

## RCSD pre-K is a national model

### So why can't that success continue in older grades?

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Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK

Five-year-old Prince Roby, in a little blue vest and pageboy cap, showed more interest in the balloons scattered around the room than the certificate his teacher handed him, but his mother, Patricia Williams, teared up as she thought about its significance.

At the start of the year, Prince wouldn't always speak in full sentences. But during his pre-K graduation ceremony, he sang a song with his class.

"I actually watched my son progress the whole time he was here. I'm just so excited being a first-time mom," Williams said. "Seeing him actually work up and put in a lot of work — that was fantastic.

So I really love this school." Prince is on several waiting lists for elementary schools he may attend in September. But in Rochester, that milestone of entering kindergarten is bittersweet. For most families, it marks the transition from a pre-K system that is a national exemplar to one of the lowest-performing K-12 school districts in the country.



KARLA BROWN-GARCIA/ USA TODAY NETWORK; GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCKPHOTO

The gap between the two has bedeviled advocates and reformers for years. What makes early education in Rochester so successful, and why doesn't it translate to the older grades?

Interviews with families, educators and experts highlighted some keys to the success of the pre-K program:

- Common, age-appropriate curriculum with low-stakes evaluation and small class sizes.
- Intensive parent involvement.
- Stability in leadership and broadbased community partnerships.

pre-K are considered ready for kindergarten. Four years later, according to the national NWEA assessment, just 18% of them are proficient in reading.

What happens in the meantime?

A number of things go wrong, some avoidable and some inevitable.

By the time children in poverty reach age 7 or 8, they often have significant family responsibilities, including caring for younger siblings, said Lynn Gatto, director of the early childhood teaching program at the University of Rochester Warner School of Education.

In the classroom, best practices like play-based learning and time to rest often fall by the wayside. Curriculum differs from building to building and is not always developmentally appropriate.

■ State funding that is adequate, consistent and unrestricted.

Some of those points are primed for replication; RCSD is already working on developing a common curriculum for K-2 and, eventually, all elementary education, within a year. Others are harder to sustain as children get older. Since there is no transportation provided for pre-K, parents have no choice but to visit the school twice a day, which helps forge bonds with teachers. Even the most dedicated K-12 parents aren't in their children's schools 10 times a week.

"I think there are more things we could do that shouldn't be that difficult to implement," said Bridget Shumway, president of Generations Child Care, a pre-K provider. "When I think of the success of UPK, then read about the fact that so many children by grade 3 seem to be falling behind — I feel like we planted this wonderful garden when they're 4 years old, then we forgot to water it."

### What brain science says

Experts pointed to a number of factors that lead to successful pre-K programs in the city, but everyone agreed on two main ones.

The first is having developmentally appropriate curriculum — which, for 3 and 4-year-olds, means playing.

"Brain science and all those findings really point up the critical nature of (play)," said Mary Louise Musler, coordinator of the local Early Childhood Education Quality Council. "You need a whole-child approach, and the socialemotional is critically important."

When Prince began prekindergarten, he communicated with short phrases and didn't know all his shapes and letters. His teachers encouraged him to tell stories about the pictures he drew, and his speech and vocabulary have improved dramatically, his mother said.

"He's actually putting in that time and that effort to learn his ABCs, to learn what different sounds are," Williams said. "To see him actually accomplish this and know where he came from — it pretty much amazed me."

Having full-day programs means more opportunity for long periods of uninterrupted play. Low student-teacher ratios allow for closer supervision and a wider offering of activities to choose from. And the absence

Leadership in schools and at the district level is much more volatile in K-12. When adults don't have stable relationships and a clear, agreed-upon strategy, children suffer.

Student-teacher ratios increase because of lower funding. A class of 4-year-olds that had two or three adults present might only have one teacher at age 5.

At the Rochester Early Childhood Education Center, parents are required to physically sign their children in and out of the classroom daily. Director Lisa Traficante-Loncao says that creates a more personal and functional relationship between parents and teachers.

"Every morning we get to see the parents, we get to see the kids," she said. "We get hugs, we get kisses, and they see their teachers every day. So anything that's going on, or anything they can do at home — it's truly like family."

Jorge Casanova's twin boys attended pre-K at the center, and he said Traficante-Loncao had an open-door policy that made communication with parents especially accessible. "I walk in there whenever I need something from her or ask her a question, and she's always been there for me."

"I'm kind of sad because this is their last year here," he said.

Casanova is concerned that his boys won't get the same amount of attention from their teachers once they move to elementary school, but he's committed to staying just as active on his end.

"Regardless of whether they go to this school, that school or the other school, if a parent is not involved, nothing is going to happen," he said.

### How can it be built upon?

RCSD Deputy Superintendent for Teaching and Learning Cecilia Golden pointed to a number of areas where the district is trying to replicate the success of pre-K, at least in grades K-3.

The most important, she said, is a holistic focus on children rather than an overriding emphasis on academics.

"When students go into kindergarten, they should continue with that focus on the whole child and the developmental stages, how to make learning joyful

of high-stakes academic testing removes a layer of stress from both teachers and children.

The second important element is parental engagement. Young children are more dependent on their parents, in particular for transportation, so relationships with teachers can be built more easily.

Once school-age children can take a bus to school or walk on their own, parent involvement declines.

“It’s a lot harder when kids take a bus to school and parents don’t say good morning every day when they drop their child off,” Musler said.

“Pre-K is not a mandated program, so the only way you’ll ever get there is to make (parents) see it would be valuable for their child,” RCSD Early Education Director Robin Hooper said. “And the only way to do that is to make everything parent and family-friendly.”

### Stability in leadership

Another striking difference between pre-K and the rest of RCSD is stability in leadership. Many of the key players in early education have been around for decades and have kept the same standing meeting schedule all along.

RCSD, meanwhile, has seen rapid turnover, not only among superintendents but also in crucial middle-management positions, making it difficult to sustain relationships and best practices.

“I might have missed two monthly meetings in 10 years,” Hooper said. “Everyone knows every month that meeting’s going to come. It takes a lot of time to involve everybody, but if you don’t do it, what you end up with might not meet the needs of everyone you need to accommodate.”

That leadership includes leaders of community-based pre-K providers as well as various agencies and coalitions, most notably the Children’s Institute and ROC the Future. The district has struggled to maintain that same sort of stability in other settings.

Another key factor: Early education is maintained through state funding that is sufficient and does not come with strings attached. That is a significant difference from K-12, where urban districts are funded through a bevy of state and federal programs, each with its own restrictions and accountability requirements.

every day, understanding that students learn things organically,” she said. “Not, ‘OK, we’re going to sit down and learn to read.’ “We’ve got to continue to see children as children. I don’t think pre-K ever forgets that.”

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**Melissa Okeen sits in the front row to watch her daughter Ariana graduate from pre-K.**



**Lisa Traficante-Loncao, the director of the Rochester Early Childhood Education Center, talks to families before a moving-up ceremony. PHOTOS BY ERIN GAVLE/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE**

## Why doesn't it persist in RCSD?

Fifty-five percent of 4-year-olds completing



**Sarah Angie presents a certificate to her student King Lawrence.**

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*Jorge Casanova*

*Parent of twin boys in pre-K*