

PRINCIPALS LEAD THE WAY FOR PK-3:
Early Investment
Strong Alignment
Better Results

A P R I L 2 0 0 6

Holding to a Philosophy of Continuous Improvement

Campbell Elementary School
Arlington, Virginia
Laurie Baker, Principal

PROFILE

Grades: PK-5
School Enrollment: 280
District Enrollment: 19,000
Community: Suburban
Percentages of students:

- African-American: 15
- Asian: 6
- Hispanic: 56
- Native-American: 0
- White: 23
- Other: 0

Poverty rate*: 69 percent
English language learners: 49 percent
PK program location: School
PK program funding: Title I, Head Start and state funding

**Poverty rate determined by percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch*

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

- Head Start, Montessori and regular PK classes offer options for families.
- Created to employ best practices, the school strives to carry out that philosophy.
- Diverse school embraces different cultures and has strong parent outreach.

SCHOOL SNAPSHOT

BUILT FOR ALL PIECES TO FIT TOGETHER

Campbell Elementary School in Arlington, VA, a suburb of Washington, D.C., not far from the Pentagon, was built as a model demonstrating how a school focused on early childhood alignment could work in public schools. Campbell Elementary adapted the nurturing environment of exemplary PK programs to a PK-2 school. In the spirit of a family setting, Campbell opted for multi-age classrooms. The school provided a place for washers and dryers to handle spills and messes, along with spaces for children to nap and eat lunch in their classrooms. The atmosphere has prevailed, even as the school has expanded to fifth grade and moved to a new facility.

The home-away-from-home approach also underlies year-round programs for working parents and after-school activities. Principal Laurie Baker, who has led the school since it was on the drawing board to ease overcrowding in Arlington's elementary schools, says Campbell has always pictured itself as a laboratory for best practices in early childhood. She asks, "How often is someone given the opportunity to really create something based on beliefs like that?" While the school was granted freedom to break the mold, it was also given the task of convincing parents that its concepts and results should be continued. As a choice school open to families from half of the populous county, the school only enrolls students whose families opt for the program over a neighborhood school.

Campbell Elementary has emerged with an enrollment that's largely Hispanic, a large group of students learning English as a second language, and a high rate of low-income families. Baker says that while she sees tremendous progress in students, Campbell "continues to struggle" to translate its work into complete test-score triumphs. The school falls below state and district averages on Virginia's Standards of Learning Assessments of English reading and writing, with 76 percent of Campbell third graders passing that exam in 2004, up from 58 percent in 2000. The school fares better on math, social studies and science tests. On 2005 tests, however, scores dropped, and the school did not make Adequate Yearly Progress as defined by the No Child Left Behind Act.

PK-3 ALIGNMENT

CONNECTING TEACHERS, STUDENTS, GRADES AND YEARS

Starting in PK, the school features a variety of approaches. Campbell offers Early Head Start for 3-year-olds, one Montessori PK class and two sections of the state's PK program that follow a High/Scope curriculum. Special education students are also integrated into the PK program. All teachers in the various PK approaches meet and plan together to ensure learning activities are aligned to the state's standards and the school district curriculum that starts in kindergarten. Baker says activities that don't fit into the focus on standards might find a spot in the school's summer program.

When students reach kindergarten, they enter the school's multi-age classrooms, mixing students in kindergarten and first grade, as well as second and third graders. Classroom instruction follows a curriculum adopted by the district based on Virginia's Standards of Learning. Students stay with the same teacher for two years. Baker says the strategy offers a wider range of opportunities for all students and promotes alignment. Those able to work beyond their grade level in certain areas can easily step up to new challenges, while those needing extra help or time can review before moving ahead. The multi-age, two-year classes also

help teachers stay abreast of state learning goals and students' developmental levels. Finally, the looping plan allows families to build closer ties with their children's teachers, Baker adds. "It's about being more developmentally appropriate."

When the school expanded to fifth grade, administrators and teachers spent two years planning how to make the upper grades fit the school's philosophy. Multi-age grouping was extended into fourth and fifth grades. In all classrooms, the school uses the Work Sampling System to gauge and report how students are progressing.

