

Aligned Case Study:

How Marquand-Zion's Pre-K Program is Changing Lives in Rural Missouri *Missouri Quality Pre-K and QAR Implementation*

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. Marquand-Zion shows how even the smallest, most rural districts can build strong early learning programs when given the right tools and support..

In the quiet, wooded corner of southeast Missouri, where the Castor River winds through a town surrounded on three sides by the Mark Twain National Forest, sits one of the smallest public school districts in the state. The Marquand-Zion R-VI School District, located about 45 miles northwest of Cape Girardeau, serves just 140 students—and graduated a class of only ten seniors this year. But within its single school building, the district is delivering a powerful early learning experience for its youngest students, one that's rooted in quality, equity, and resilience.

Despite being a tiny, rural district, Marquand-Zion is making clever use of state and federal resources to provide a high-quality preschool program to children who face some of the steepest barriers to school readiness in Missouri. Many arrive in pre-K without having ever worn shoes, used a fork, or played with other children. Some are nonverbal or transitioning between caregivers. Still, these children are thriving thanks to strategic leadership and the commitment of educators like preschool teacher Amber Thurman.



Deep Need, Local Solutions

Families in Marquand-Zion face obstacles that complicate access to early education. All students in the district qualify for free meals through the Community Eligibility Provision. Programs like Head Start aren't realistic options: "The closest Head Start would be Fredericktown, about 20 miles away," Superintendent Scott Blake said. "The problem is Head Start doesn't provide transportation in our area."

Transportation, isolation, and low wages often mean families have to make impossible choices. "Then they basically, unless they have a high enough paying job, they're falling in the hole to go to work," Thurman said. "They have to have a vehicle all day long. They have to have gas and everything. We're back to that 20-mile trip because we're very limited on jobs. So those kids don't go to daycare. They don't have experiences with other children very often. So we're not just talking about the academic part. We're also talking about the social, emotional, and behavioral aspects. It's a whole other part of the whole child."

In the absence of other options, the district has worked to create an inclusive preschool program that meets families where they are. Over time, they've evolved their funding strategy—starting with Missouri Preschool Program (MPP) dollars, then using Title I funds when MPP ended, and most recently, securing a Missouri Quality Pre-K (MOQPK) grant to relieve pressure on K–12 budgets.

"The MOQPK grant has helped us direct Title I funds back to K-12," Blake noted.

A Coaching Model That Works

Last year, the district fully participated in Missouri's Quality Assurance Report (QAR) initiative—a voluntary system supporting continuous improvement in early childhood programs. Through QAR, the district received support from a trained coach and used the CLASS® (Classroom Assessment Scoring System) to assess classroom quality and interactions.



"We only have one pre-school, one kindergarten, one first grade. But somebody who's good at coaching can help us take what we have and make it better" - Dr. Scott Blake, Superintendent.

Thurman, the district's only preschool teacher, said the QAR coach offered encouragement and new ideas. "It's always helpful to have somebody that has been to several schools, several places," Blake said. "Everybody has ideas, and somebody who's good at coaching can take those ideas, add to them, and formulate new things. They're just creative, especially in rural schools like this. We only have one preschool, one kindergarten, one first grade."

For Thurman, that support was crucial. With no other preschool colleagues in the building, having a professional sounding board made a real difference. "She didn't have another preschool teacher to bounce ideas off," Blake said of Thurman. "So getting that feedback helped."

The district doesn't qualify for certain early childhood funding streams because of its size and "hold harmless" status under state foundation formula rules. They can't access pre-K funds tied to Average Daily Attendance (ADA), and they're ineligible for the 8% set-aside that supports larger school systems. But rather than let those barriers stand in the way, the district has leaned into what is available—and made it work.

A Different Kind of Readiness

Students arrive at preschool in Marquand-Zion with a wide range of life experiences, and many have never been in any kind of group care or structured environment before. Thurman takes a developmental, child-centered approach to meet them where they are.

"I had a student come into me at age four this year and has never used a utensil because that family only ate pizza rolls," she said. "So I had to teach him how to use a utensil. And he's doing that now. So that was an important skill for him—not how to hold a pencil yet, because we need to know how to sit at a table and eat. So it is specific to each child, in my opinion, of what makes them ready to go to kindergarten and what doesn't."

Other students face trauma or inconsistent caregiving. "Sometimes kids are with parents and then transition to grandparents, and the grandparents may not want to take the child to school, so then there is a lot of interruption," she explained.

One child came to school so unprepared that the first few weeks were chaos. "The child didn't want to go to school, and the parent would take them kicking and screaming," Thurman recalled. "The child didn't know how to use the toilet, so, at school, he ripped off the back of the toilet and washed his hands in the urinal."

But progress happens—and it's meaningful.

"That was an important skill for him—not how to hold a pencil yet, but how to sit at a table and eat. It's about meeting each child where they are." said Amber Thurman, Preschool Teacher.



