



---

**An Interview with (Margaret Ranny Bledsoe (Superintendent, St. Johnsbury VT) and Michelle Fox (Early Education Coordinator, St. Johnsbury VT))**

- **Ranny(overview):** *St. Johnsbury is a comparable district to many of the contexts in Kentucky*
  - St. Johnsbury is VT. capital; 669 students in school, high poverty community, Free and Reduced Lunch >60% (poverty avg is normally early 40s), hub for social services, low income housing, jail, work camp, drug abuse resources
    - Economic divide within the community (old and new section)
    - St. Johnsbury children are referred at 10x state average to DCS (child welfare)
    - Before state issued universal Pre-K, worked with providers as early education collaborative.
      - Applied for grants and met once a month for two years to build relationships
    - Race to the Top enabled application for pre-k for 4-yr-olds
    - Currently in year 2 of having Pre-k at school,
      - Have worked with 7 centers
    - Kids on year 2 of pre-k have seen a difference
  - **Broader Goals of Program:** Initially gave behavior data to school board, called a meeting after a negative article was written in the newspaper, 35 people showed up to the meeting to support the work, began outreach to centers.
    - Key= building relationships
    - With Universal Pre-k, many opted to house all pre-k in school. St. Johnsbury did not because of the commitment over time from business owners (child care center) to early education work.
    - St. Johnsbury recognized that;
      - Culture is different in centers vs. schools
      - Wanted to protect and work with people in community
      - Choice is important for parents. Working with centers feels organic and diversified

- Key Messages= build relationships and work to obtain grant funds to support the work at first
- Michelle (early childhood coordinator) was completely paid for by grant funds during first year
  - This year paid for by grants and partial funds
  - Work not possible without her as she does nuts and bolts of managing funds and partnerships
    - **Michelle:** In programs every day across 7 sites. In classes once or twice a week. Support teachers for classroom and professional development needs. General oversight. Help implement common curriculums that all sites are utilizing. Wanted children to have common language and social-emotional skill set.
- Teachers see themselves as teachers and leaders, not just child care providers
- **Range of Quality Across Settings- Quality Improvement**
  - Last year learned about gaps and disconnects
  - This year focused on strengthening class around curriculum
  - Hired professional development coordinator to bring “equality of quality” up
    - Identifying and being creative around big and small program needs
  - What does quality mean, what does it look like, where are the gaps?
- **Q:** How do district pre-k classrooms fit in if at all?
  - **A.** Common professional development 4 times a year
    - Trainings based around needs
    - Center teachers invited to in-service in fall
    - Joined pre-k collaborative and take turns going to meetings
    - Family events to bring all centers and families to tables
      - Ex: Harvest dinner- Learned harvest songs, over 350 in attendance
  - **Ranny:** Building relationships between two kinds of pre-k is a struggle. School= more academic. Private= more personable in some ways. Teachers aren’t in a union...more like families
    - Continue to push relationships. A lot of it is complaining, they don’t want to be excluded, but they do keep themselves apart a bit
    - Next year incorporating Head Start voluntarily
    - It’s not seamless

- Clarity of purpose and patience are needed for engagement and respect for colleagues
- **Q: High Level Takeaways From Work?**
  - **Michelle:** Collaboration and relationship building. Gathering once a month to have conversations and process them. Working together for outcomes. Common professional development days. Having a liaison between centers and school.
  - **Ranny:** It's important to have a sense of moral purpose....We're a low income school....We have kids who really need the safety, support, care, and early academic social intervention...That sense of belief and commitment gets you through a lot of frustrations
    - Keeping children at the center and their needs at the forefront

## **Discussion**

- **Michelle and Ranny:**
  - Really getting the curriculum in place and aligned is a hard piece.
  - Still need to get a common coherent, vertically themed curriculum
    - Initially had some funding and started with purchasing 2nd step - clear and cohesive approach to social and emotional development
    - Initially focused on building strong climate and community, and still have a lot of work to do on literacy and numeracy