Beyond creating a structure that maximizes alignment, teachers work together to plan connections between grades and regularly discuss student performance and ways to strengthen achievement. Baker says teachers have an unusually strong understanding of what's expected as students move through elementary school. One PK teacher previously worked as a second- and third-grade teacher. Another taught K-1 in the school. That kind of experience adds to the school's efforts to connect what is taught throughout the elementary years. "We can't consider any part of a school as separate," says Baker, a principal for 16 years. "The entire program has to be part of the community. We were able to do that as we created this school, including emphasizing the importance of communication among teachers at all levels."

PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

SETTING DIRECTION IN DESIGN, IMPLEMENTATION AND OUTREACH

Baker had the unusual experience of leading the design of the school before it opened and hiring all staff in the years since. When she retires at the end of the 2005-06 school year, she will be succeeded by the district official who collaborated most closely on creating Campbell's vision and philosophy.

Baker's leadership involves getting results in classrooms, along with her role as the school's main salesperson, building connections with parents, potential parents, community groups and others. She forged a relationship with the Hispanic Committee of Northern Virginia, which now recruits volunteers for a tutoring program. Churches, universities, a local children's theater and other organizations also work with the school. Meanwhile, Baker promotes the school by attending community events and speaking before civic groups and gatherings of potential parents.

Baker's leadership has helped create cohesiveness and unity of purpose in the school. "This year we're focusing on vocabulary and language development," Baker points out. "Recently, the staff was talking about how the music teacher may have time once or twice a week to work with fourth and fifth graders, and the PK teachers spoke up and said they could tutor a child while their class is napping. There is such a staff commitment."

Baker says that while the school serves a largely low-income, minority student body, it delivers experiences comparable to that of the most affluent public schools. Regular field trips offer enrichment and provide a first-hand glimpse of how state learning standards align to the everyday world. "We provide exposure and experiences every child has in a middle-class American experience," Baker says. "We all keep learners in focus as the target, and we know that the target moves."

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

A FACULTY BUILT AROUND THE SCHOOL'S MISSION

The principal credits a cohesive and well-qualified faculty with helping the school make good on its design as a nurturing home for best practice and child development. More than half of the school's 63 teachers speak more than one language, and an equal number hold a master's degree or above. About 95 percent of the school's teachers met the federal definition of highly qualified in 2004-05, and no teachers had conditional or provisional credentials.

Campbell offers teachers many opportunities to collaborate and grow professionally. All teachers in the same grade level, including PK, share planning time. As with the expansion to fifth grade, the school carefully considers how it can make changes while adhering to its vision and mission. Choosing the Work Sampling System as a way to measure and report student progress was a collective decision "that aligned itself with our philosophy," Baker recalls.

Beyond big picture issues, teacher training is focused on ways teachers can be more effective in aligning the state's curriculum goals at all levels and recognizing children's styles of learning and stages of development. Teachers regularly discuss student work, focusing on the strengths and needs in their own classroom and in a bigger context as they meet in teams.

RESULTS

PK PROVIDING A GOOD FOUNDATION FOR ACHIEVEMENT

Campbell has worked to raise test scores on Virginia's Standards of Learning Assessments, even though the school still struggles in English reading and writing. About 76 percent of students passed the exam in 2004, up from previous years but still below district and state averages. The school fares better in other subjects, according to a 2004 district report. All 22 Campbell students who took the state math test in 2004 passed, and all of the 21 tested in history and social science passed. The passing rate in science that year was 95 percent. All of those subjects showed marked improvement over 2000.

While test scores are an important measure of progress, Baker says that alignment and a strong PK program are factors leading to a reduced number of children referred for special education services and intervention as they begin kindergarten.

"They are coming into kindergarten with strong skills — recognizing letter sounds; being aware of print and rhyme; knowing the letters in their names and more," Baker says. "In many cases, our students coming out of PK are as well prepared as the kids I had in North Arlington, where the school was 95 percent white with professional parents and a two percent free or reduced-price lunch rate. The quality of PK programs and access that we didn't have before is making a huge difference."