from social service providers to address food insecurity: providing children with food, including the need for weekend food distribution. We collaborated with the Wichita Falls Area Food Bank and distributed over 30,000 PowerPak 4 Kids Backpacks. This is a two-pound sack of nourishing food handed to a child at the end of the school week.

A summer feeding program served over 25,000 meals this past summer to qualifying children. According to Mr. Kuhrt, meeting these challenges has been "tough." The district has had to

expand the locations where summer food is provided. This included the purchase of a food truck designated to serve apartment complexes and other locations with free meals. The district was able to purchase the food truck in collaboration with its child nutrition program provider, Chartwells. This year the district has started offering a supper meal opportunity to students on high need campuses before they leave school. All of this is operated under the auspices of the USDA National School Lunch Program.

SUSTAINABILITY AND SCALABILITY

Mr. Kuhrt and his staff are currently advocating in the Texas Legislature for permanent, full day Pre K funding thus sustaining the progress they are beginning to experience through programs such as Waterford SmartStart and UpStart. Without such support from the state, sustainability and scalability are threatened.

ADVICE/INSIGHTS FOR COLLEAGUES

Get together with other people who share the same passion for early learning and to focus on that. A challenge to this effort is coming up with common definitions and terminology. For a lot of people early learning is through 8-years- old and I think that is probably the case but we are talking "birth" to 8-years-old is the early learning period and other organizations or individuals might have a different understanding. (Kuhrt)

Read up; you have to start studying, because I wasn't an early learning educator. I know that people get excited when students get to high school and start to shine and we are always are so excited about graduation. But I think we could have such an easier time and take our kids so much further if we focused on a proactive early learning approach and got that right first! We tend to be reactive and focus too much on remediation and intervention later in school; the focus needs to be on when the student is developing. We can have the most impact and return on our investment in the 2-3-4-5 age range. So I think as a superintendent, or any other leader, one should be focused on social supports for families, early learning and instructional strategies associated with what early learning should look like. A lot of development needs to happen in the first few years of a child's life besides just being ready to read. (Kuhrt)

**RESEARCH, STUDIES, & VIDEOS SUPPORTING EARLY LEARNING
RECOMMENDED BY MIKE KUHRT**

Adverse Childhood Experiences Study

[Kaiser/CDC ACES Adverse Childhood Experiences Study](#)

A documentary entitled "Resilience" from San Francisco based Nadine Burk Harris, M.D.

[ACES Too High](#)

[Center for Youth Wellness](#)

[Building Resilience: Remarks from Dr. Nadine Burke Harris](#)

[TED Speaker: Dr. Nadine Burke Harris](#)

Texas Home Visiting Program

[Texas Parents as Teachers](#)

Waterford UpStart and SmartStart

[UPSTART](#)

[SmartStart](#)

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)

[Caring Relationships: The Heart of Early Brain Development](#)