Coventry preschool program celebrates 5-star rating

By KENDRA GRAVELLE
kgravelle@ricentral.com

COVENTRY — After coming so close last year to achieving the highest possible rank for its early childhood education programs, Coventry Public Schools received word on Friday that its preschool has earned a five-star rating from BrightStars.

BrightStars, the state's Tiered Quality Rating and Improvement System, is used to assess and communicate the level of quality in early childhood education programs on a scale from one- to five-stars.

Less than two percent of all preschools in Rhode Island have achieved five stars, with just 18 out of 952 early childhood programs statewide meeting the top rating. Only four of those programs belong to public school districts, including Westerly Public Schools, the Chariho Regional School District and the East Providence School District.

Denise Ahern, director of early childhood programs at Coventry Public Schools, said Monday that the district has achieved the rating having slowly moved through the ranks.

"It's a pretty thorough, intensive process to go through," Ahern said.

To earn a rating, preschool programs are assessed based on a set of 10 standards, including staff-to-child ratio, teacher quality, curriculum and family communication, Ahern explained.

When the district applied to be assessed in 2018, it received five stars in eight of the 10 standards. It had fallen just short, however, in the assessment standard and the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) standard, which involves a thorough evaluation based on a site visit.

"To be a five-star, you have to get [five stars] in every standard," Ahern explained. "So we tried again."

With this feather in its cap, the district this month will submit an application to the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) to be a vendor in the state's expansion of its pre-Kindergarten program.

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Rating

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In 2014, RIDE was awarded a $19 million federal grant, which has been used to increase access to its state program in districts where more than 50 percent of children are enrolled in Free and Reduced Price Lunch.

This year, for the first time, RIDE has opened the program to the entire state, inviting licensed child care providers, Head Start programs and public and non-public schools statewide to apply to install state pre-K programs.

"It looks like they're going to grant 25 new classrooms this year," Ahern said, pointing out that this is the first time Coventry has been eligible to apply.

In his weekly update to school committee members, Superintendent Craig Levis said last week the grant funding would go toward two classrooms, which in turn would increase the district's capacity to provide high-quality early childhood programs to local families.

"What we're proposing is that we would transform one of our existing [classrooms] into a state pre-K, and then add an additional one," Ahern explained, adding that the state program would be a full-day, six-hour program open to four-year-olds.

Currently, Coventry runs 10 half-day preschool sessions.

"This is a great opportunity for this community," Levis added during Thursday's school committee meeting. "It aligns with our strategic plan and the emphasis on early learning opportunities."

Levis also touted accessibility to high-quality preschool as a way to build "a solid foundation" and to "level the playing field" for students.

"I remember we were the last school district to have full-day [Kindergarten]," Levis continued. "And while everybody else had all-day [Kindergarten] and we didn't, that half a day had to impact the performance of our students."

Having earlier this year been the only school district in the state to receive a Young Children's Champions Award from Rhode Island Kids Count, Levis added that he's confident the district is "in a really good position" to receive the funding.

"I think winning that award from Kids Count—everybody uses their data. I think that's definitely going to help us," Levis said, adding that Coventry has some "incredible programs."

And now that the district has earned five BrightStars, Ahern said she, too, is optimistic that Coventry will be selected to receive the funding.

In order to be eligible, programs must meet a stringent set of Comprehensive Early Childhood Education (CECE) standards. And having a five-star BrightStars rating automatically puts Coventry just below those standards.

The application to become a vendor in the state's pre-K program is due to RIDE at the end of this month.

"It's exciting. And I know it's a grant, we have to receive it, but we are putting our best foot forward and applying for it," Levis said. "I think we have a really good position."

Five-day Weather Forecast

Today

Sunshine, some fair weather clouds, remaining cool. Highs near 45. Some evening clouds then clearing at

Wednesday

Mostly sunny and pleasant. Highs near 50. Thickening cloudiness at night. Lows near 35.

Thursday

Considerable clouds, a few showers are possible, breezy. Highs 45 to 50. Chance for a few showers at night.

Friday

Chance for early showers then mixed clouds and some sunshine, breezy. Highs 45 to 50. Partly cloudy at

Saturday

Partly sunny, breezy and cooler. Highs in the low to mid-40s. Mostly clear and very chilly at night. Lows near 30