

Preschool program eyes re-ranking

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COVENTRY — The town's preschool program is seeking a higher rating from BrightStars, the state's tiered quality rating system for early education programs. Coventry's preschool classrooms currently have three stars out of a possible five-star system, but according to Coventry Public Schools Director of Early Childhood Programs Denise Ahern,

the district submitted an application in March to be ranked at five stars.

The district currently has five preschool classrooms spaced out across three different schools. By September the goal is to have all of the classrooms based out of Washington Oak Elementary. Ahern said there will be two preschool sessions daily — a morning session for 3-year-olds and an afternoon session for 4-year-olds.

BrightStars uses a system of on-

site assessments to assign ratings to different preschool programs for quality assurance purposes.

"It was initially used in community settings only and about five years ago they started using it for public school preschools too," said Ahern. "It's meant to be aligned with all programs."

It is optional to participate in right now in Rhode Island, and all ratings are posted publicly at early-educationmatters.org.

BrightStars assesses preschool and early education programs in six domains: health, safety and nutrition, enrollment and staffing, staff qualifications, PD administration, early learning development and family engagement. Coventry put in its first application to be rated in December of 2014 applying for only one star. Then, in December of 2015 they applied for a star upgrade, and in May of 2016 the district was given a three-star rating for all three of

its preschool programs, which were assessed individually by school. This year, Ahern said, they are hoping for five stars, but it's quite an ambitious goal considering only a handful of programs have ever received the designation.

In order to achieve the five star rating each program must receive fives across the board after being assessed in 10 categories.

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“I am very confident that we will be fives across the board with the exception of just one assessment, learning environments” said Ahern. “This is a challenge for us. They are going to come out for unannounced visits to our programs.”

The programs recently received three stars for things like playground equipment in need of repairs, or issues with not having the proper number of sinks in the preschool bathrooms. Ahern said she tries to focus on the areas where they can improve.

“I have high hopes we will get something higher this year,” she said. “At least four stars.”

The benefit of moving

from three stars to five, she explained, is that it means Coventry’s preschool programs are of a high quality.

“For us it’s the definition of what high quality programming is,” she said. “Preschool is part of school and that’s why I think this is important.”

Ahern also talked about Coventry’s play-based curriculum for preschoolers. You may see children playing with Play-Doh, she said, but by doing so they’re developing and enhancing many other skills. It looks like they’re just playing, but they’re actually learning.

“The teachers watch that and see strength and hand-eye coordination, the use of simple tools, identifying letters and letter forms, developing language skills through intentional questioning, dramatic and pretend play and

exploring characteristics of objects,” said Ahern. “Some people think they’re just doing Play-Doh but they’re not. The teachers are trained to ask questions. It’s guided play where we’re facilitating play and learning, but targeting all the standards at all times.”

“There is a misconception that preschool is play, and obviously it’s so much more than that,” said Coventry School Committee Chair Kathy Patenaude.

“The five stars to me is like a commended school,” said Coventry Superintendent Craig Levis. “It’s a very high standard and I think it makes a big difference down the road. The teachers work effortlessly for this program so we’re very fortunate.”

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