Thanks to the added support from the MOQPK grant, the district has been able to serve children with significant developmental needs who may not otherwise have had access to preschool. In some cases, children have entered the program completely nonverbal, not potty trained, and without basic early learning skills. With time, support, and extended preschool participation, these children have made remarkable progress—developing language, acquiring foundational academic skills, and entering kindergarten with a stronger start. Some have continued on to first grade with individualized support plans, gaining confidence, independence, and the ability to express themselves through writing and conversation.

Even with all the gains, Thurman doesn't sugarcoat the realities. "I am teaching kids whose jobs haven't been invented yet. So when someone asks me if they're kindergarten ready, well, I mean as much as they can be. Yes. But again, social-emotional is the most important to me. Making sure that those needs are met. I don't feel you can move past until you do that."

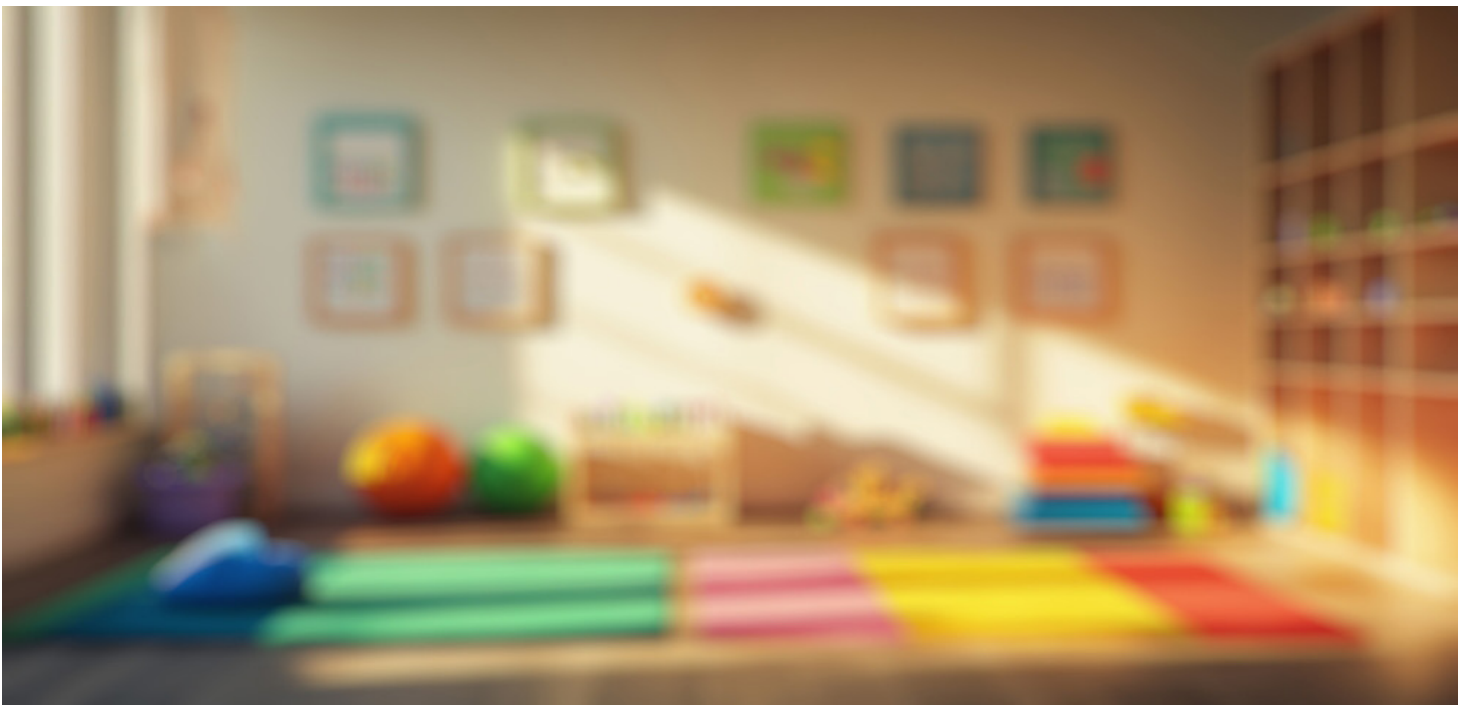
The goal isn't just familiarity with numbers and letters—it's full participation in school and community. "We're

not teaching them their address or phone number and how to tie their shoes anymore. No. They need to be able to write a decent sentence, even if it's a three or four-word sentence. But they have to get an idea in there, and they need to be able to do that before they leave. They truly need to be reading by the time they leave kindergarten."

A Rural Model Worth Watching

What's happening in Marquand-Zion proves that with strong leadership and the proper support, even the smallest, most remote school districts can deliver high-quality early learning. "To be honest, I never understood why other schools don't pick up on it," Blake said. "I've seen a lot of students, really challenged students, disabled students that really need to be in the program."

Marquand-Zion may be surrounded by forest, but the work inside its preschool classroom is anything but isolated. With coaching, wise funding choices, and relentless commitment to children, the district is laying the foundation for learning and life.



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