

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

A P R I L 2 0 0 6

Using Data to Steer Alignment, Instruction and Improvement

East Silver Spring Elementary School
 Silver Spring, Maryland
 Niki T. Hazel, Principal

PROFILE

Grades: PK-2
 School Enrollment: 270
 District Enrollment: 139,400
 Community: Suburban
 Percentages of students:

- African-American: 56
- Asian: 8
- Hispanic: 24
- Native-American: 0
- White: 12

Poverty rate*: 55 percent
 English language learners: 23 percent
 PK program location: School
 PK program funding: School budget, Title I, Head Start and state funding

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

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

- Extensive efforts to use data increase the focus on achievement and alignment.
- The state’s accountability structure necessitates collaboration with feeder school.
- Principal places a premium on teacher planning and close data analysis.

SCHOOL SNAPSHOT

MONITORING THE PULSE OF ACHIEVEMENT

Alignment goes high-tech at East Silver Spring Elementary School in Maryland. The principal's focus on using data to make decisions led to a pilot program in which teachers use personal digital assistant devices. Teachers load information into the school's data system and receive an updated analysis of student test results on their handheld devices. Using technology to reinforce alignment and academic standards is a key part of the program for informed decision-making under second-year principal Niki T. Hazel. "Getting information faster means we can do implementation faster," she says. "It also means we can really drill down into the data and look at the needs of our students."

As it explores new ways to use data, East Silver Spring also emphasizes a strong foundation in the early grades. The district moved the school's third graders to another school and added PK and Head Start to create an early primary center. East Silver Spring now operates two half-day PK programs and one six-hour Head Start session, with teachers of all three classes collaborating on the content of the programs and working with kindergarten teachers to make sure they prepare children to succeed. The reconfigured school led East Silver Spring to develop stronger ties with the school into which it feeds. Maryland's elementary accountability testing begins with third-grade students, which means East Silver Spring's official status with the state is determined in part by how well its graduates do in a school a few miles away.

Beyond the teamwork among schools, East Silver Spring's data work yields achievement evidence well before state testing. The school met its Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) goals under the federal No Child Left Behind Act, and saw 60 percent of its students score at or above the 50th national percentile on the composite index for second-grade Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS) exams in 2005. The school's strongest showing was in math computation, where 76.1 percent of second graders surpassed the average score of the national norm group. The school, covering suburban neighborhoods popular with African and Hispanic immigrants on the edge of Washington, D.C., earned its lowest CTBS score in reading, with 41.7 percent of second graders scoring at or above the national average.

PK-3 ALIGNMENT

AN OPEN LINE TO A FEEDER SCHOOL

Principal Hazel says the PK-2 configuration of the school lends itself to school-wide planning and alignment, as all its students are working on mastering early primary skills. The fact that state accountability testing hits in third grade when children are beyond the reach of East Silver Spring teachers creates a sense of urgency on the part of the school to prepare its children to succeed when they reach Piney Branch Elementary. The structure of the accountability system also means that the two schools communicate more about expectations and alignment than they would otherwise, Hazel says. "There are ways that it's good for us because it keeps us current and focused on what the needs of kids are," she notes. "It's a challenge that we don't have that extra year, but that's what makes constant communication among teachers and these schools important."

Both schools follow a curriculum the Montgomery County district aligned to state standards. Within the school, teachers work together on alignment issues, with PK and kindergarten teamwork serving as a model,

particularly in reading. One challenge in implementing alignment, the principal says, is making sure parents understand why standards are important and see the impetus for setting high expectations. “Now and then, parents ask if we are pushing students too far, too fast, too soon,” Hazel says. “Most people would probably agree that what kindergartners are learning today is what we were doing in second grade years ago. There’s a real curriculum for four- and five-year-olds, and we expect them to be involved in activities where they are learning all day long. That can be an issue for people who’ve been in the profession many years or parents who may not recognize how things have changed.”

Hazel says parents need to hear from teachers and principals why standards and accountability are important and how they will benefit students. That means teachers must understand not just how to teach more challenging content, but also how to explain it clearly to non-educators. At East Silver Spring, that may mean communicating with parents who speak Spanish or recent Ethiopian immigrants who speak Amharic, the most common language in Ethiopia. East Silver Spring’s staff includes a full-time parent and community coordinator paid with Title I and district funds to make sure parents are informed and help provide support services to address student and family issues that might impede learning—from English classes for parents to homework help for children. The school also translates important school materials into Spanish and Amharic and makes sure translators are on hand at school functions.

PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

PLOTTING DRIVES PLANNING

To improve alignment and meet state standards, Hazel helps teachers focus on student work, classroom results and data analysis. The principal embraced a district initiative to have schools give common assessments and use a new data management system to find patterns and pinpoint issues indicating need for improvements. The district’s assessments check student progress three times a year, but Hazel schedules formal progress monitoring sessions for teachers every two weeks. Under the pilot program, the school equips teachers with handheld personal digital assistant devices to enter and analyze data trends for their classrooms or students. The system creates graphs and charts showing results. “It has the potential to be an important support for both teachers and students,” Hazel says.

Hazel also champions professional growth by teachers as a way to help students progress toward proficiency on state academic standards. She works to help teachers, parents and students understand the mission, beginning in PK. “For so many years, I think PK has been ignored or seen as the place where students just built their social skills. We’re now taking a much closer look at the role PK plays,” she says. “We see more and more students coming into PK with strong skills and they’re part of our data discussions—how do we serve them? We’ve raised our expectations.”

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

A PREMIUM ON MONITORING AND FEEDBACK

Hazel sees teachers’ planning time as an opportunity to make adjustments that will boost achievement. Teachers have an hour each day for planning, with reading, ESL and math specialists assigned to work with individual teachers and teams of teachers on content issues. Hazel makes sure teachers’ time is focused on “the curriculum and spent talking about content and what skills students need. That means regularly looking at things like what’s on level, what’s above level, and making sure we’re doing what our students need.” She

leads monthly meetings to analyze data with teams of teachers and discuss class data with individual teachers.

Hazel says getting specific, regular feedback is an important strategy for improving alignment. She believes she is most effective “providing ongoing professional development through planning and providing additional training where it’s needed. I do my best to get in classrooms every day that I’m in the building. Teachers say that giving them very specific feedback about what they are doing and how they’re trying to improve is helpful.” Along with improving instruction, data also guides decisions about training and staff development. Hazel says teachers get a weekly opportunity to discuss support they need, whether it’s seeing a technique or lesson modeled or learning more about an issue. “We’re constantly asking our teachers how they are doing and what they need,” she says, adding that these efforts build the faculty’s capacity. Records show that 96 percent of the school’s classes were taught by teachers deemed “highly qualified” in 2005.

RESULTS

GOING BEYOND FORMAL ACCOUNTABILITY

In a school focused on data, the feedback that matters to teachers and administrators comes from student work and regular district assessments. The school also encourages students to focus on performance expectations. Starting in first grade, students regularly swap writing assignments and use rubrics to tell their classmates what’s working and what needs improvement. The exercise shows students the criteria for the work they need to do.

State accountability reports show that East Silver Spring met its AYP targets under NCLB in 2005. About 66 percent of the school’s students scored proficient in math in 2004, slightly below the 2003 scores. In reading in 2004, 58 percent of East Silver Spring students met proficiency targets, almost exactly the same as in 2003. In both years and both subjects, the school easily surpassed its NCLB target scores. On the CTBS exams’ composite index in 2005, 60.1 percent of East Silver Spring’s second graders scored above the 50th national percentile, with students scoring best in math computation and lowest in reading. East Silver Spring’s CTBS scores were below the county average, where 76 percent of students scored above the 50th national percentile on the composite index. East Silver Spring faces stiffer challenges than schools serving the county’s affluent neighborhoods. About 61 percent of East Silver Spring’s students qualified for free or reduced-price meal programs in 2005, compared with the district elementary school average of 31 percent.

Hazel notes that the school’s focus on data should help staff know where students stand well before state accountability results provide the official snapshot. By watching the picture as it develops, teachers and administrators hope to steer change more quickly and nimbly than they could by reacting to annual test results. “The biggest piece for us is how we use our data: How teachers work together to analyze it and use it to make decisions about where they need to move their students—and how our instructional leadership team helps support teachers to make that happen,” the principal says.