

Transcript of Brenda Van Gorder

Interviewer

Tell us your name, how to spell it, and what your title is here at Granite School District.

Brenda Van Gorder

It's Brenda Van Gorder. And it's B-R-E-N-D-A, capital V-A-N, space, capital G-O-R-D-E-R. And I'm the Director of Preschool Services for Granite School District.

Interviewer

What happens in the Granite School District to help families with small children promote their child development, from one to five?

Brenda Van Gorder

We've had a high quality preschool program since 2006. We had some other kinds of preschool programs prior to that, but we were a successful candidate for a U.S. Department of Education grant that allowed us to really try some things out and get to a place of weeding out the things that don't work for children, and things that actually do work. And the primary focus was for children who live in poverty and helping them be prepared for kindergarten. Because what we knew through lots of research and lot of statistics, not only in our state, but nationwide, was that children who enter kindergarten behind, they stay behind. And so our entire focus of our preschool program is to ensure that children don't enter school behind. We want to give them every single opportunity and leg-up so that they are entering school ready to take on the kindergarten core and beyond.

Interviewer

What does that look like if you're comparing that to children who come from low-income families and children who come from medium income families?

Brenda Van Gorder

In Granite School District, preschool is preschool and it's all high quality and it doesn't make any difference if the children are coming from families that qualify for free or reduced school lunch which would put them in a level of poverty. It looks the same for them as it does for our children who just barely don't meet the free and reduced lunch. So more in that low, middle income and middle income. But then it's the same kind of a program for high income children in our school district. So we've really focused in on high quality. The difference is how the children come to us. The children who have had less opportunity, it's not that they are children who are low functioning and can't learn, it's they've not have the opportunity, they've not had the exposure to different kinds of things that children who live in other kinds of situations and different kinds of environments. We see children coming to school with low oral language. Low vocabulary. Low

exposure to all of those pre-academic skills. Many of them are coming to us with low exposure to books and literature. And so they come to preschool like these little sponges, just taking in absolutely everything that we can provide for them. So that's the main focus of our preschool program is just giving them opportunities so that we can help make sure that they are ready for kindergarten.

Interviewer

Dan was a great example of a preschool teacher that takes literature to almost a theatrical place. Talk about the importance of that.

Brenda Van Gorder

When we're hiring our staff, it's not just anybody who can do this. We need staff and we hire specifically with a certain kind of person in mind. We need people to be so excited about school and make this – not just a fun, learning environment, but that it's also a warm and nurturing place for families. What we know is about so many of our families who live in poverty, school wasn't always necessarily a really positive place for them. We want to turn that around. We want to make sure that these kids know school is fun. It's exciting. It's where I'm going to get lots of nurturing as well as get me excited about wanting to stay in school. The drop-out rate for children who live in poverty, it's just abysmal. We see kids dropping out at a much higher rate when they're coming from families who live in poverty. We want to turn that around and not put the Band-Aid on in junior high and high school when we see the drop-outs happening. We've got to connect the kids much earlier. And to keep kids connected, we also need to reconnect their moms and dads and their aunts and their uncles and those primary caregivers back to school. So we're seeing families, like in Mr. Dan's class, that they want to be at the school. The kids can hardly wait to get there. He takes literature, oral language, early math, science, problem solving – those are all those hard skills – but he also takes all of those soft skills – the being a friend. And you hear him say over and over, "Good morning, friends. Turn to your friend and greet them." They stick out hands. They do handshakes. They're learning social skills. And then he comes right back in on top of that and teaches them all of the hard skills – the math, the literacy, the early reading, science, problem solving. It's just an incredible combination. We hire staff to do that with all of our kids.

Interviewer

How do you define at-risk?

Brenda Van Gorder

So at-risk is a term that is used in a variety of ways. Within our preschool program, when we talk about at-risk, there's some factors that we look at. One being qualifying for free and reduced lunch. So there's economic risk factors. Then we also look at some of the other factors that we know contribute to children potentially not doing well in school. Things like a parent's education level, the environment that they're living in at home. Is it a high crime area? Are

