Ensure Everyone Travels the Path of High Expectations

Baldwin Academy
La Puente, California
Bonnie Wilson, Principal

PROFILE
Grades: PK-5
School Enrollment: 703
Community: Suburban
Percentages of students:
• African-American: 1
• Asian: 3
• Hispanic: 91
• Native-American: 0
• White: 3
• Other: 2
Poverty rate*: 85 percent
English language learners: 42 percent
PK program location: School
PK program funding: Head Start and state funding

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS
• Focus on intensive teamwork among teachers begins in PK programs.
• Assessments regularly gauge student progress and guide interventions.
• Strong links connect parents with teachers, the principal, and learning goals.

*Poverty rate determined by percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch
SEEKING TO BECOME A SHINING LIGHT

More than halfway through the school year at Baldwin Academy, a PK-5 school in the San Gabriel Valley east of Los Angeles, CA, a new student arrived from Vietnam with no English language skills. Teachers and leaders at many schools facing high-stakes testing might silently wish away such a steep challenge with so little time left in the school year. At Baldwin, however, a teacher immediately suggested that the new girl join her class, where a lesson on letters and sounds was already underway.

Getting students moving along the path to California’s education standards—no matter how far back they start—is a challenge that drives Baldwin Academy, says Principal Bonnie Wilson. The preparation starts in PK and Head Start classes serving 80 students. While the PK experience boosts many students, a kindergarten enrollment of 120 means that many get their first taste of public school after their PK years. In fact, because of the high transient rate at Baldwin, there is no clear point of entry, pushing all teachers to be flexible and ready to swing into action to meet students’ needs.

“We believe that if kids aren’t where we want them to be or aren’t making the kind of progress we’d like, it’s because we haven’t figured out as professionals how to get them there,” Wilson says. To that end, Baldwin’s goals are built around California’s academic standards, as the curriculum and assessment system are designed to stay on top of student progress. The school maintains a sense of teamwork among its faculty to create strong alignment from grade to grade. Families are urged to understand and support the school’s high expectations and join its efforts to help students who are struggling.

“We talk about ourselves being a beacon of light in the community, and we really do try to shine,” Wilson says. California’s school rating system suggests the school is moving quickly in the right direction. Its state index based on test scores rose from 493 in 1999 to 764 in 2005. Wilson said that even though 85 percent of Baldwin’s students come from low-income families, the staff expects to see its Academic Performance Index top 800 soon.

TEAMWORK BUILDS A CHAIN OF CONNECTIONS

Fostering a school that connects its curriculum from grade to grade and links all teachers helps maximize students’ progress, school and district leaders say. Head Start teachers and teachers in the state-funded PK program collaborate on what they’ll cover in class and share instructional strategies. Kindergarten teachers regularly join the discussion, and the same connection occurs at other grade levels with routine discussion of students’ skills, strengths, and needs, as well as exchange of teaching ideas. Students and parents also get to know teachers in succeeding grades during the school year, easing the move from grade to grade. Plus, the school regularly convenes parents for specific feedback on ways to improve links between grade levels, particularly for young children. “We emphasize that we’re a team, and that includes not just teachers and kids, but parents as well,” Wilson says.

Baldwin’s curriculum follows California’s curriculum framework and teachers know the steps required to reach the state’s academic content standards. Assessment is also a key part of ensuring alignment in the early
years. Beyond state tests, which measure students in reading and math every year starting in second grade, formative assessments are conducted by the school three times a year in math, language arts and science. These occur each year from kindergarten on. The Hacienda La Puente Unified School District aligns these tests with the state exams. The school’s writing assessments, given twice a year to each student starting in kindergarten, also measure learning and growth in that area.

Gabriela Chavarria, director of child development and early primary programs for the district, says Baldwin uses the kindergarten academic standards to determine the range of learning experiences in Head Start and the state PK program children will need as preparation for the next level. She says the district expects all school programs and materials to be directly linked to the state’s academic standards, and that Baldwin does an exemplary job of carrying out these curriculum expectations following state standards from PK through primary grades and beyond.

PK students’ skills are assessed three times a year. Results are shared with parents and kindergarten teachers who inherit the students the following year. In fact, the PK year is an opportunity to get ahead in almost every aspect of school. Baldwin creates individual transitional education plans for PK students with learning or physical disabilities. Because kindergarten teachers are involved in the process, students who need them begin to get special education services when they start kindergarten. “If we can get them to start intervention early enough in PK, sometimes that helps take care of it,” Chavarria says.

**PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP**

**A COMMITMENT TO PK AND SPREADING HIGH EXPECTATIONS**

Developing strong alignment between grade levels, a clear map for student learning, and a strong PK program are fundamental to Baldwin Academy’s success, Wilson says. “With the rigorous standards we have in California, by the time kids leave kindergarten, they are writing and learning to read. If they don’t come with some letter recognition and other readiness skills, they almost don’t have a chance to get where they need to be. We have to have kids coming in before kindergarten.”

A high transient rate, large population of students whose primary language isn’t English, and large cohort of students from low-income families push Wilson to keep a focus on high expectations. Principal at Baldwin for 15 years, she also looks for new ways to support teachers. “When new students come in, they may not necessarily be at the level of our children, but our teachers work immediately to find out what they need,” she says. “We also work with parents until they believe their child can be successful. Even if language poses a problem, they can be an encourager.” She says trying to lead the school to success has come to mean meeting the needs of the whole community.

The district offers adult education for elementary school parents and brings in speakers regularly for parent education programs. Baldwin supplements these programs and educates parents further on state standards and higher expectations. Every Tuesday is college day, when students and teachers are encouraged to wear university T-shirts—a subtle way to build aspirations, Wilson says. At the beginning of each year, the school identifies the lowest-scoring 25 percent of students based on pre-assessments and starts weekly meetings with parents to outline intervention plans and progress goals. “We’re running parent meetings all the time,”
Wilson says. “They know about standards, they know about data, they know what it takes for their children to be successful and how they can help.”

At Baldwin, the district is a visible presence in strengthening the PK program. Because limited public awareness is an obstacle to the program, district leaders have visited laundromats, parks, and other locations to reach out to young parents and spread the word about the public school PK program. Wilson also works all angles to add more portable classrooms on campus for additional PK slots. “I’m ready to do what it takes—go to meetings, juggle the lunch schedule, plead for more buildings—because we believe that PK makes a difference for our kids in kindergarten, and we want it to be a part of our school,” the principal says.

**Professional Development Opportunities for Teachers to Learn from Each Other**

Baldwin Academy benefits from a well-qualified staff. In 2004, all 33 teachers who had completed the state's supervised internship program for first year teachers were fully certified for their teaching assignment. The staff also benefits from Wilson’s efforts to make professional development part of the everyday environment and squeeze more opportunities into the school day for teachers to work together. Roving substitutes give teachers time to visit one another's classrooms, building knowledge and skills by collaborating on instructional issues or questions about student work. Wilson covers teachers’ classrooms when they make the case for spending time in another grade level or observing a fellow teacher’s specific technique or lesson. “There is a lot of sharing ideas,” Wilson says.

California requires a 20 to 1 student-teacher ratio in K-3 classrooms, which Wilson believes helps teachers improve and succeed. She is also quick to address teachers’ requests for extra information or help.

The district’s professional development priorities reinforce the PK connection with primary grades. Chavarria, Hacienda La Puente district's early primary director, says the district involves PK teachers in training sessions with other primary teachers whenever possible. PK and kindergarten teachers recently combined for early literacy and math training. “That builds a team,” Chavarria notes.

**Results: All Students Moving Forward**

The school’s consistent increases on the state’s Academic Performance Index (API) stands as the most convincing evidence for teachers that the school is on the right track in emphasizing professional teamwork, engaging parents, and meeting students’ learning needs head on. Scores on the California Standards Tests and the other exams that make up the API—California Achievement Test; Spanish Assessment of Basic Education, 2nd edition; and California Alternative Performance Assessment—have consistently risen, while showing little gap between groups of students based on ethnicity or family income.

Baldwin’s school rating based on state test scores rose from 493 in 1999 to 764 in 2005. Over the same period, the median elementary school index state-wide grew from 629 to 752. In 2004, when the API at Baldwin was 744, students defined as socio-economically disadvantaged scored 737. Hispanic students scored 733. The school met all requirements for showing Adequate Yearly Progress on the No Child Left Behind Act in 2005.
Beyond state test results, Wilson says the school regularly assesses quantitative and anecdotal information generated by teacher collaborations to spotlight progress or determine areas needing extra attention for groups of students, teachers or the school as a whole. As another way to gauge the school’s success, the district also analyzes results on the school’s assessments benchmarked to state exams. Wilson says other factors, such as feedback from parents about problems as students start a new grade, also provide information that helps the school set its course for giving all students the strong academic background state standards expect.