

EDGERTON SCHOOL DISTRICT
Edgerton, Wisconsin 53534

TO: Four Year Old Kindergarten Legislative Task Force
- And -
State Representative Task Force Chair Debi Towns

FROM: Dr. Norm Fjelstad, District Administrator of the Edgerton School District

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The Edgerton School District has approximately 1,800 students and is located 20 miles south of Madison. I have been a professional educator for over 30 years as a teacher, guidance counselor, assistant principal, principal, and for the past 18 years, District Administrator of the Edgerton School District.

The Edgerton School District went through a period of growth from 1988 to 2000 and during that 12 year period, it has had four successful building programs to address overcrowded facilities and improve technology. The Edgerton community takes great pride in the education of its children and schools. In my 18-year tenure, the Edgerton School District has not had a failed referendum and the community considers its schools a source of pride.

From 2001 to 2004 the Edgerton School District had a declining enrollment resulting in a controversial decision to change boundaries and keep a rural elementary school open. This was my recommendation despite a declining enrollment because I anticipated we were on the cusp of growth as over 800 housing lots were being developed within the Edgerton School District.

As predicted, a kindergarten class of 108 in 2004 jumped to 158 in 2005. This is relevant to four year old kindergarten because during this four year period of time, the elementary administration, teachers, and especially the five year old kindergarten staff, were having serious concerns about the readiness of children not attending a preschool. Since we anticipated growth in the Edgerton School District I was reluctant to encumber classroom space for four year old kindergarten and then find, as a result of putting in a new program, we would have to go to a referendum to add classrooms. I did not believe this would be acceptable to the Edgerton community.

Therefore, during the 2004-2005 school year I began to examine the data from other school districts that had implemented four year old kindergarten. During that year, I discovered that the experiences of other schools matched ours with children not attending preschool having significantly more difficulty than those children who did attend a preschool. I also discovered that some childcare centers were delivering preschool instruction and there were very successful preschool programs already in the Edgerton community. To launch a four year old kindergarten program would be to compete with them and potentially harm their businesses.

This led me to discussions with school districts such as La Crosse, Portage, and Monroe who have collaborated with the childcare centers and preschools in their communities to provide four year old kindergarten instruction at a childcare or preschool facility. This seemed more appropriate for Edgerton because it did not require encumbering classroom space in a District that is potentially growing, and it did not compete with the existing preschool programs that were already doing an excellent job.

The Edgerton School District student population averages about 17% of the students requiring special education programming and approximately 18% accessing free and reduced lunch. As five year old kindergarten teachers observed students entering their classrooms, it became apparent there was a correlation between low socioeconomic background and lack of preschool opportunity, poor social skills, classroom readiness, behavior, and academic success. In working closely with the families in the Edgerton School District over the past 18 years, it was obvious to me that those families accessing free and reduced lunch or requiring special education, with rare exception, were never enrolled in a preschool program. These families frequently struggled with financial restraints preventing them from paying tuition or providing transportation. It was my observation these families struggled with the parenting skills essential for children to have a school readiness environment and our records show between 60 and 70% of the students were not attending any preschool prior to five year old kindergarten.

This observation has been consistent over the years and to address it the Edgerton School District implemented a Reading Recovery strategy in the 1997-1998 school year. Federal Title I funds were allocated to hire staff to provide one-on-one and small group instruction to students deficient in reading in 1st and 2nd grade. This program was extremely successful, and our scores went up 15 to 20% in reading based on the 3rd grade reading test. From 2001 to 2004 these scores were consistently 15 to 20% higher than they had been prior to 2004. This was a direct result of an early intervention and resulted in the reduction of one full-time teacher of the learning disabled in 2004. Again, the correlation existed between socioeconomic background and lack of preschool experience of those who struggled with reading. The Edgerton School District frequently has been able to access federal funding to provide specific interventions to close the gap between the haves and have-nots. However, we are always limited to the 15 to 20% that qualify because of low socioeconomic status. It is important to target these children and it has made a difference; however, the have-nots experiencing a lack of preschool school readiness are a significantly higher percentage and include many students outside of the low socioeconomic defined area.

Without scientific data to prove it, I have concluded that many children who fall behind get referred for special education. When a child is deficient in their ability to listen, cooperate, and understand classroom expectations, the gap between those who are ready and those who are not increases dramatically by 2nd grade. Parents of those children who have provided preschool and/or nurtured their children at home with what they assume is good parenting all parents should be doing, have an expectation that the class will not be “dumbed down” to wait for the have-nots to catch up. It is my conclusion this gap seems to be increasing and there is a direct relationship between early intervention and narrowing that gap. After 30 years as a professional educator, I am convinced that most students that fall behind as a result of a deficient beginning in their educational experience rarely, if ever, catch up. The federal government has attempted to

pass legislation to retain students if they do not meet grade level and, while this sounds good in theory, it is not practical and rarely do you have students retained more than two years. In my opinion, the formative years of four and five year olds are critical to successful results in the upper grades.

Therefore, at the end of the 2004-2005 school year I informed the Edgerton School District Board of Education that in the fall of the 2005-2006 school year I would begin to work with the childcare centers and preschools in Edgerton to implement a half-day four year old kindergarten program starting the 2006-2007 school year. All of the childcare and preschool providers joined with me and the Edgerton School District has 110 four year old kindergarteners registered for the 2006-2007 school year. We are particularly proud of the fact that we believe we have all of the eligible Spanish-speaking students enrolled which has been a huge challenge for these families and the Edgerton School District to provide for a smooth transition into our District.

Since the state funding under the existing revenue limit is based on a three-year rolling average, the Edgerton School District will only receive one-third of the funding for this program in 2006-2007, two-thirds funding in 2007-2008, and full funding in 2008-2009. When the Edgerton School District Board of Education approved this program, it was with the understanding that fund equity would have to be used in the first two years to provide four year old kindergarten.

As I reach the sunset of my career, it would have been easier for me to not address this issue and be concerned about navigating through the difficult political waters to defend reducing fund balance for a new program and instead end my career with less concern about our financial state. However, my 30 years of collective experiences in education have been invested in an understanding of what I sincerely believe is best for the children of Edgerton. There is no doubt in my mind that the collaboration we are doing with the childcare centers and preschools in Edgerton in providing four year old kindergarteners with a level playing field four half days a week and the fifth day of each week with their parents will pay great dividends for their future. With 20% of our time helping parents understand preschool readiness and giving them an opportunity to get excited about their children's experiences in a social learning environment, we will make a link with parents that will assist them in areas that are causing their children to be deficient.

I sincerely appreciate the legislature's commitment to the children of Wisconsin and the support it has continued to provide for four year old kindergarten. I have always had the philosophy that we should plant shade trees that we will not have the opportunity to live long enough to sit under. Four year old kindergarten is planting shade trees that others will benefit from by providing a visionary foundation for the future of the State of Wisconsin. Thank you.