there a lot of industrial area around in the area and businesses in the area where they're living versus living in a neighborhood? Is there a lot of drug activity? Have the children been exposed to drugs and alcohol? Have they been exposed to domestic violence? Those are all things – gang activity in the neighborhoods. Those are things that don't necessarily, not every single child, just because they're exposed to those things are going to do poorly, but we know that as a whole, in the research, that children who are exposed to those kinds of things on a daily basis and over and over, are potentially more at risk for learning failure. So if we can take away some of those pieces – we can't change everything about the neighborhood and we can't change everything about their home life, but the one thing we can control is what happens at school. And if we can turn kids around and help them see that school is a safe place, and make sure that it always is a safe place, and it's a warm place, and it's a place where I can be nurtured, and it's a place where I can connect, and it's a safe place where I can always let people know if something's not going well for me, it turns things around for them. Then they can just relax. Kids come into us highly stressed because of those different kinds of risk factors. As you can imagine, when you're three and four years old, those things are happening around you and you have no control of that. What we want to do is bring those kids in, let them just relax and be able to be open to learning. It's an absolutely beautiful thing to watch kids that walk in that are so tense, and as soon as our teachers start singing those familiar songs and having familiar routines and it's something that's predictable and that they can expect that it's going to happen every single day, they just relax and then their little minds open up and in comes the learning. In comes that friendship. In comes being connected to another adult. It also opens up an opportunity for the parents to also see this is a great place for my kids, I want to be there too. I can't even tell you how many families who have come to us who had dropped out of high school, struggled with reading and math themselves through elementary schools, junior high, through high school – it was so hard for them, that they just left. They decided not to stay. Their kids are excited about learning and now they're starting to get excited about learning. They want to get connected. They're signing up and doing adult ed, getting their high school diplomas. They're saying I can go to college and they're doing that. They're hearing their kids say, "We're supposed to go and college, and I am going to college." They're starting that kind of conversation with their parents when they're three and four and their parents are saying, "Oh, my goodness, I've got to get on board. I've got to stay ahead of them." Some of our low readers of our families, they are now saying, "I've got to learn to read because I've got to stay a couple of steps ahead of my children." And our three and four year olds, they're pushing it. They know the alphabet. They know their sounds. They think they've invented reading. They start breaking the code when they can start sounding words out. That's exciting for families and at the same time there's a little bit of scare for families like oh, my gosh, am I smart enough to be the mom or dad of this little child?

Interviewer

Who are the families? I would like to talk to them. Do you know a family?

Brenda Van Gorder

We could probably connect you to some.

Interviewer

Back to school.

Brenda Van Gorder

We've had so many families that have gone back to school. And we're their cheerleaders, they're their cheering on.

Interviewer

This is a two-generational mechanism. When the child sees their parent study, they also want to study and visa versa...it working for both the parent and child.

Brenda Van Gorder

It's good for all. You know, I think that there's so many... people who believe that the only way to fix poverty is that we have to just keep putting these Band-Aids on and fixing the things that we can visibly see. You have to have a place to live, and you have to have food and you need to find them a job, and they're essential, and they're also kind of a Band-Aid. It doesn't really fix or cure or change the trajectory. And we know that because we see multi-generational poverty. And I believe this with all my being that when you address it early on, and we have to make sure that the kids have a place, and the parents too. They have to have a home and they have to have things to eat and medical care and all of those things. But at the same time, to change that totally around so that we just don't feed the next generation right into that same need for somebody else to put the Band-Aids on for them, if we educate these children and get them connected to school, we're changing it, not just in preschool. We're not changing it just even in elementary or even in the school years. What we're doing is changing this family's life forever. This kid, it changes them forever. It changes the trajectory. They're going to be doing something different. They're not going to be feeding into that multi-generational poverty. They can be the thing that stops it and turns it totally around for a family.

Interviewer

Stress. I can see the issues of poverty. Tell us what that does to a child developmentally.

Brenda Van Gorder

When a child comes to school stressed, appearing to be delayed, it often looks like that introvert, shyness, afraid to expose themselves and to enjoy themselves. Sometimes we see it on a different side. So that's kind of that introvert side. Sometimes we see stress come out in totally different ways of acting out. Stress looks like punching, hitting, throwing, temper tantrums. And they're three and

four years old. They're not quite sure how to handle all those emotions. So helping our teachers understand all sides of what stress can look like and what kids are going to come to school. And we take the kids how they come. We see kids who are so stressed that they are afraid to go in and use the restroom and they won't use the bathroom when they're at school and they won't wash their hands and they don't want to sit next to anybody. Having teachers be trained on how to watch for those things and connect the kids in different ways and just keep nurturing them and supporting them, and providing great opportunities for them to try things in a different way. We kind of break through all of that. And you can see it in their shoulders, you can see it in their little faces that they just relax. And once we get them to that place of just relaxing, learning takes place, friendships happen, connecting back to school, connecting to learning. And then all of the sudden they start seeing I'm in control of this. I'm in control of my emotions. I can be in control of what's happening around me. I have words that I can say when I'm upset. I don't need to hit. I don't need to scream and cry. I can tell you I don't like this, what you're doing is – I don't like it. I want you to do something different for me. Giving kids words instead of "no", "stop it," "shut up," "go away," those aren't words that you'll even hear in our classrooms. We use totally different words. We have a program called Good Talking Words. And it goes clear back to just teaching kids about taking care of themselves and also, being open to friendships and reaching out to people. Asking for help. That's a new concept for children. Sometimes of just sitting back and waiting for somebody to notice that they need help. No, we need you to be proactive. You need to be active for yourself. You need to advocate for what you need. If you're hungry, you need to tell me you're hungry. If you're thirsty, tell me you're thirsty. If you want him to stop hitting you, tell him to stop hitting you. And giving them some power within themselves but also within their environment.

