



Developing Young LEARNERS

**4K programs are preparing students
for kindergarten and beyond**

Shelby Anderson

In 1856, Margarethe Schurz started what would become the nation's first kindergarten. Located in Watertown, the small, one room school building has been restored and now serves as a museum. Today, that spirit lives on as the state continues to be a leader in educating its youngest students. During the 2014-15 school year, 95 percent of school districts had four-year-old-kindergarten (4K), and more are expected to come on board.

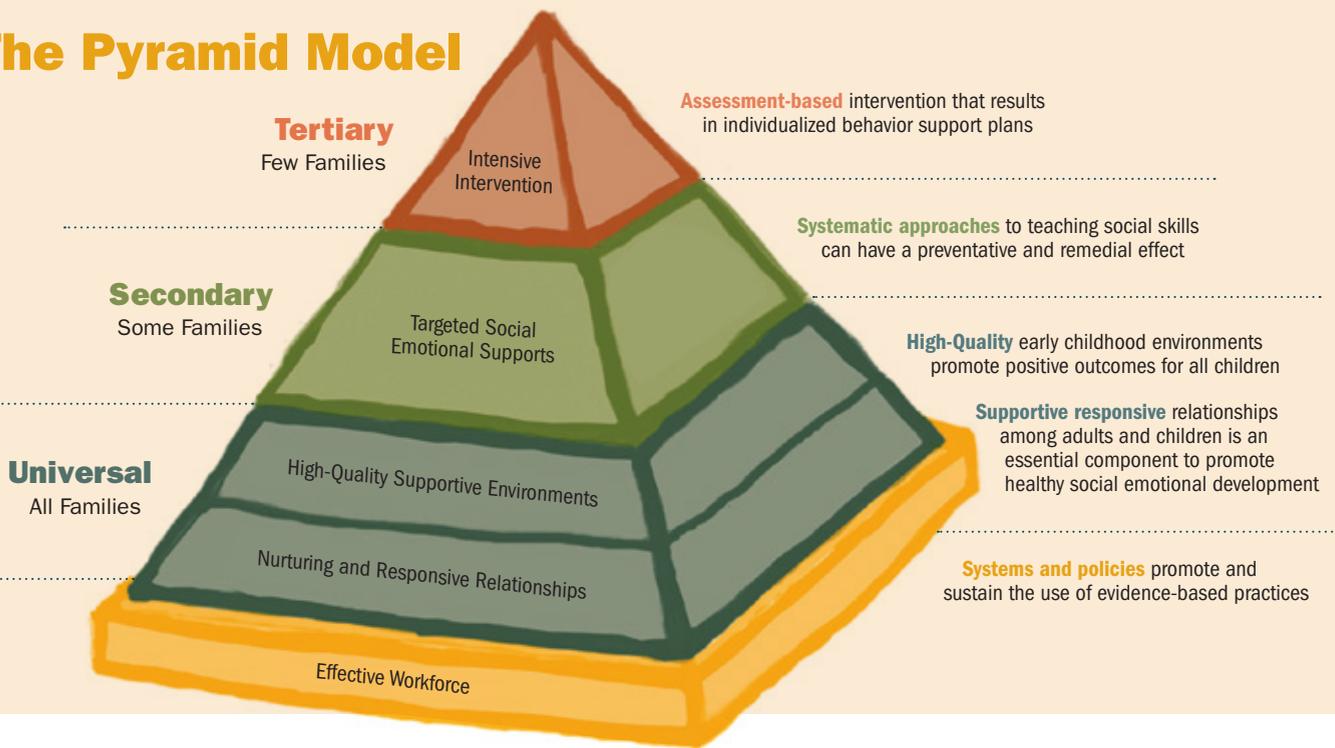
Despite the growing 4K programs in Wisconsin, state-funded pre-K enrollment has dropped nationwide. As pre-K enrollment falls, gaps continue to widen between students from different socio-economic backgrounds.

"Wisconsin has a long understood the positive value of early childhood education," said State Superintendent Tony Evers. "Our state's founders enshrined education for four-year-olds in the Wisconsin Constitution, paving the way for communities to offer preschool

services. Whether those services are provided through a community-based approach, or a traditional model, a growing body of research supports our investments in 4K."

Continuing Wisconsin's commitment to 4K and other early education efforts is crucial to preparing students for school and lowering the state's achievement gap. "Early intervention is where you close the achievement gap," says Culleen Witthuhn, director of early learning in the Racine Unified School District.

The Pyramid Model



■ Social and Emotional

School administrators recognize that starting students off on the right foot in 4K sets them up for success when they begin 5-year-old kindergarten.

