Looking Beyond the Goal of State Standards

Patricia J. Blattman Elementary School
San Antonio, Texas
Cynthia Luna, Principal

PROFILE
Grades: PK-5
School Enrollment: 630
District Enrollment: 78,100
Community: Suburban
Percentages of students:
  • African-American: 3
  • Asian: 10
  • Hispanic: 22
  • Native-American: 0
  • White: 64
  • Other: 1
Poverty rate*: 20 percent
English language learners: 12 percent
PK program location: School
PK program funding: School budget and state funding

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS
• Assembling and developing a strong teaching team keeps focus on achievement.
• After meeting state goals, attention turns to higher performance targets.
• School seizes opportunity for greater alignment through better data analysis.

*Poverty rate determined by percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch
SCHOOL SNAPSHOT
SEEKING DISTINCTION IN TEACHER AND STUDENT PERFORMANCE

Opening a new school in the growing northern suburbs of San Antonio, TX, in fall 2003 gave Patricia J. Blattman Elementary School fresh opportunities to deal with education issues of the 21st century. For principal Cynthia Luna, the main step in rising to meet current education challenges—including aligning starting in the earliest grades—meant putting together a highly skilled and cohesive teaching staff.

“This is a school that encourages teachers to have self-initiative and become strong leaders while staying in the classroom. We find ways to lead in the school and community without giving up teaching,” Luna says. A focused staff, she says, realizes the importance of issues such as alignment and finds ways to work together to constantly seek improvement.

While student mobility is an issue in the growing Northside Independent School District, the school has the advantage of a relatively affluent district where test scores are above the state average. At Blattman, that means student achievement goals go beyond meeting state standards, which nearly all students accomplished in reading and math in 2005. The school focuses on increasing the percentage of students who score in the state’s “commendable” range on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills. Still, Blattman’s path to a successful PK-5 program is not without obstacles. The school opened with two half-day PK sessions, but because attendance did not meet expectations, the district dropped the program in the school’s second year. One half-day session was reinstated in 2005-06, but motivating parents to send their children to public PK remains a challenge.

PK-3 ALIGNMENT
DELIVERING FOR STUDENTS WHO ALREADY MEET STANDARDS

Curriculum alignment in the school is spelled out in the state’s academic goals, known as the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills. The state translated these standards into content to be covered in every grade. The district offers a curriculum guide for teachers to follow and provides booklets explaining academic standards to parents in each grade. Luna says that aligning the PK program to kindergarten expectations is ensured by joint PK-K district supervision. “The beauty of that position is the district has been able to write standards for PK and K understanding both levels,” Luna says.

Professional development in the school helps teachers see connections between the skills students should learn from grade to grade in language arts, math, science and social studies. Luna adds that planning time is also structured to encourage teachers at different grade levels to work together on issues like assessment, student progress or teaching techniques. That kind of teamwork led the faculty to start “curriculum compacting,” which allows students who score 85 percent or higher on unit pre-tests to opt out of regular classroom teaching and work on more advanced material during the two weeks their classmates learn the unit. Luna says the program is a way to individualize instruction to keep all students moving at a challenging
pace. “We’ve made a start,” she says of the new effort. “It’s a big job to take each unit and get extra materials ready.”

The push for alignment also comes from the district, which developed benchmarked unit tests based on its curriculum guides. It is also starting an information system that lets principals quickly see, track and analyze students’ performance on the unit exams. Scores can be broken down by ethnic, income or gender groups, as well as by classroom teacher or other factors. Luna can compare her third graders’ scores against those of their peers in other schools. While the data system is still in its early stages, it points toward even greater attention to alignment and achievement in the future. “We’re not yet where we need to be with the new system, but it will be helpful for teachers to look at their classes and for us to be able to track how our students are progressing from grade to grade,” she says.

PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

VALUING PROFESSIONAL GROWTH AND ACHIEVEMENT

Just as Blattman Elementary focuses on moving students to the highest level of the state’s achievement scale, it is also a home for award-winning educators. Principal Luna was the 2004 National Distinguished Principal for Texas, a state-by-state recognition program of the National Association of Elementary School Principals. The campus is also home to winners of the district’s Teacher of the Year award, a teaching excellence award presented by Trinity University in San Antonio, as well as a first-year elementary educator of the year award from the district.

Luna says her vision of creating strong alignment and boosting student achievement starts with choosing a topnotch teaching staff. “When I interview or look for a PK-5 teacher, I want someone who is child centered, someone who is using brain-based research and who interacts with students. We share that vision,” she says. “I hire good leaders who are central to my vision of child centeredness.”

“I really believe that every child can be successful in a classroom, and it is our responsibility as educators to find a way,” the 15-year principal says. Her previous school earned National Blue Ribbon status. Test scores at Blattman earned the school “gold performance” status through the Texas Education Agency for high scores in reading and English language arts, math, writing and science.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

TEACHERS GIVEN MULTIPLE OPPORTUNITIES TO WORK TOGETHER

While Luna works to assemble a team of strong teachers as the foundation for school success, the school also focuses on building teamwork and skills among its faculty. One teacher at each grade level is designated a team leader. Team leaders meet regularly to discuss the focus and direction of curriculum and tackle big-picture alignment issues. The group also monitors how the school is meeting goals from its improvement plan and taking the lead in spreading the school’s overarching vision among the faculty.

Teachers at each grade level have common planning time each week and also meet weekly after school. The school also builds in vertical planning time when teachers meet with colleagues from other grades where alignment issues are paramount. “It’s helpful to hear what other grade levels are doing,” Luna says. The school’s move toward developing enrichment activities for students with high scores on unit pre-tests started
among second-grade teachers but quickly caught on with others after it was discussed in common training time. “Teachers learn best through their peers,” Luna adds.

The school schedules early-release days for extended professional development for all teachers. They discuss a variety of topics, including technology, reading instruction, aligning classroom assessments to state performance standards, or their own training needs, as administrators plan for the year ahead.

RESULTS
FOCUSBING ON IMPROVING COMMENDABLE ACHIEVEMENT

After opening in 2003, Blattman debuted as a strong performer on achievement tests. On the 2004 Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills reading and language arts exam, 77 percent of all students met state standards. In math, 66 percent of Blattman students met these standards. In 2005, the numbers rose to 82 percent in reading and 73 percent in math. In both years, nearly all students met the standards for judging Adequate Yearly Progress, well ahead of both district and state averages, and leading to recognition status for Blattman. As a result of these high scores, Luna and the school’s teachers now define improvement based on increasing the percentage of students who reach the state’s commendable performance level on state tests. In 2004, 24 percent of Blattman third graders scored in the commendable ranks on reading. In 2005, the rate rose to 33 percent, almost twice the district average. The commendable rate also improved in other areas of the state test between 2004 to 2005, although not as much as in third-grade reading.

Luna says teachers’ focus on data and results provides a way to gauge how students are doing from year to year. That emphasis—along with the information gleaned about improving student achievement—will likely increase as the school begins to use the data management system and benchmark testing that its school district launched in 2005-06.

Students throughout the district will take common benchmark tests as they finish units, providing district administrators with data that can be broken down by classroom, student groups or other factors to show how well students are mastering material. While the pilot year of the program has involved fine-tuning the system, the exams are already providing useful information. When the system is fully implemented, Luna expects it will offer powerful information in helping to improve alignment and show weaknesses as students move from first grade through the system. Luna also hopes the data will offer schools a glimpse of student achievement in elementary grades compared to their success in middle school and high school.

In PK, the school will continue to rely on teacher observation and classroom assessment to judge progress. In kindergarten, the school uses a district reading inventory and state-wide reading assessment to measure achievement. Still, Luna says, as more data is gathered in first grade and beyond, it will no doubt trickle down to better define the readiness skills needed in kindergarten and PK. “We stay focused on getting better,” she says.