Interviewer

And if it's severe, and it's chronic –

Brenda Van Gorder

We have supports for kids where our staff, they do all of the strategies that I've just talked about. But when we have children who need additional supports -- the really nice thing about our program is it's not just a preschool program for teaching pre-academic skills. We have all different kinds of supports. We have psychologists, we have social workers, we have nurses. I have special education teachers. Speech pathologists, OT's, PT's – all of those different people who can gather around a child and give them the supports that they need to boost them up so that they can do well. Not just in a preschool setting, but keep doing well beyond, not just at school, but also at home. Give them some skills that they can also use in their communities.

Interviewer

Do you have any stories of families or people in your program who are struggling to provide a rich education for their kids? Or doing everything they can to support their child?

Brenda Van Gorder

We have 3,000 families right now in our program and I don't think it would be an overestimate to say that more than half of those families are in some sort of a situation of struggle. It's financial struggle, struggle with additions and things that are happening in their households. But being able to meet all of the needs. And it's working families, it's single moms, it's two-parent homes. It's all of that. It's families who are having to live multiple families together in one home so that they can all meet the needs of living under a roof and having running water and all of those kinds of things. I don't think it would be anywhere near of an overestimate to say that these families are doing the very best that they can. They work hard every single day. We hear constantly about how families are working together in a neighborhood to pick children up from school and their little children off at school because this mom needs to sleep because she's working shifts. So this mom will take the kids to and from school, and kind of keep the kids so that this mom can do what she needs to do. We have parents that are crossing back and forth and it's mom that drops the kids off for preschool, and it's dad that picks up because the parents are doing shift work. It's not uncommon for us to hear about the number of families that have two or three jobs to try to make ends meet and it's still not enough. They're still struggling financially to meet all of the needs. Then when we get to a place of are there enough discretionary dollars leftover after you've met housing, clothing, food, and medicines and all of those things that are just the basics. [intercom announcement]

Interviewer

After taking care of the essential.

Brenda Van Gorder

So after the families have met all of those basic essentials, then is there discretionary funds leftover to put towards preschool? In most families the answer is no. There aren't discretionary dollars, there aren't discretionary dollars for fun activities either. But preschool gets kind of pushed down further onto the plate. Through programs like what we're offering right now, through federal dollars, state dollars, investment dollars, from very generous donors, we're able to offer scholarships that takes away that barrier for the families. It's not a fight. It doesn't matter that it's a financial burden, we can take that piece away. Your child deserves to have a high-quality preschool exactly the same way as every other child who doesn't have all of those barriers. So being able to have just this nice equal program. So when you asked earlier, what does preschool look like different for families who live in poverty versus our families who are living in very wealthy families – we have that full range – our preschool program looks exactly the same because all children deserve a high-quality preschool program whether you live in poverty or not.

Interviewer

And some people in our community believe children should not be in preschool, that they can get those things at home.

Brenda Van Gorder

So we know that children aren't always getting all of the stimulation and the opportunities at home because of what it looks like when they enter school. We have children that are entering so far behind – language development exposure, those kinds of things. When people ask me, and I've been asked many times, "Why are you taking these children out of their homes, the very best nurturing, best place for young children, three and four year olds," they talk of them as babies. "Where these babies need to be is home with their moms." That works for some families, and for other families that's not going to work. We have to be realistic. In some of our families, they're at work. Home isn't where the kids are going to be, they're going to be in some other kind of a setting. And if they're going to be in another setting, we want that setting to be high quality, not just some kind of a setting, just some kind of a half designed program. If we're going to do it, let's do it right and let's do it right in childcare, let's do it right in public school, let's do it right in private school, let's do it right in our environment, in every environment, in every community. It's about choice. And I know that the families are making choices based on what's good for them and we need to allow families to do that. We don't need interference from outside entities who believe that they know what's right for every single family. That's your opinion, that's your opinion for your family. Hold that opinion for them. You don't get to make decisions for every other family. Let them make their own decisions. I have 3,000 families who on their own, have made the decision that they want their children to go to preschool. Those are families who are wealthy, those are families who are middle-income, those are families who live in extreme poverty. These are families who don't speak English, these are families who are refugee status. These are families who have children with disabilities. Every family needs to make a choice for their own family. And we also need to make sure that there's choices available that are equal and high quality no matter where you are in society, no matter where you are financially, you should have high-quality choices. Make choices for yourself, let everybody else make choices for themselves. But we have to have choices available for everybody.

Interviewer

What is the cost if these children aren't put in quality preschool as a community?

