

Michigan district expands learning outside of school

Gibraltar School District partners with Champions to provide preschool, before- and after-school programs

Bruce Burger has been the superintendent of the Gibraltar School District in Michigan for the past five years, which serves 3,700 students and includes four elementary schools, one middle school, one high school and one alternative school. When Burger first came to the district as superintendent, one of his most serious concerns was the state of the preschool program already in place. "We had an early childhood program housed in one building, which was losing a considerable amount of money each year," says Burger.

While parents in the community appreciated having such a program located inside the district, management and other costs were deemed too high, and the GSD school board voted to close the building and absorb some of the early childhood program into several other buildings. "It was a tough decision to make, but financially, it was unsustainable," he says.

At board of education meetings in the months after the decision, it was clear that despite the high costs to the district, parents in the community appreciated the early childhood program and wanted it to continue. "We heard many parents say that the location was conveniently located right on their commute to work, for example," says Burger.

In fact, not only did the community not want the early childhood program closed, they wanted it expanded. "We received feedback that we needed additional services, such as latchkey and other opportunities outside of school," says Burger. Reopening and expanding its early childhood center and providing before- and after-school programs wouldn't be feasible, however, given the district's past challenges.

A superintendent colleague of Burger's at a neighboring district had encountered a similar problem, and decided to partner with Champions to operate the district's preschool and before- and after-school programs. "I visited their district to see their programs, and I thought Champions looked like a great opportunity for us," he says.



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A provider of before- and after-school programs and break-time camps, Champions operates educational programs designed to extend the school day, improving student learning and helping them to develop socially, emotionally, physically and cognitively. Champions partners with local school districts to align its curriculum content and activities with district and school goals, while providing a safe, fun atmosphere for students.

"We brought Champions on board as a partner in 2010 to provide latchkey services in our four elementary schools up to grade 5, and they rented what was our early childhood building from us to open a preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds," says Burger, who says the partnership was a turnkey operation; Champions took care of all the details, from programming and activities to staffing and supplies.

The feedback three years later has been very positive. "I don't get two complaints in a year," says Burger. "When I visit the preschool, I see a high-quality educational program going on. I don't see babysitting; this is quality instructional time," he says. "Quite often, my kindergarten teachers have told me that they can tell which students have been to Champions as opposed to other preschools, because they are so prepared for kindergarten."

Today, Burger is pleased to act as a reference to his colleagues at other districts who are pursuing early childhood or before- and after-school programs, recommending Champions to others just as it was recommended to him.

"I have shared with several other districts in our area our positive experience partnering with Champions. I highly recommend them, and I'm a strong advocate for Champions and what they do for districts."

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