

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

A P R I L 2 0 0 6

Expanding PK and Alignment as a Remedy for Low Achievement

Fairborn Primary School
 Fairborn, Ohio

Jerry Baker and Nancy McMahan, Principals

PROFILE

Grades: PK-3
 School Enrollment: 1,545
 District Enrollment: 5,553
 Community: Suburban
 Percentages of students:

- African-American: 8
- Asian: 2
- Hispanic: 2
- Native-American: 0
- White: 82
- Other: 6

Poverty rate*: 51 percent
 English language learners: 1 percent
 PK program location: School
 PK program funding: State funding, Title I, Head Start and school budget

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

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

- Principals are leading the transformation of a narrowly focused PK program.
- Lagging test scores are bringing teachers together around standards and data.
- Aligning PK and primary grades is seen as the key to boosting school success.

SCHOOL SNAPSHOT

INTEGRATING PK INTO ALIGNMENT

Connecting a large PK program to the traditional grades in the huge Fairborn Primary School is a work in progress. School leaders are making a 10-year-old district-run preschool program focused on students with special needs into a full part of the school with wider participation. Getting the school to feel ownership of the PK program, helping PK teachers see themselves as part of the larger faculty and capitalizing on ways an expanded PK program can help raise student achievement are major undertakings for the two principals at this suburban Dayton, OH, school.

With test scores that fall short of the state's proficiency and accountability requirements under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) requiring better results from students, school officials say building a better PK program and working on alignment throughout the primary school are vital in creating classroom success. "Our vision is that our PK teachers would really work in tandem with kindergarten and other teachers to make sure they are all connected," says Nancy McMahan, one of two principals at the school. "We're working toward that now."

The path to PK-3 alignment grows from a major school-improvement push at Fairborn Primary, opened in 2004-05 when the district reconfigured its five elementary schools. In 2000, the district was rated as an "academic watch" district by the state. The pressure for better results led all schools to develop improvement plans. As a result, teachers at Fairborn Primary increased attention to meeting academic standards and to improving assessment as a way to gauge student proficiency in the classroom. Principal Jerry Baker says that integrating PK into the school is part of the bigger push to make programs less compartmentalized and more focused on contributing to the larger aims of the school and district. "People now see this as part of the whole, which took principal leadership and saying that if these kids are in the building, they are part of what we do—it's not about being departmentalized or in separate pods or wings."

PK-3 ALIGNMENT

EMBRACING STANDARDS AND REACHING PROFICIENCY

The Fairborn City Schools' PK program started as part of the district's special education program for students with disabilities. Gradually, other children have been added to the PK mix, although the program still has twice as many special education students as non-disabled students. Baker and McMahan say that the district's decision to consolidate a handful of elementary schools into a single primary and intermediate school offered an opportunity to look at PK in a new way. "Now the district sees it as a natural part of a primary school," says Baker, a 17-year principal.

Any project at a school with 150 faculty and staff members is a major undertaking. At Fairborn Primary, where the sound of military planes at nearby Wright-Patterson Air Force Base is routine background noise, retooling PK is taking some time. In fall 2006, the principals say they expect to have equal numbers of special education and regular education students in PK. Still, the principals say, the 2005-06 school year may stand as a significant turning point, as the school is succeeding in helping PK teachers understand their connection to kindergarten and the success of the overall primary program. At the same time as it refocuses PK,

the school leadership continues to help teachers gain a stronger understanding of Ohio’s academic content standards. They also seek ways to tailor classroom instruction to ensure that more students will become proficient, particularly in reading and math, which the state tests in third grade.

The school follows state academic standards at all grade levels. In PK, quarterly assessments and progress reports are now consistent with those sent home in K-3 and show the connection to state standards. McMahan says the changes have yet to show up in state test scores but should pay off in the near future. “It’s taken two years where teachers know what we’re talking about when we discuss standards and benchmarks,” she says. “The state was putting out report cards showing performance in the state, district and building and teachers were saying, ‘I’m teaching, but why is Johnny not getting good scores?’ We had to say it’s because you’re not teaching what they are testing. Now teachers see the connection between standards, assessment and success.”

PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

SETTING DIRECTION WITH A HOLISTIC VIEW

Baker says it took action from a principal to show how the district’s PK program was not reaching its potential. “We’ve had to help the board see this as a part of the whole process of what we’re doing,” he notes. “That’s why they need principals. There’s a reason why it’s important to have someone looking at things from a holistic point of view. The PK program was like a world unto itself. It looked good on paper, but we see the building differently than specialists do.”

Baker and McMahan took steps to make the program mesh with the larger school goals and help teachers see how they connect with their peers. “If PK people are speaking the same language about different learning modalities, readiness and other topics, that helps all of us have a better handle on how to get these children where they need to be when they’re taking the third-grade test,” Baker says.

Blending all the programs in a large consolidated school has been a major challenge, the principals say. Had the PK program had principal input from its inception, including it in the school’s alignment efforts would have been easier. “Especially with No Child Left Behind, we’ve got to see everyone together,” McMahan says.

In addition to connecting the school’s programs internally and to state expectations, the principals also work to build public awareness of the expanding PK options for all students and make sure the program grows. “If we get PK children early and make them feel like they’re part of an academic situation, we can really bring them along. That means that as principals we do a lot of work building capacity, which is especially important in a school this big,” Baker says. In addition, the principals work to build community partnerships, widen parent involvement and develop support programs that increase student achievement.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

BUILDING A TEAM WITH A COMMON FOCUS

The Fairborn principals pointed to a spring 2006 faculty meeting as an example of progress in helping PK evolve from a separate program to one aligned with wider school goals. A school-wide training session

included significant input and involvement from PK teachers. Such signs are heartening examples of alignment at work, Baker says. “A year and a half ago, if we’d had that same training, those teachers would have stayed in their rooms cleaning up or working on their students’ education plans. Now they contribute just like our K, 1, 2 or 3 teachers. They’re really getting in there and stretching their muscles.”

“When the PK teachers came, they felt like they were on an island,” McMahan adds, recalling the start of the consolidated school. “Now they are coming on board professionally, being treated more professionally, and really becoming experts in reading. We’ve made real progress in the last two years on that.”

Across grades, the school uses diagnostic assessments and the data from classroom tests to make changes in instruction and set targets for teacher training and planning. Fairborn’s literacy program is also a focus for teachers as they learn to gather data and create focused learning experiences to help children improve reading and writing skills at all grade levels. Fairborn also uses its collaboration with Wright State University’s education program as a professional development opportunity. The teacher-education students are a resource for discussing professional issues in PK and other grades.

The faculty appears to be in good shape on paper. State reports show that all of Fairborn’s teachers held a bachelor’s degree in 2005 and two out of three held master’s degrees. All of the school’s teachers were properly certified for their teaching assignments.

RESULTS

IMPROVING RESULTS WITH ALIGNMENT AND ACHIEVEMENT GOALS

The school judges whether it is meeting alignment and achievement goals based on quarterly PK assessments, kindergarten screenings, “Get It, Got It, Go” (a classroom standards-monitoring system), student work and state testing. The increasingly urban profile of the district, high student transience and low parent involvement are major challenges, but the principals say they expect to see student performance increase in the near future.

Ohio’s school rating system places the school in the “continuous improvement” category for 2004-05—the middle level in a five-tier system. The designation is a step above the “academic watch” level. Third-grade state test results for 2004-05 show that 63.8 percent of Fairborn’s pupils met or exceeded the state’s proficient level in reading and 58.4 percent achieved at the state’s proficient level in math. The state requires schools to be at or above 75 percent. While the school met the federal definition of Adequate Yearly Progress for 2003-04, scores fell in 2004-05, meaning the school did not meet the NCLB target.

The school’s principals say the recent focus on connecting the school’s 11 PK sections to kindergarten expectations and state standards—along with expanding the program and advancing efforts to align expectations, instruction and assessment in the primary grades—will deliver the achievement increases that have eluded the district.

“Our goal is to have everyone pass the third-grade test,” Baker says. “The chances are a lot better when you know that your PK teachers see that they have a role in making sure third graders reach proficiency. You can get there if you have one big team at work, and that’s a big shift for us.”