Brenda Van Gorder

The cost for our community of not having children be prepared for school – and I say this to my staff regularly – we're not just preparing children for kindergarten. That's so short-sighted. We're preparing children for all of their school life, but we're also preparing children for life beyond school. We have to always be thinking about what's that next environment. The cost when children are ill

prepared is, at the school level, that's easy, kindergarten teachers, if they have to back up and re-teach or do new learning to children who missed skills in those pre-kindergarten years, they have to take time to do that so that they are ready to do the kindergarten core. Every time we have to keep going backwards to catch kids up and pull them up, that costs our entire system a lot of money. Remedial services are expensive. Prevention is not expensive at all. We need to have programs like that. Then, as we move on, as kids get older, as they hit those junior high years and those high school years, that's where we start seeing some of the other effects of children who are not connected to school, when they start being more involved with gangs, criminal activity, juvenile justice systems. Those things, that's cost to our society as well. And I'm not being like Pollyanna-ish and saying that every child who goes to preschool will never be engaged in any kind of things that they're not supposed get involved in – drugs, alcohol, and crime and things like that. But we know for a fact, based on many different kinds of research, and research that's going on right now in Granite School District, that children are less likely to engage in risky behavior, less likely to be engaged in criminal behavior, and less likely to be engaged in activities that will get them into a place of not only costing them, but costing our society.

Interviewer

Talk about the research and the tracking and how that was used to help.

Brenda Van Gorder

So as I mentioned we were the recipients of an Early Reading First grant and it was part of that grant that we started weeding out the things that make a difference and the things that were really not getting us outcomes. And we had been keeping track – collecting data around different kinds of outcomes. What we started seeing is that children who entered our preschools well below their age-mate peers – in this particular case, on a standardized test – children that were functioning two to two and a half standard deviations or more below the mean on a standardized test, they looked much like children who were potentially eligible, that we may have referred for special education serves which is another really costly part of education. And yet, we knew because of the risk factors, that there was a high probability that they were not children with disabilities, rather they were children who lacked an opportunity. So we beefed up the opportunity and we just kept watching these children through preschool, kindergarten first grade, all the way up through. Right now our cohorts, those first three cohorts that were under that initial grant are in fifth, sixth, and seventh grade. We've been watching. We didn't have that gravitating back to the mean like so many of the other national research was doing for – especially for programs for children who live in poverty nationally. The data wasn't all that great. Children who they kind of looked okay in kindergarten, but gradually in first, second, and by third grade they'd just kind of come right back to looking no different than the children who had not had interventions in preschool. We wanted to turn that around and we wanted to also see if the interventions that we were doing were going to have that long-lasting effects. As we were collecting this data, we were like, we're on

to something, we are seeing the difference. Not only in those hard skills in the exact same tests that are being used in the entire state for English language arts, for mathematics and science. Our kids were right on target with the rest of the state even though that is state-wide with kids who don't live in poverty, kids who aren't living in at-risk kind of environment, compared to our kids who were living in some of our most impacted neighborhoods. They didn't look like this anymore, they looked like this, exactly the same. That data, we started sharing, bringing it to the attention of the State Department of Ed, the Health Department. Our outside evaluator from Utah State University said, "We've got some incredible data, we need to be sharing this data." Voices for Utah Children was looking at the data, paying attention. We had legislators both in the senate and the house that were starting to pay attention to that data. All of the sudden the outside investors started paying attention saying we've got something different that's going on here. How are you getting those results? How are you getting those results to see sustained past that magic third grade – are the kids on target in third grade? Can you keep it going fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh? Well the answer is yes. Yes, we can right here in Utah, we can do that, and we are doing that. It was enough – the primary premise of House Bill 96 and with our outside investors is that children who looked like children, who were potentially eligible for special education have now turned it around and they're not eligible for special ed. We don't suspect that they have a disability. They're doing really well. Not just really well, they're doing as well or better than their age-mate peers who don't live in poverty and such at-risk conditions, to the point that it's a cost-avoidance for our state. The way special education funding works is that when a child is identified, then the state funding comes, we push it into our count for funding. The money comes, we serve the children. The following year, we do the count, the funding keeps coming. What we also know nationally is that children, once they're eligible for special education, they rarely get out. So it's not just a savings this year, it's the ongoing cost avoidance for our state all the way through their education career which starts adding up when you say that it's now 300 kids, then it's 600 kids, then it's 900 kids, then it's 1500 kids. That each one of those kids, every year is doing a cost-avoidance for our state. It was enough to get a lot of national attention as well as the attention of some pretty powerful investors that said, "We'd like to help make that happen across your entire state." We could help the state avoid paying for potential education services that probably weren't needed if we would just pay funds upfront where it's much less expensive than trying to do remedial services and special educations services after the fact. Putting that Band-Aid on after the fact. And so hence we had the passing of House Bill 96, and ongoing funding for at-risk preschool.

