

Written comments of Josh Middleton, Laurel Superintendent – 2-2-05

Good afternoon. My name is Josh Middleton and I am the superintendent of the Laurel Public Schools, a district where all schools reached the status of Adequate Yearly Progress, but an elementary district which did not reach AYP. A district where 4<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 11<sup>th</sup> graders all scored above the national average on the ITBS tests, and where all 4<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 10<sup>th</sup> graders surpassed the targets for proficiency on the CRT. And finally, this is a district whose students who have taken the ACT test have scored higher than both the state and national average in the last four years.

Sounds good? However, one must dig a little deeper in the data. Laurel also has a special education population of 19%, a full 6-7% higher than state and national average. We have 28% of our student population considered to be economically disadvantaged. These two sub groups, special needs and economically disadvantaged, did not fare as well on the CRT and so with not making AYP for the second year in a row, the Laurel District has set to work to make “learning for all” a reality.

One of our interventions this year was to create one section of all day, everyday kindergarten for 16 students who scored low on the kindergarten pre-screening that occurred last spring. This investment was made with district general funds because we are committed to early and lasting intervention. I commend the Laurel Board of Trustees for their initiative, and to teacher, Mrs. Pam Belston who has made this happen.

Why would the Laurel School District invest in something that is not part of the state’s funding formula? If we can agree that reading is the foundation for present and future learning in the school career of students, then let me tell you why Laurel has taken this step.

In the United States, research has shown that by age four, the average child growing up in white collar, professional household has heard 5 million words. The average child growing up in a working class household has heard 3 million words. The average child growing up in a poor/economically disadvantaged home has heard 1-2 million words. Now in the next year, these children are all arriving at the starting line called kindergarten. Some already know their letters, could be reading, or at least reading within months. Others have not been read to in their short little lives and a huge gap now exists. The difference in the mere exposure to vocabulary hamstrings a growing number of students entering school.

The “simpletons” answer to this complex problem is: We need better and earlier parental intervention. Amen to that, but the reality is a school must deal with students who are enrolled with whatever prior learning that has occurred – in other words, we can’t control what happens before age five, but we as a state could make a huge difference in many 5 and 6 year old lives.

Let me give you another research finding: If a student is struggling in reading in 1<sup>st</sup> grade, there is an 88% probability the student will still be struggling in 4<sup>th</sup> grade. If a

student in 1<sup>st</sup> grade is an average reader, there is a 10% probability the student will be a poor reader by 4<sup>th</sup> grade. Are we willing to accept those odds? Who are those poor readers?: The kids who have been exposed to significantly fewer words by age four.

Please put aside your own kindergarten experience. Today's kindergarten has had to adjust to today's students and the higher expectations placed upon them by local, state, and national expectations. Thirty seven years ago when I was in kindergarten, more was caught than taught. It was truly a transitional year before 1<sup>st</sup> grade made up for the most part of a pretty homogenous group.

Today, teachers and administrators are asking for more time in the classroom for 5 and 6 year olds. Here is what Mrs. Belston, our all day, everyday kindergarten teacher is reporting after just half a year of instruction with 16 of the lowest scoring students:

- 1) Having more time has allowed for greater understanding of concepts, and has allowed her to teach and re-teach lessons in different ways to maximize student learning.
- 2) Daily interaction has provided the opportunities for repetition, a key component to successful learning.
- 3) There is a greater connect between teacher and student because of the consistency each day.
- 4) Parents have become more involved in their child's learning. Because teacher now has more time, she has home work expectations that include more one on one reading and reading related activities.
- 5) Attendance, despite all the flu this year, is better for all day, every day section, is compared to part time sections.
- 6) Because of this intervention, our Title I teacher is spending less time with kindergarten and more time with older grades.
- 7) If we did not have all day, everyday, all 16 students would be in Title I program. At this point, it is predicted there will be fewer referrals for Title I next year when they enter 1<sup>st</sup> grade. There will be no retention due to academic abilities from the all day, everyday section in Laurel.

Let me encourage you to promote and pass all day, everyday kindergarten, at least as a funded option for all 5 and 6 year olds in Montana. Early not later intervention is the key to greater academic achievement and learning for all.