The **Racine Unified School District** has a comprehensive early education program. The district has 11 4K community partner sites, 14 elementary schools with 4K-fifth-grade students, and two early learning sites with only three- and four-year-olds. The district empha-

sizes the importance of working with and reaching out to parents and it uses data to track student progress and guide decision making.

One of the main focuses of Racine’s early education program is on social and emotional development of its 4K students.

New research links children’s social skills in kindergarten to their well-being in adulthood. A 20-year study conducted by researchers at Pennsylvania State and Duke Universities followed nearly 800 people

from kindergarten to age 25. Researchers found that students who had good social skills in kindergarten, such as sharing and helping other children, were more likely to go on to higher education and hold full-time jobs.

The good news is that these social skills, like academic skills, can be taught.

In Racine, 4K students are taught social and emotional skills using the Pyramid Model (above). Developed by the Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention for Young Children, the Pyramid Model was developed specifically for infants and young children. It emphasizes setting a solid base by developing nurturing and responsive relationships and high-quality supportive environments for all students. Upon this foundation, a secondary support is set up for students who need a more systematic approach to learning social skills. And, at the top level, individualized behavior support plans are developed for the few students who need intervention.

“Everybody needs a nurturing, high-quality environment to learn in,” Witthuhn said.

In action, the Pyramid Model can look different from classroom to classroom but its focus is on





providing students with a nurturing environment where teachers build relationships with students. In the Racine 4K program, this involves student check-ins each morning with teachers welcoming students. It also involves specialized group activities where students are asked to identify different emotions and talk about when certain emotions or responses are appropriate. The Racine 4K classrooms all have social/emotional centers for students to participate in activities related to building these skills. Activities and lessons also focus on helping students develop friendship skills.

“If a student doesn’t have the ability to work collaboratively, sit next to others or problem solve, they’re not going to grow academically,” says Witthuhn.

Community Approach

The old cliché, “It takes a village to raise a child” is especially relevant to the early education model.

In Wisconsin, more than 100 school districts, like the **Hortonville School District**, have undertaken formal working relationships with the preschool providers in their community to offer 4K programs. The

goal of the collaborative approach, among other efforts, is to develop a similar curriculum and operate at a high-level of standard across the board at all early education sites.

In Hortonville, the school district operates a 4K site at its elementary school and works with four community sites: Fox West YMCA, Hillside Preschool, Play and Grow Learning Center, and St. Edward School.

Janice Zuege, associate principal of the middle and elementary schools in Hortonville said there are many benefits of a collaborative community approach to 4K. It allows families to choose a site that works best for them, and it is easier for children of

working parents to attend (children who need care when they are not in the 4K program can remain onsite). Working collaboratively with community sites also allows the district to run a larger 4K program than it could have on its own.

Zuege and coordinators from each community 4K site meet on a monthly basis and stay in regular contact between meetings. “Constant communication and collaboration between sites is key,” she said.

Teachers from all of the 4K sites came together and developed their own Power Standards (a term developed by Doug Reeves, a well-known educational leadership author and speaker). These standards, consistent across the 4K program, determine what students should be able to do once they complete the 4K program. The goal is to have the standards “mastered” by students. If they are not, teachers provide interventions to help support students.

In addition to using the same standards, all of the sites use consistent progress reporting tools and student data such as the pre-K literacy assessment PALS. There is also a focus on consistent professional development among all 4K teachers.

The collaborative community approach has received good feedback in Hortonville. In a survey given to parents at the end of the school year, 93 percent said they believed their child gained early academic skills that will support success in kindergarten. One parent wrote, “I had real



Grandpa Goes to Kindergarten by Joe Quick

Over 25 years ago Robert Fulghum wrote a collection of essays entitled “All I Really Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten.” It was hardly a revelation; more a gentle admonition to think about how humans interact.

After 55 years, I have finally completed the rigors of kindergarten. This past school year, having never attended kindergarten myself, I volunteered two mornings a week in my grandson Lucas’s class in the Madison Metropolitan School District. Even lacking the experience personally, I believe few adults fully appreciate what is expected of today’s five-year-olds.

While social growth goals are similar to years ago, the academic expectations have changed dramatically. It’s not your father’s kindergarten — it’s not even yours. Here are some thoughts from my year of volunteering.

Education is complex if only for the fact that you have varied personalities (16 in this kindergarten class) with different agendas, all being gently guided in the same direction. Think of 16 people randomly chosen from your workplace and how different they are.