Interviewer
Wonderful.

Brenda Van Gorder
It's fabulous. It's fabulous.

Interviewer

Are other districts catching on?

Brenda Van Gorder

Uh-hmm. Anybody who wants to know about what we're doing, we've been very open and willing to share with anybody who wants to know. We have not just school districts that are interested, but also private providers for preschool. So we have numerous partnerships in the community with private preschool providers. We also are working with some non-profit agencies that also focus efforts for children who live in poverty. And we're all working together and sharing what we know about our populations, but also what we know about strategies that make a difference, that make long-lasting differences. So right now we have across the state, we're up now like 130, 140 different classrooms that are using the same kinds of strategies that we've been using in Granite School District since 2006 and they're seeing the same kind of results. And the really cool thing is, is you see the results pretty darn quick. It's not like we even have to wait years and years and years to wait for all of the results, we see the difference right away. Our private providers, the private childcares, they saw results nearly instantly. And we do a pre, a mid, and a post evaluation of children. From the pretest to the mid-test, we were already starting to see some of the same trends that we've been seeing since 2006. Anybody can do this. It's a commitment that we need to do and it's a worthwhile commitment, but anybody can do it. I'd love to say that we have the corner on the market and it's magic and only Granite School District could ever think this up. It's not true. Anybody can do this, you just need to pay attention to what the research is telling us, implement the research with fidelity, and wa-la, we get results.

Interviewer

Head Start nationally is struggling, at least that's what I've read over and over. As they call it "fade out" by third grade. But, the CEO of Utah's Head Start program said a high percent of their graduates were ready for kindergarten.

Brenda Van Gorder

I was so encouraged – just recently I had an opportunity to be in a think tank and do some presenting at the Aspen Institute in New York City. And sitting next to me is the head of the Health and Human Services for the United States. And Head Start is under that department. And she and I were having a really rich discussion about the changes that are happening nationwide for Head Start. It has a bad rap. The data has not been pretty. And we know that – and that's not Brenda speaking, that's the data and the reports are saying that. We know that there are programs nationwide that were kind of bucking those trends and have been turning it around. But the most encouraging thing is that the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Health and Human Services for Head Start, those two departments are now having some really nice conversations and looking how they can bring those programs together to get more kids ready.

Using those dollars to get more kids ready. It's going to have to come down to changes in Head Start standards and the expectations of teaching staff, just as we had to make changes in expectations and using our data to drive all of our decisions. Head Starts need to do those same things nationwide. And it's not just Head Start because there's lots and lots of different kinds of federally funded, state funded, locally funded different programs all over our nation that were having those very similar kind of results. Public schools were getting some of those same kind of results. We do these things in preschool, and by third grade the results have faded. If we pay attention to the research, and implement with fidelity, there doesn't have to be a fade. And part of that, we believe, because we have the data all the way now up into seventh grade, and no fade, that says if we teach the children the essential skills that they need – and not just have it be an exploratory, not hoping kids will soon bloom where they're growing and come up to us and beg us, "Please pick me, now teach me to read, now teach me math." Because what we know about children who live in poverty and children who are suspected of having disabilities, they don't come forward like that to us. They sit back and wait for teachers to teach them. We need to teach them. We have to get the skills into the kids, choose the essential skills that will prepare them now to be ready for the next environment so that those teachers can teach the essential skills of that grade to move on to the next environment. That's how we're going to change things over our entire system.

Interviewer

House Bill 96, did that money or did the Goldman Sachs money go to private daycares?

Brenda Van Gorder

Both. It is both in public and in private. The House Bill 96 clearly laid out that this wasn't just a public school funding source, it's for all programs working with children who are at-risk at the preschool level. It's kind of a two-part thing. If you have the data, and are ready for the social impact piece of that, the investors are there ready to provide the funds in and through the payback mechanisms and whatnot that are in House Bill 96. The other piece is not to put everybody else that wasn't quite ready for, to attract the funding of an investor, to be able to build their quality to the place that they can attract an investor. So the money was split out. Those that were ready to have the social impact investing, and then the others that we're building quality. So there's quality grants out and those are both private and public schools, Head Starts, non-profits –

Interviewer

Head Start, that's part of that money?

Brenda Van Gorder

They can access this money as well. So all they needed to do was write a grant, go through the process and be funded. And it's to build quality. Many of our programs that were funded in the last year are programs who needed to collect

more data. They had programming going on, but the data hadn't quite caught up yet, so they're in the process of gathering the data to be able to support and share with funders to be part of the social impact side of House Bill 96.

Interviewer

Children's Express. Talk about that.

