Laying the Groundwork for Student Success
Baldwin Early Learning Center
Boston, Massachusetts
Graciela Hopkins, Principal

PROFILE
Grades: PK-1
School Enrollment: 175
District Enrollment: 63,000
Community: Urban
Percentages of students:
• African-American: 25
• Asian: 30
• Hispanic: 30
• Native-American: 0
• White: 15
• Other: 0
Poverty rate*: 60 percent
English language learners: 37 percent
PK program location: School
PK program funding: School budget, Title I and grant funds

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

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS
• Best practices are used to address a diverse student population’s academic, social and emotional needs.
• Partnerships with local universities and community agencies boost student learning.
• Principal creates a culture of developmentally appropriate, data-informed practices tied to standards.
SCHOOL SNAPSHOT
CREATING A SPACE FOR EARLY LEARNING

When the Early Learning Center North opened 20 years ago, it was the first of its kind in Boston Public Schools (BPS). Under the leadership of its founder, Dr. Joanne Collins Russell, the center became a model for other early childhood centers that opened throughout the city. Graciela Hopkins, the center’s current principal, assumed leadership of the center in 1998, when it served about 80 students and was located in a corner wing of a larger elementary school. Hopkins felt then that the center’s young learners needed their own space. “I knew the school deserved its own space, one where our vision for early learning could really thrive,” she says.

Hopkins also felt that teachers, staff and students at the center would benefit from a new opportunity offered by BPS. She began talking to staff and parents about the possibility of the becoming a BPS Pilot School. Created to serve as models of innovation and identify best practices that can be spread throughout the district, Pilot Schools operate with increased autonomy within the school district.

In spring 2003, the center became a Pilot School. Hopkins says that the Pilot School model has allowed her and school staff to create innovative, vision-driven programs that support high expectations and achievement for all of the 3- to 7-year-olds enrolled in the school’s early learning programs. During the Pilot School application and transition processes, Hopkins also worked with BPS central administration staff to secure a new space for the school. In fall 2004, Early Learning Center North moved into a new building and was renamed the Harriet A. Baldwin Early Learning Center.

Baldwin students benefit from coordinated, carefully assessed, developmentally appropriate curriculum. Teachers at the center use hands-on approaches to help students master key concepts and skills in a literacy-rich environment. “This is a unique opportunity for students to learn. We want to make sure that by the time they leave us they have a strong foundation for reading, writing and social-emotional development,” Hopkins says. “Our approach makes that learning fun.”

Building a strong foundation for learning, she adds, is especially important for the diverse ethnic student population served at the school. Children at the center come from 20 countries and speak 13 languages. Hopkins, a native of Peru, understands the needs of these students and their families and says Baldwin’s staff is committed to helping students develop strong language skills using their cultural backgrounds as a catalyst for learning.

PK-3 ALIGNMENT
MULTI-AGE GROUPING AND INDIVIDUAL ATTENTION HELP STUDENTS REACH STANDARDS

Baldwin uses several innovative approaches to help align student learning within and across grade levels in the school. All students are taught in classrooms designed to foster curiosity and learning. Three- and 4-year-olds work in multi-age classrooms, where they learn side-by-side in groups of no more than 16 students. Hopkins says this grouping approach is a valuable strategy that helps all students learn. “Three-year-olds learn from the 4-year-olds in the room and older students, in turn, are able to help teach the younger ones, which is very valuable to their own learning,” she says. She adds that the multi-age grouping
approach also makes it easier to align learning experiences between grade levels. Five- and 6-year-olds work in age-level groups in looping classrooms. Looping allows students to work with the same teacher for two consecutive years. In this way, teachers are better able to understand the needs of individual students, tailor their approaches to those needs and align students’ learning experiences in those critical years.

In all Baldwin classrooms, certified teachers lead whole-group instruction in language arts, math, science, social studies and social-emotional development. At activity centers in classrooms, students use computers, manipulatives, art supplies, books and other educational materials to reinforce their daily lessons. Surround-care teachers, who work with students before and after school, teacher assistants, literacy tutors and volunteers in the classrooms help keep the student-adult ratio small—typically four students for each adult in the room, and no more than eight.

When the early learning center opened, neither city nor state early childhood guidelines existed. School staff adapted kindergarten standards for their early learning programs to create alignment within the building. Now that Boston and Massachusetts have introduced guidelines, Hopkins and the school team have found that many of the standards they created and have been using for years dovetail nicely with those guidelines.

Benchmarked standards in literacy, math and social-emotional development guide instruction and assessments at each grade level in the school. Baldwin’s 3-year-olds, for example, are expected to know half of the alphabet, at least five numbers, and how to write their name at the end of their first year in the school. Four-year-olds learn the entire alphabet and 10 numbers. By the close of first grade, students use computers and the Internet to do simple on-line research, type essays about their culture and ancestry, and read essays to their peers and adults.