With the wee ones, you have criers, infectious exuberance, runny noses, varying abilities to dress for recess, bold and brassy, and sometimes sassy. They are bluntly honest. (“You smell nice; did you take a shower?” or “Ewww! You smell like coffee.”) They have vivid imaginations (several inform me they have plucked hammerhead sharks out of Lake Mendota) with emerging abilities to describe personal adventures and experiences. They begin the process of socialization where egocentrism, hopefully, declines.

While there are mid-morning snacks and brief resting in the afternoon, kindergarten is far from fun and games. Coloring is

considered frivolous. The expectation is for students to be reading and writing by June. Like hopeful puppies, the kids generally want to please, but they can be easily distracted. Similar to adults going on Facebook during worktime.

Writing is hard. Spelling might be even harder (phone, for example, and the hundreds of words ending in silent ‘e’). Reading takes specific cognitive abilities and teachers work diligently to identify students missing the mark, getting them the help they need.

Ultimately, each student of the Class of 2027 is responsible for his or her success, but that oversimplifies today’s classroom experience. As expectations rise, state support for public education dwindles. Do more with less, politicians offer. Maybe spend more time in the classroom this grandpa suggests. That would be educational.

The health of our community is inextricably linked to the success of our public schools and an educated populace. I marvel at the minor miracles performed daily by school staff. Firm but fair, they cajole, support, encourage and celebrate with our children. So much happens on so many levels working to ensure student success, but it doesn’t come easy.

So when you fondly remember your kindergarten days, be mindful of how life changes. Our kindergarteners going off to first grade this fall aspire to be farmers, veterinarians, teachers, nurses, construction workers and a host of other occupations they talked about last fall. They are our future. We need to be nice to them. You learned all this stuff years ago. Maybe you forgot. □

Joe Quick spent almost 25 years advocating statewide for public education as a parent, lobbyist and public communications official, including 14 years for the Madison Metropolitan School District.





concerns at the beginning of the year. My son really seemed to struggle and not want to learn. Now he is excited to tell me and show me what he learned at school.”

In addition, all 4K sites reported a majority of its students reaching literacy benchmarks on the PrePALS assessment. To meet the increasing demand, the district is adding another section of 4K at the elementary school.

Kindergarten teachers in Hortonville report that students who participate in 4K are less anxious about starting 5K and adapt more easily. They also have a solid foundation of letter/sound knowledge, which allows kindergarten teachers to focus on academics earlier.

“Prior to 4K, we were just trying to get kindergarten students to learn how to act in school,” Zuege said. “Those social and emotional skills weren’t advanced.”

■ Parent Engagement

Like Hortonville, the **Mount Horeb Area School District** has also taken a community approach to 4K. To receive state funding for 4K community programs, school districts select from different funding options. Mount

Horeb has selected the funding option to provide at least 87.5 hours of outreach activities to families. The Mount Horeb School District has gone above and beyond the minimum requirement in an effort to engage 4K parents.

“Early childhood programs should provide families with education, support, and perspectives on child growth and development,” said Sarah Straka, director of early learning.

One way the district engages parents is to invite them to participate in advisory council meetings where parents can weigh in on what is working and what could be improved in the district’s 4K program. These meetings, which take place four times a school year, include a 4K coordinator and school board member. In addition, this group developed a survey for all 4K parents in the district in an attempt to hear from each parent and continue to drive improvement. The survey was especially helpful in determining which communication methods or outlets worked well with parents.

The district also partners with its local public library and offers programming for parents, childcare providers, and school personnel that focus on early childhood education.

These events have focused on a variety of topics, including early childhood pre-reading strategies, behavior strategies, and infusing creativity and play into learning.

“We have seen a genuine excitement about our new 4K program and the many activities and trainings that are offered outside the typical school day,” Straka said.

Family open gyms provide another opportunity for parents to become involved in their child’s learning. Held monthly on Saturdays, the gym sessions are open to all 4K families. At the open gyms, stations are set-up with activities that focus on developing gross motor skills (running, skipping, tossing, jumping) fine motor skills (hand-eye coordination) and academic skills like counting and identifying lower and upper case letters.

The Mount Horeb 4K program is expected to experience a slight increase in enrollment numbers at the start of this school year. The district also plans to add more trainings and workshops for 4K families. Participation numbers in the family outreach programs were positive, with almost 50 percent of families participating in an open gym. Additionally, more than 90 percent of parents “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that the parent/child activities were valuable.

For Straka and other staff at the Mount Horeb Area School District, the outreach efforts help introduce parents to the district and prepare students to succeed from a young age.

“It is nice to know that we can support families who then will support their children during their time in our 4K program and beyond.” ■

Shelby Anderson is editor of Wisconsin School News.

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— *Sarah Straka, director of early learning,
Mount Horeb Area School District*