

Aligned Case Study:

Stanberry R-II - Building Bright Futures with Pre-K

How a small district is using state support to strengthen school readiness and connect families

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. Stanberry R-II shows how a high-performing rural district can use those tools to expand opportunity, strengthen family connections, and ensure more children arrive at school ready to learn.

Tucked into Missouri's northwest farmland, the Stanberry R-II School District may be modest in size, but it's making an outsized impact on early learning. With just 390 students and a reputation for strong academic performance, Stanberry is proving how smart, targeted investment in preschool—supported by the Missouri Quality Pre-K (MOQPK) grant—can strengthen school readiness and entire families.

That solid foundation reflects and reinforces the value of investing early. In this rural district, thoughtful implementation, family engagement, and innovative use of state support have helped build a meaningful pre-K program that enriches the lives of both students and their families.

The Missouri Quality Pre-K (MOQPK) grant is one of several funding streams available to support early learn-



ing in Missouri's public schools. Designed to expand access to high-quality preschool for four-year-olds, particularly those from low-income families, MOQPK provides state funding directly to school districts and charter schools. The grant is especially beneficial for smaller districts, where resources are limited, but the need for early learning opportunities remains high.

Making Pre-K Sustainable in Small Districts

Stanberry had a pre-K program before receiving state funds, but it was entirely supported through local dollars, placing significant strain on the district's budget. When MOQPK became available, the district embraced the opportunity to shift pre-K costs off local sources and allow for Title I funds to cover academic supports and special education.

Fluctuating enrollment affects the funding amounts districts receive from the state. MOQPK gives smaller districts like Stanberry the means to offer pre-K seats with greater stability and confidence. And that stability pays off—because when students arrive in kindergarten ready to learn, everyone benefits.

Dr. John Davison, the district's superintendent, will tell you that Kindergarten teachers can tell which kids have been in preschool and which have not by the differences in academic and emotional readiness.

“We do feel like every child should experience preschool before kindergarten,” said Davison. “One of the big things is just increasing their social-emotional skills. We found that’s been extremely helpful. And then build on their concept of language and gross motor skills, which allowed them to be successful in kindergarten.”

“Our classroom paraprofessional already knows the kids coming in next year—and they know her. So do the parents. It’s almost a seamless operation.”

*— Dr. John Davison,
Superintendent*



Parent Engagement That Builds Trust

Parent engagement has been a cornerstone of the program's success. Through six to eight themed family nights per year, children and parents participate in guided learning stations, building connections between home and school. This shared experience helps parents learn how to support early learning at home while building

Stanberry has created a more equitable path to early education by freeing local dollars and avoiding tuition-based models. The program also helps offset potential learning gaps, especially among children from middle-income families who might not qualify for Head Start or afford private care.

Another key to the program's strength is its staffing model. Having a certified teacher and a paraprofessional who also serves as the district's Parents as Teachers educator creates continuity across years and strengthens relationships with families. Preschool attendance is strong, and kindergarten teachers can easily identify which students attended preschool based on their readiness levels.

"Parent engagement nights help create strong buy-in with families," said Dr. John Davison, Stanberry R-II's superintendent. "Our teacher is very open and communicates in a lot of ways—phone calls, email, whatever works. Having our Parents as Teachers educator also serve as the classroom paraprofessional has been a great link to families. She already knows the kids coming in next year, and they know her. So do the parents. It's almost a seamless operation. Now, our preschool teacher might not call it seamless every day—but for the most part, it runs really well."

"It's not just about seats in a classroom—it's about creating the kind of learning environment where young children can thrive, connect, and feel joy."

Strengthening Quality Through QAR

Stanberry R-II's voluntarily participated in Missouri's Quality Assurance Report (QAR) process to strengthen its preschool program and ensure alignment with state benchmarks.

The Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education developed QAR, the state's quality recognition system for early learning programs. Launched in its current form in 2022, QAR offers a flexible yet structured framework for programs to reflect, grow, and improve.

Through QAR, Stanberry gained access to classroom observations, personalized one-on-one coaching for educators, and tailored professional development opportunities. These activities helped the district create a strategy to maintain continuous quality improvement efforts and strengthen program standards.

By embracing QAR, Stanberry signaled a commitment to compliance and excellence and ensuring every child, regardless of background, begins school in a high-quality setting.



The Grizzly Bear Knows: Preschool Matters

Stanberry's story is a testament to what's possible when small districts are given the right tools. Unlike pre-K funding tied to Average Daily Attendance (ADA)—which many smaller or hold-harmless districts can't access—MOQPK provides a more equitable path to early learning resources. It was designed to fill a critical gap, giving districts like Stanberry a dedicated funding stream for preschool, even when traditional formulas offer no financial incentive to expand. That flexibility allows them to serve families who often fall through the cracks—those with incomes too high for Head Start but not high enough to afford private tuition. By investing early through MOQPK, Stanberry is building a stronger foundation for learning and ensuring positive, high-quality early experiences are within reach for more children.

That kind of access isn't just about seats in a classroom—it's about creating the kind of learning environment where young children can thrive, connect, and feel joy.

Some of those experiences come on Fridays, when Dr. Davison becomes “the grizzly bear,” chasing preschoolers around the playground to their absolute delight. Among the questions at a recent parent engagement night was, “Who is this bear that comes to the playground?” It's a playful tradition that reflects the district's whole-child approach, and a leader who understands that imagination, movement, and connection are all part of how young children learn best.



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