The Work Sampling System is used throughout the school to observe children and identify their strengths and challenges. Teachers also pay close attention to results from formalized assessments conducted three times each year to identify ways they can help individual students reach standards.

While parents can choose which school Baldwin students will attend after first grade, most students begin their second-grade year at a local PK-5 school. Hopkins and her staff make connections with that school to ensure that what Baldwin students are learning is aligned with the work of second- and third-grade classes. “It’s important that we still pay attention to how well students are doing when they leave our school, so that we can feed that information back into our curriculum or change practice here if we need to,” says Hopkins.

**PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP**

**SPREADING A VISION FOR EARLY LEARNING**

Hopkins began her career in education as a high school counselor. She says that in her 11 years in that role, she saw many disparities among students’ academic achievement rates—disparities she felt she had little power to reverse. Hopkins enrolled in a doctoral program, received her principal certification and decided that the best way to prevent achievement gaps for students later in life was to ensure all children participate in high-quality early learning opportunities. “We know that this is the one chance our children have to develop a strong foundation for the challenges they will encounter later in life,” she explains.
Hopkins communicates her vision for student learning to all members of the staff and to volunteers even before they begin teaching at the school. “We have an applicant pool of almost 200 potential teachers whenever we post an opening,” she says. “We have been able to select outstanding new teachers with a range of ages and experiences who are focused on helping students build that foundation.” Helping students build that base means making sure the teaching staff reflects the ethnic diversity of the school. “It’s healthy for children to be around a diverse group of adults so that they can see themselves in the faces and languages of staff members,” Hopkins notes.

A hands-on leader, Hopkins helps select assessments, facilitates discussions about data analysis and continuous improvement, and leads professional development opportunities tied to assessment results. She also cultivates community partnerships that support student learning. Through partnerships with local universities and nonprofit groups, including Boston University, Boston Partners in Education and Tufts University, Hopkins has helped create a ready supply of volunteers, tutors, student teachers and classroom assistants for the school. She is also helping teachers-in-training develop their understanding of early childhood issues and teaching strategies by lecturing at local universities, providing education students with living examples of best practices, and giving opportunities to apply their own knowledge within the school.

As a strong proponent—and vocal advocate—of early learning, Hopkins is helping expand the number of high-quality early learning opportunities in Boston. Her advocacy, as well as that of other principals, about the importance of coordinated early learning opportunities—and the impact they have on student performance later in life—has prompted Boston Public Schools to open 40 PK classrooms in public schools and expand its number of early childhood centers.

**PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

**STRESSING CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT IN PRACTICE**

Hopkins says that while Baldwin’s approach provides young learners with a solid academic, social and emotional foundation, there is always room for improvement at the school. “Different students and staff have different strengths and challenges and we need to keep assessing ourselves to make sure we are always strengthening practice and student learning,” she notes.

Each Wednesday, students leave the school at 11:30 a.m. so that teachers and other school staff can participate in professional development meetings and discuss strategies for overcoming student challenges. Meeting topics are identified based on student assessment results. In the 2004-05 school year, for example, results showed that children were consistently having trouble with math problem solving and empathy, so teachers regularly discussed teaching strategies to help boost student learning in those areas.

Professional development takes place within the regular school day as well. Teachers observe one another’s classrooms, as well as lessons modeled by the school’s math and literacy coaches. They then reflect on their observations and apply what they learn to their own classes.

School staff also meet to talk about students’ social and emotional needs, which Hopkins considers important pieces of child development. One hour each week, teachers meet across and within grade levels in
student support teams. Teams discuss challenges of teachers, students and families, and identify supports to help overcome them. Students, for example, might be paired with volunteers for one-on-one instruction. Parents may be connected with social services in the area.

Professional development opportunities and ongoing conversations about student needs are not limited to teaching staff at the school. Hopkins says it is also imperative that teaching assistants understand the importance and implications of benchmarks, teaching strategies and assessment results. “I want to help them become curriculum assistants in the classrooms, not just playmates,” she says. She meets with assistants at least once a month to build capabilities, and provide them with instructional training.

**RESULTS**

**AFFECTING STUDENT LEARNING AT THE CENTER AND THROUGHOUT BOSTON**

According to Hopkins, the school is meeting its goal of helping students build a solid foundation of learning. Ninety-five to 100 percent of students exit first grade reading at a second- or third-grade level, she reports. Students also develop strong social-emotional skills from working closely with peers—and adults—during their four years at Baldwin.

Part of the Baldwin administration and staff’s mission is to disseminate best practices and influence early childhood practice throughout other public and private programs in Boston. To that end, Baldwin has opened its doors to other early childhood professionals. Teachers, principals and staff from other programs and centers are invited to join in on the school’s professional development opportunities, free of cost. These opportunities allow Baldwin staff to positively affect early childhood learning throughout the city, and continue to build their own knowledge about best practices in the area.