Brenda Van Gorder

Children's Express is one of our partners and has been through another grant through the Kellogg Foundation. They wanted, from the Kellogg perspective, they wanted to see this incredible work that we had been doing in Granite School District and they said you know, that's some pretty tight kinds of things and parameters that you have within a public school setting and things that you can control. Could you get those same kind of results if it was in a private childcare setting? We said absolutely you could. The Office of Childcare here in our state offered to help build some partnerships and those bridges and knew of some programs that they thought would probably be open to the idea. We contacted them. They came and visited with us. We visited with them and built this relationship. And they now are part of the – attracting the investors. So it's not just on the public side, it's also on the private side and the non-profit side.

Interviewer

And your role is to help train the staff?

Brenda Van Gorder

Our role with Children's Express and a couple of other private childcares has been – it's truly a partnership and we brought everything that we knew to the table and they brought the things that they knew to the table. We have offered coaching in the classrooms, ongoing professional development – so training of their staff. And then also working with their directors and owners on some of the strategies that we use to build sustainability. At some point, we'll not necessarily part ways because we're so connected to them and they're serving the very children who are in our neighborhoods and in our school district. We want to stay connected to them. What will happen now is that they will have a sustainability plan of funding and but we'll still be connected. We do referrals back and forth to each other, they may still tap into and buy into some of our professional development. They may be building skills within a consortium of other childcare providers to build their own professional development and rely on themselves and not necessarily rely on a public school setting for that. It's a very cool thing.

Interviewer

Can you distinguish quickly childcare from pre-K?

Brenda Van Gorder

I think a lot of the words in preschool age group, in that birth to five kind of get like mixed up and people use terminology to mean one thing and yet they're really talking about a different thing. Preschool is very specific about teaching pre-kindergarten skills. It's around teaching specific skill sets to get ready for the next environment, which is kindergarten. So it is more of a pre-academic, social, targeted, focused kind of a program. Childcare can be those very same kinds of things, but is more of the wraparound services. It's the times of the day when there's other things happening like enrichment of what was happening. It might not be targeted and focused on specific educational kinds of goals, but more on care goals. It would be more of a place for parents to have their children while they're at work. But what we're seeing now is that it's not just childcare is one thing and preschool is another, we're starting to see that nice blend and crossover. All of the private childcares that we're working with have a preschool component in the morning and they have childcare in the afternoon. So during the afternoon – they're three and four year olds – and so they're pooped after they've had their intensive preschool program. That's in the afternoon. They're having their lunch, they play outside, they do arts and craft kinds of things. They have their napping time. It looks a little less structured. It's a little more relaxed and that they've already had their preschool time and then they go into their childcare time.

Interviewer

Talk about the waiting lists.

Brenda Van Gorder

Waiting lists are parents self-identifying who wants to be in preschool. We right now have, in Granite Preschool, every year have lists anywhere from in the 500 range up to over a thousand children whose parents have come forward and said I want my child to be in preschool. I hope there will be an opening that my child will be able to get in. Granite's not the only place that has waiting lists. We have waiting lists around our entire state to get into high-quality preschool programs. That's parents self-identifying. Not school districts. Not private childcare. Not private preschools go nothing to homes and dragging children out and making the parents sign them up for something that's some sort of a government program. That's not what this is about. This is about parents making choices for their own family. They want preschool. We need to provide it for them.

Interviewer

How many are on the waiting list for Granite?

Brenda Van Gorder

Right now we have a waiting list of over 600 children.

Interviewer

So what does that say to policymakers? What does that say to private investors?

Brenda Van Gorder

I hope what it's saying is that families are telling us loud and clear they want preschool. They need preschool. And if there aren't enough high-quality preschool providers, that they need to be funneled all into just a few locations, we need more. We need them to be more widespread so that they're easily accessible within their neighborhoods. Some of our waiting lists are strictly because the family has a barrier of transportation of being able to leave their neighborhood. Where I might have room three miles down the road, that's great, if I had a car to get me the three miles down the road. I can walk to my neighborhood school. But once that classroom is full, it's full. If I had another preschool at the school that was only like two or three more blocks away, I could probably walk that extra two or three blocks to get to high-quality preschool. But what I'd really like to do is take my preschooler to the same place where I'm going to take all my other kids. When I'm dropping off my kindergartner, when I'm dropping off my third-grader, I'd like that to be my school community. I don't want to have a community here and here and here and there. This is where I want to have my community school. And I need my preschool to be there too.

Interviewer

So what does that say we need to change?

Brenda Van Gorder

What we want is to have opportunities for high-quality preschool state-wide in every single community. Families are telling us loud and clear where we have high-quality preschools and opportunities for families, families choose to come out in droves. Not trickling out. When we have our registration and it starts in January, I will have classrooms – especially in my Title 1 school areas, where we have higher levels of poverty – to access my social impact House Bill 96 kind of funding – those slots will be filled in January and February. They're gone. We need more slots for the families that are trying to access, want to access, and need it close by. They can't drive to Layton to get it, they can't drive clear across town to get it. They need it right here close to home.

