Raising Expectations for PK-3 Learning

Centura Elementary School
Cairo, Nebraska
Steve Wilson, Principal

PROFILE
Grades: PK-6
School Enrollment: 277
District Enrollment: 600
Community: Rural
Percentages of students:
• African-American: 1
• Asian: 0
• Hispanic: 5
• Native-American: 0
• White: 94
Poverty rate*: 44 percent
English language learners: 2 percent
PK program location: School
PK program funding: Head Start, Title I, school budget and federal special education funds

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

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS
• School piloted the state’s first comingled PK funding formula that is now used across Nebraska.

• All teachers are trained in data management to support assessments of student progress.

• Project-based instruction helps students put concepts into practice.
SCHOOL SNAPSHOT
LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD

Centura Elementary School sits beside a sprawling cow pasture in the rural community of Cairo, NE. The 600-student Centura Public Schools serves three small communities in the central part of the state. Dwindling population and financial hardships led to consolidation into one district in 1970.

When Steve Wilson became principal of the elementary school in 1988, parents drove 20 miles outside this farming and ranching community to find a school-based PK program. The only options at the time were child care centers that varied in quality and often failed to address principles of early learning. “We had a lot of students who had never seen a book, who had poor language skills or who had never been to a doctor,” Wilson says. “We had all of these inequalities facing us from day one in kindergarten.”

Wilson believed it was imperative to establish a PK program in his school and take a more rigorous approach to identify best practices in PK through third grade. While poverty in rural areas fails to attract the same attention as it does in large cities, Wilson knew from experience that many young children from isolated communities often lack early childhood education experiences routinely provided by urban middle-class families.

The principal began working closely with a state Department of Education official exploring innovative funding strategies to help schools start PK programs. A plan to allow school leaders to comingle funds from Title I, Head Start and federal special education sources was approved in 1991 by the Nebraska Board of Education. A year later, Centura Public Schools became the first district in Nebraska to tap the new funding stream to start a PK program at Centura Elementary.

Today, the school’s program for 3- and 4-year-olds is recognized across the state for providing a broad array of early learning and social supports for children and families. Strategies include having a full-time parent educator visit families in the home, sending parents early literacy materials, and providing families with a range of social service referrals. Honored as a National Distinguished Principal by the U.S. Department of Education and the National Association of Elementary School Principals, Wilson believes the holistic nature of the program has made a significant difference for young children as they enter kindergarten. “We’re leveling the playing field between the have and have-nots,” he says.

PK-3 ALIGNMENT
CURRICULUM MAPPING AND BEST PRACTICES

Wilson and his staff are committed to a research–based approach to improving learning across PK-3. Teachers and school leaders meet frequently to discuss best practices, explore ideas for creating developmentally appropriate classrooms and share a pedagogical vision rooted in making learning connections for students.
“We really worked hard to create a common understanding of best practices,” Wilson says. “The philosophical understanding is now the same whether you are a prekindergarten teacher or a third-grade teacher.”

Leadership teams and teachers at Centura have spent considerable time mapping the curriculum to ensure strong PK-3 alignment. All teachers are required to submit detailed information about what they teach in their classrooms. The information is included in a school-wide database, which allows teachers and school leaders to analyze trends on how well the school covers state standards across grade levels. When gaps or overlaps are discovered in the teaching of math or language arts, for example, adjustments can be made.

Teachers at Centura have opportunities for planning time to develop cohesive lessons that facilitate PK-3 alignment. Wilson structures the day by providing teachers extra meeting time when students are at lunch, recess or physical education class. To free up a teacher, Wilson often schedules himself for lunch or recess duty. Along with time carved out three days a week for teacher meetings in grade-level teams, several professional development days are scheduled throughout the year for teacher meetings across grades.

Wilson describes his PK-3 classrooms as sharing similar characteristics. Instructional practices are project-based and include hands-on learning that help children make connections between concepts and practice. Language development takes place as children discuss, explain, question and analyze material in small groups or as a class. Social development is also addressed as children talk through their problems with other students. “This happens through professional development activities specifically planned to appropriately meet the needs of young children,” Wilson says. “Some is accomplished through our school improvement process, and part is accomplished through our learning communities that discuss what instruction should look like in the PK-3 classrooms.”

PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP
THE EVOLUTION OF A LEADER

Like many principals, Wilson took few early childhood development classes throughout his education. When he became principal of Centura Elementary School 18 years ago, he admits to only a general sense of how to lead an effective early childhood learning community. To ramp up his professional learning, Wilson began attending workshops, reading literature on best practices, and working with state education officials.

Over time, he steadily became both a respected school leader and a savvy policy advocate at the state level. From knowing little about early childhood development at the beginning of his career, Wilson is now the president-elect of the Nebraska Association for the Education of Young Children. He has become a familiar presence in early education state policy circles. He has worked closely with the Nebraska Council of School Administrators and the Nebraska Association of Elementary School Principals to successfully advocate at the state level to help expand PK funding opportunities for schools across the state.

At Centura, Wilson is visible as much as possible in classrooms. His first-hand observations are discussed in leadership team meetings and individually with staff members. As he helped build the PK program at the school, he also included early education in the school improvement process required by the district. This involved researching best practices, disseminating early learning literature to staff, and making sure teachers had common reference points as the school moved ahead to build a strong PK-3 vision.
“Building my own knowledge of appropriate practices in the PK-3 classrooms was very valuable, so I could facilitate the right discussions and provide leadership for my faculty,” Wilson says.

Data management is another pillar of Wilson's leadership focus. The principal believes that by analyzing student performance data, teachers can disaggregate information in a way that helps improve both student learning and classroom instruction. All teachers are trained to use spreadsheets and other tools in order to do this.

**PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

**CREATING TIME FOR TRAINING**

Teachers at Centura Elementary have professional development opportunities at the school and district level. Wilson describes the approach as a three-tiered process, where teachers can develop skills independently, in small groups or in school-wide settings. Individual teachers often ask for time to pursue a workshop on a particular reading strategy, for example. Wilson encourages his staff to take advantage of the three professional development days given each year for this purpose. In other cases, a small group of grade-level teachers attend workshops or classes outside the school and return to disseminate information to other staff. Throughout the year, the school district also builds several professional development days into the school calendar, when all teachers meet as part of the formal school improvement process. The school district also pays for teachers to take up to 300 hours of professional development classes at local colleges.

All of Centura's teachers are highly qualified as defined by No Child Left Behind. The principal also prefers that teachers in early elementary grades have early childhood endorsements, showing evidence of specific training in the field, along with their elementary certification. This further ensures that qualified teachers with a strong understanding of developmental learning stages teach children in Centura classrooms.

**RESULTS**

**PAVING THE ROAD FOR PARTNERSHIPS**

A range of assessments and classroom observations at Centura are used to evaluate student progress. In PK and kindergarten, for example, students’ gross motor skills are assessed through observing their use of blocks and other manipulative tools. The school also uses the Dynamic Indicator of Basic Early Literacy Skills to provide baseline assessments of phonemic awareness, fluency and other measures of early reading abilities.

By using the results of early diagnostic tools to address students’ needs, the school performs well on many measures. Students who have gone through the PK program are less likely to be referred to special education. They develop stronger early reading abilities, demonstrate fewer discipline problems, and have parents who are more active in their education. With its increased test scores, the school has also met Adequate Yearly Progress measurements. In 2004, 72 percent of fourth-grade students met the proficiency standard in reading, a 10 percent increase over the previous year. In math, 74 percent of fourth-grade students met the proficiency standard in 2004, while only 65 percent met the standard in 2003.

Centura’s PK program also has an important partnership with Central Nebraska Community Services, which facilitates area Head Start programs. The community service agency helped the school develop its PK
program to meet Head Start accreditation standards. It also helped Wilson write a state Department of Education grant application to expand the program to include Head Start components. Centura was the first school in the state to receive this grant, and as a result of its successful implementation, a growing number of similar grants have become available to other schools throughout Nebraska.

“What we did years ago has really had an impact on what schools are doing today,” Wilson says. “When we started there was really no program for this. It was really archaic back then. Now schools have a better-paved road to follow.”