

## Aligned Case Study:

### **Branson R-IV - Expanding Access and Bridging Gaps Through Pre-K**

#### ***Braiding MOQPK grant and ADA 8% funding***

*Missouri's early childhood system has come a long way—and Aligned has been there every step of the way, advocating for policies that fund, support, and improve Pre-K access. These case studies spotlight the impact of key policy wins—like Pre-K inclusion in the foundation formula, the MOQPK grant program, and the QAR quality framework—on local districts working to give all kids a strong start. Branson R-IV exemplifies how schools can use every resource to level the playing field for kids—especially in overlooked communities.*

Branson R-IV School District may be best known for its location in one of Missouri's most popular tourist destinations, but behind the entertainment lights is a school system quietly building one of the region's most expansive and inclusive early childhood programs. With 11 preschool classrooms and a student body that includes many children living in extended-stay hotels, Branson has become a model for how a larger district with rural characteristics can braid funding streams to serve more children—and close gaps early.

#### **Strategic Growth Rooted in Access**

Branson's early childhood program has grown quickly and intentionally over the past several years. What began with a few classrooms funded through Title I and small grants has evolved into a robust, district-integrated program that serves more than 200 children, the majority of whom would otherwise lack access to any kind of preschool experience.

“Our story starts all the way back with Title funding,” said Dr. Michael Dawson, Executive Director of Instruction. “We were funding three to four classrooms. Then the state allowed four-year-olds on the formula, and we



shifted our Title I funds to cover paraprofessionals. But we still had a waiting list—50, sometimes 60 kids.”

The arrival of Missouri Quality Pre-K (MOQPK) grant funding was a turning point.

“When the MOQPK grant came, we thought, ‘You’re going to give us the SAT money for these kids versus formula money?’ It felt like a no-brainer,” said Dawson. “We ramped up and added more classrooms. Then came the classroom expansion grants. We kept saying yes—and we’re at 11 classrooms now.”

Dr. Staci Ray, Director of Early Childhood, added, “We have the capacity for 220, and last I heard, we had 216 enrolled. We don’t have a waiting list anymore.”

### **Braiding Funds to Maximize Reach**

Branson’s success lies in its ability to strategically braid multiple funding streams. The district uses MOQPK funds to support four-year-olds and 8% ADA (Average Daily Attendance) foundation formula funds for three-year-olds.



This approach is especially critical for districts like Branson, which don’t receive a financial incentive to expand ADA due to hold-harmless provisions. Lawmakers designed MOQPK to fill that gap, offering a state-level solution for districts that serve under-resourced students but can’t access traditional pre-K dollars.

As Dawson explained, “MOQPK gives us the ability to bring in the kids who aren’t getting any early learning—especially those living in hotels or whose families can’t afford private preschool.”

### **Serving the Unserved—Not Competing**

While growth has been rapid, district leaders have been mindful of their impact on the broader early childhood ecosystem. Instead of targeting families already using private preschool providers, Branson focuses on those not yet enrolled anywhere.

“I think we are known as a high-quality program,” Dawson said. “It’s very recognized in our community that these are certified teachers, trained paraprofessionals, and that our preschool is a full part of the Branson School District. It’s not a separate program.”

***“Our action research showed that not a single kindergarten student who attended pre-K needed intervention. That speaks volumes.” - Staci Ray, Director of Early Childhood.***

“We don’t ever promote our program as better than anyone else’s,” said Ray. “We support families if they choose other programs. We just want kids somewhere. Our action research showed that not a single kindergarten student who attended pre-K needed intervention. That speaks volumes.”

Branson also works closely with community providers, including Head Start and local private centers, to collaborate when a child may need additional support or services. “There’s

some give and take,” said Dawson. “We’ve built really open dialogue with other preschools in town, and we’re all focused on what’s best for the kids.”

### **Outreach, Enrollment, and Family Trust**

A large part of Branson’s success in reaching full enrollment comes from strategic communication and grassroots outreach. From social media campaigns to preschool tours and informal conversations at Walmart and soccer games, staff go out of their way to spread the word.

“Our communications team is wonderful,” said Ray. “We did a big social media push—just blasting everywhere: ‘Four-year-olds are free, bring your four-year-olds.’ We even recorded a video about our program that’s been shared at the board level.”

Branson also leverages its robust Parents as Teachers (PAT) program to promote early childhood opportunities, especially in underserved areas like Rockaway Beach. “Our PAT educators are seeing families from birth to kindergarten,” said Ray. “They’re often the first to say, ‘Hey, your three-year-old needs to be in preschool.’”

### **From Readiness to Resilience**

Branson’s early childhood program is about more than just enrollment—it’s about closing gaps before they grow. Many of the district’s youngest students arrive with fewer life experiences, limited vocabulary, and challenges related to housing instability and poverty.

“We’re trying to swim as far upstream as we can,” said Dawson. “These kids come to us under-resourced. Some have lived their whole lives in a hotel. Then they walk into what looks like a Taj Mahal of preschool—it’s overwhelming. But we work through the socialization and self-regulation. We get them ready.”

***“Preschool reduces the need for costly interventions later—and research shows it even affects future earnings. But it’s also about giving kids vocabulary, background knowledge, and life experience,” said Dr. Michael Dawson.***



Ray added, "These students are entering kindergarten on a level playing field."

The district sees early childhood as an equity tool and a long-term investment. "You're saving so much money on long-term interventions by having this," said Dawson. "There's research showing the difference in salary between adults who had preschool and those who didn't. But it's also about vocabulary, background knowledge, and life experience. We're giving kids those foundations—through books, conversation, play, and even trips to the zoo or aquarium."

### Looking Ahead

Both Dawson and Ray acknowledge that it will take a few more years before data fully captures the academic impact of Branson's early learning program, but they're confident in the trajectory.

"It'll take two to three more years to have the sample size to really see the impact," Ray said. "But we already see the difference. The intervention data is telling us a lot."

For now, the results are visible in the joyful noise of full classrooms, the absence of waiting lists, and the steady rhythm of a community that believes in investing early. Branson R-IV shows what's possible when districts commit to using every tool at their disposal—and center kids, not bureaucracy, at the heart of early childhood education.



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