Interviewer

So you need more money?

Brenda Van Gorder

We need more money. We need more programs. We need lots of money! So, when I say we need money, and we need lots of money, I just want to quantify that a little bit that we need less money if we do high-quality preschool, than if we don't do high-quality preschool. We will pay for these kids to be educated and we will pay for them for all of the different kinds of services and extra services that they're going to need. And I'm not just talking about school, I'm talking about out in our social services and additional services. We will pay one way or another. It is much cheaper, it is a much better investment, it's a much better pay-off if we serve kids early. Preventative is inexpensive.

Remedial, horribly expensive, and it's a Band-Aid. It just starts snowballing and one remedial service leads into another remedial service into a juvenile justice service, into housing services, into medical services. All of those things just become more expensive, not less expensive. We can pay now or we can pay later.

Interviewer

What are the indicators? These pieces of quality that you're talking about?

Brenda Van Gorder

We have ten indicators that are researched-based that we know get results. And some of them are focused on children, and some of them are focused on our staff, and some of them are focused on the families. So they are things like having standards and teaching to the standards. Having a curriculum that's researched-based. And within that curriculum, that there needs to be a balance. There needs to be teacher-directed time, and child-directed time. Whole groups, and small groups. And time for children to be able to work independently. We need to have nice connections and communication happening between home and school. We need to have qualified staff. And then the other piece of that is making sure that they're not only qualified, but then they're trained and it's ongoing and recursive and targets and focused. We need to make sure that programs are accessible to all children, not just children who can afford to pay for preschool, but children who speak a language other than English, children who have disabilities, children who live in poverty. All kinds of at-risk factors. We need to make sure that preschool all really means all. We have to be able to do that. We, let's see, how many is that?

Interviewer

That's good. Talk about the preschool development grant. \$15 million.

Brenda Van Gorder

So our federal government has these child development grants that are available to states to build and kind of jumpstart their early childhood dollars, the preschool dollars. They're really targeted at children – it's a targeted population, so mostly children who are living in poverty. It's not an attempt to try to have universal pre-K. I'm not sure that as much as an advocate I am for preschool, I'm not sure universal pre-K regulations and mandates are the answer, not just here in Utah, but I don't know – I don't think that it needs to happen that way. It needs to be available based on parent desire to access those. We have these monies available. Money that was coming available to Utah was in the \$15 million range. At this moment our state has decided that now is not the time to access those dollars. I don't know why. Why is now not the time? Right now is the prime time. We have the House Bill 96. It would build on the momentum that we have going. It's a way to blend those funds together and spread the high-quality preschool to all corners of our state nearly instantly. We could do it instantly. We don't need to gradually have investors come into the mode. We could

capitalize on, blend those funds, and make it happen state-wide. Now is the time. We need to do it now.

Interviewer

It didn't happen.

Brenda Van Gorder

It did not happen. We need to make sure that our legislatures, our governor's office, our State Office of Education, our Health Department, school districts – we all need to be advocating for the same thing. We need to let our lawmakers know. We need to let our elected officials know. We need to let our State Office of Ed know, we need to let the governor's office know that we as a body want choice for our families and one of the choices is high-quality preschool.

Interviewer

There wasn't a lot of publicity about it, and the public didn't know much about it.

Brenda Van Gorder

The money, as many federal grants are, they're announced quietly and people that are in the know that track and watch those things, know about them. The money is applied for, and then the money happens, and it just kind of happens in the, kind of behind the scenes. This was a little bit more open whereas Utah was a targeted state. The U.S. Department of Ed had on purpose, by design, had gone into areas of our country where there has been a lack of state funding or high numbers of children who live in poverty or in at-risk conditions, accessing high-quality preschool. So these were dollars that were really targeted at Utah. It's not too late. It's too late for this particular funding round, but those are going to keep coming up. They come up every year. We need to be paying attention and now is the time we need to be thinking ahead and all of us joining together. Not just those of us in the early childhood field, but those of us who are parents and grandparents and lawmakers and educators – we all need to come together and say this is the right thing to do for the kids of our state, because it will make a huge difference not just for preschoolers, it's going to make a difference forever.

Interviewer

One thing you mentioned was the phrase, "closing the achievement gap." I was talking to someone who said she disliked that phrase because it feels like it pulls children down. "They should say equitable education opportunity." Have you heard that?

Brenda Van Gorder

I have. Closing the achievement gap, it's kind of an education kind of terminology. We hear closing the opportunity gap, we hear looking at educational opportunity – you're hearing all of the same thing – it's really all describing the very same thing: Provide good-quality education. Kids do better. They do better than what? Better than they would have if they hadn't had good-

quality education. And we need to be striving, absolutely for equal access. What will that look like? Well equal isn't exactly the same. Some children need more to get them up to that, even the playing field out. Some kids need exactly what we've always offered and that was good enough. But it's not always going to be good enough for every single person in our community. And to truly be equal and even, no matter what we call it, somehow we have to bring that in together so that all children have great education and equal opportunity to succeed.

Interviewer

Why should early learning matter to Utahans?

Brenda Van Gorder

The kids – early learning matters because of the kids. I know it's kind of a catch, little coined little phrase, "the kids are our future," they really are our future. If we don't invest in the little bodies, and those little children, in our state, they're either going to flee – they will leave us. Or, we're going to be constantly one of those states that is the lowest funded in education. We will be the state that people are going, "Oh, what's going on in Utah? Why aren't they doing it?" We have to do something. Now is the time. We have to do something.

Interviewer

Any experiences you've had with children of families you want to share with us?

Brenda Van Gorder

Oh, my gosh, now we could talk for a whole hour about all of the families that come in. We have some of the most passionate families that want their children to be in preschool. We have families every day who they stand in line to have their paperwork reviewed so that they can get in either on a scholarship to pay tuition, to pay tuition on a sliding fee scale. Just the other day we had a family who was standing there and they live outside of the boundaries of a Title 1 school where their tuition would've been covered under those kind of funding. All of the scholarship slots have already been filled. They're a family who qualifies for free lunch and yet they live in a school boundary where our preschool would've been a tuition-based. Even on the sliding fee scale, it wasn't enough. There's not enough discretionary funds in that family. One of the moms who was standing right behind to pay her tuition for the month for her child who attends one of our other tuition-based preschool classrooms was listening to this – not on purpose. I mean it was just in her office, she was waiting her turn. And it must have weighed upon her heart. She said, "I will do this for you. I can pay for your child to go to preschool." And these two mothers just instantly bonded over this opportunity. One mom was so grateful that she could still have her child go to preschool. And the other mother is feeling good and saying, "I've got these extra resources, I can do this for you. I see that you're trying to do everything you can." She said, "I work, I'm doing all of these things, I need my child to be in preschool." This mom says, "I can see that you're doing everything that you can. I can do something. I can have you go to preschool." That's one example. We

have families that step in to help each other with childcare. We have families who step in to help each other with carpooling because I can't get my child, I don't have a car that works, or the only car that we have that works, my husband takes to get to his job so I don't have a way to get my children to preschool. So they've worked out car deals. We have parents who are baby-sitting for each other while the other one is going to college or they're baby-sitting each other's children while the other one is taking online high school classes or going to our adult ed programs. We have families who are connecting that speak a language other than English and they're connecting so that they can better their skills and still have their kids in school. The stories go on and on and on about the compassion and the desire to have their children do well in school; the desire to have them enrolled in a program that they know is going to make a difference for them and for their children. They want it to be different than it is for them. They've struggled. They know that they've struggled because of a lack of education, lack of a high-paying job, all different kinds of circumstances and those are just too numerous to even go into how many different situations for those families. And they know that they want it to be different for their kids. And what they know is that they care about them, and that education is one of those links that's going to change it for them. And at the same part, we have these other families that come around and who can say, "I have lots of choices. I could go to Granite Preschool, I could go to private preschool, I could just teach the kids at home because I have the skills to do that." And they've made a choice that they are willing to share their resources with other families and provide the transportation to get back and forth to school, to get to preschool, provide the snacks. Whatever that they can do. It has brought together not to divide people between those who live in poverty and those who don't live in poverty. That's not we've seen. What we're seeing more is that preschool has been one of those things that's brought communities together and that we see families who would've never known each other, would've never been even thinking about communicating with each other, who now have bonded over that their little children play together in preschool. Now all of the sudden they're thrown together and they're starting to connect in different ways and share resources and abilities and all kinds of things. It's just a beautiful thing.

Interviewer

And lastly, tell us why this all matters and what the community can do to support young children.

Brenda Van Gorder

It's a much bigger thing, even though right now I've been focusing on preschool because that's my job, I focus on preschool. It's a much bigger deal. If we invest in our – I think our most precious resource, which is the children, and it's not just preschool children, it's birth through up until they become these young adults. We need to invest in the children. It makes a difference for all of us. It doesn't just make a difference in that child's life, but it makes a difference for all of us. We really need to pull together and embrace a community. We need to get back

to that. Some of our communities are really large, some of them are really small. We need to get back to that mentality that we're all in this together and if preschool's one of those places that we can bond and get it started and build a nurturing educated society, so be it. But that spreads out. And what we're seeing in our little preschool is it starts here and we're just seeing that spread out as those children become kindergarten, first graders, second graders – it just keeps building out and out and some of these families are still connected because the school is the hub of their community. We all need to come together and get back to the basics of being a community, looking out for each other. Because if we look out for each other, it's going to just blossom tenfold or more as the kids grow and they become nurturing adults and it just becomes a much bigger thing.