Alignment Moves from Early Grades to Standards

Cleveland Elementary School
Washington, District of Columbia
Annie Mair, Principal

PROFILE
Grades: PK-5
School Enrollment: 250
District Enrollment: 65,000
Community: Urban
Percentages of students:
• African-American: 75
• Asian: 0
• Hispanic: 22
• Native-American: 0
• White: 3
Poverty rate*: 95 percent
English language learners: 22 percent
PK program location: School
PK program funding: School budget, Title I, Head Start and state funding

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS
• School capitalizes on its opportunity to focus on early childhood learning.

• Expectations and alignment shared with students and parents.

• New district standards seen as a chance to improve alignment and achievement.

*Poverty rate determined by percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch
SCHOOL SNAPSHOT
EDUCATORS DEVELOP EXPERTISE IN ALIGNMENT

Cleveland Elementary School got a taste of what it means to focus on PK and primary students when the District of Columbia school system recast the school as a PK-3 facility, a move sparked by shrinking student enrollment. A few years later, the same trend redefined Cleveland as the PK-5 facility that it remains today. In the meantime, Principal Annie Mair says teachers and school leaders developed a clear vision for serving young children and aligning how those students are taught and served. “Our specialty became the early years. Just like in a medical situation where you have a doctor who specializes in a certain area, you become stronger,” Mair says. “We became stronger in working with students in those early years.”

That experience became connected to fourth and fifth grade when the intermediate grades were reinstated at Cleveland, Mair says. Alignment also got a more recent boost when the District of Columbia Public Schools adopted new learning standards that map out what children should learn in every grade, starting in PK. Beyond defining standards, the district’s materials include grade-by-grade parent guides, reading lists, sample test items, unit and lesson plans, a glossary and more. Mair says teachers are in the midst of adjusting to the new expectations and integrating the new materials. In a small school with previous experience in building strong learning experiences starting in PK, the district’s tools are likely to increase alignment and lead to an even better education experience for students, the principal says.

Cleveland Elementary students already score above the district average. On Stanford 9 tests given each spring, Cleveland second graders performed better than the district mean score. The school also shows strength in its math instruction, where 95 percent of its students met district proficiency targets in 2005, compared to a 58 percent district average. In reading, 64 percent of the Cleveland students tested in 2005 met proficiency targets versus the 45 percent district average. In 2005, the school met its Adequate Yearly Progress targets under the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

PK-3 ALIGNMENT
ADAPTING TO NEW DISTRICT EXPECTATIONS

While educators at Cleveland Elementary used the years the school served PK-3 to focus on teaching and learning in the primary years, the learning standards introduced by the school district in spring 2005 are quickly updating the alignment process. “It’s a whole new ballgame,” said Mair, the 19-year principal at Cleveland. “Everybody is working on that.” The standards are accompanied by new assessments. Teachers attended a summer institute on the standards meant to link teaching from PK through high school. Staff training is also focused on making the alignment plan a regular part of daily classroom work. Mair says that in some areas, the standards push teachers toward more difficult classwork, with the biggest challenge in writing. Testing in the district will now require students to answer some questions in short essays rather than multiple-choice questions only.

The district’s standards in reading and math start in PK, where children are expected to be able to identify rhyming words in songs, nursery rhymes or stories. Children should be able to print their own names and relate stories to their own lives. In math, the district expects students to be able to express quantities of up to four objects without counting, copy simple patterns and more by the end of PK.
Mair says that beyond helping teachers find ways to follow the district’s new alignment map, Cleveland also works to clearly inform parents and students about academic expectations. Each September, the school hosts a parent breakfast to explain what children should know in each grade level. “They need to know what children need to be able to do and what parents can do to help students move on,” Mair says. Part of addressing alignment is making sure students don’t move on without certain basic skills. At Cleveland, Mair says parents, students and teachers know, for example, that children can’t move to first grade without being able to read. Mair created an end-of-kindergarten assessment the school uses to gauge students’ awareness of the alphabet, colors, numbers and vocabulary. “It’s really not fair to the child to be sent to first grade without being ready. Learning becomes painful, and it shouldn’t be that way,” she says.

**Principal Leadership**

**Getting Faculty Focused and Parents On Board**

To support the school’s alignment goals, Mair made sure music, physical education and other special-area teachers—not just grade-level teachers—understood the district’s math and reading standards. “Wherever children go, they need to hear the same thing,” the principal says. “We want everybody to be on the same page.”

Even before the district instituted standards and assessments in 2005, Mair encouraged teachers to meet for “back mapping” that defined expectations in third grade and then made sure teaching in PK-2 supported students meeting those goals. Since the district’s standards were launched, Mair says she works to build teachers’ understanding of the expectations. Mair is also an advocate of finding chances for teachers to work together to find ways to improve instruction.

A main challenge is keeping everyone moving in the same direction, she says. “One way I’ve helped strengthen early childhood learning is by getting everyone to buy into the concept that this is everyone’s job—not just a first-grade teacher responsible for a first grader.” She makes sure everyone in the school, teacher or uncertified staff member, understands they play a part in students’ education. “You may not have a degree, but you can teach,” Mair says. “When they go to the restaurant (the school’s name for its cafeteria), our restaurant hostess can be a teacher. We’re all teachers of children whether we want to be or not. Everybody in this building is important.”

Building parent awareness of academic expectations and ways families can help children is also a priority for Mair. In addition to a September parent meeting that spells out grade-level standards, the school offers parent workshops, a center for parents to learn teaching skills, and a lending program where parents can get games, flash cards or other materials to reinforce teaching at home.

**Professional Development**

**Multiple Opportunities to Discuss Alignment**

Building alignment is emphasized in staff training, which includes full-day monthly staff-development programs, a concentrated multi-day training program on standards and weekly common planning periods for each grade focusing on alignment. All help the school tackle big issues and continue to work through its
successes and challenges, Mair says. As a result, implementing new district standards and assessments seems to be going smoothly at Cleveland.

“While at the district level this is all still being implemented, we know what the skills are,” Mair says. “We’ve used monthly planning meetings for teachers to share and talk about how they are being successful or what they see others doing. We share strategies and decide on what we’ll do as a focus for the next month.” Beyond the content of the training, Mair points to the team atmosphere the school cultivates as another important ingredient in creating alignment. “There was a time in most school systems where the first-grade teacher had the total load of readiness, reading and everything,” she says. “Students came in sometimes knowing the alphabet and sometimes not, but that doesn’t sit well with us. We have expectations for what students need to know in first grade, plus first grade is just one part of the teaching that happens in our school, and everyone is a part of that process.” At Cleveland, the system starts in the two-year Head Start program the school operates for children starting at age 3 or in one of its two PK classes for 4-year-olds. One of the two PK classes combines 10 English-speaking children and 10 Spanish-speaking children in a class that’s taught half in English and half in Spanish.

RESULTS
STAYING AHEAD OF DISTRICT PERFORMANCE

The district’s new standards are accompanied by a new test that students in grades 3-5 took for the first time in 2006. Beyond formal district testing, the school measures students’ progress with diagnostic district exams five times a year to track achievement gains in reading and math. The school measures student progress in working through a vocabulary book taught in each grade level and in mental math exercises. Each day, Mair sets aside 15 minutes for one student to read to her. As a former reading teacher, she says it helps show she is focused on individual students’ skills and is a productive way to “tell where the weak folks are.” By the end of the year, she expects every student to have read with her. Mair also developed an end-of-kindergarten assessment the school uses to see whether students have learned the basics expected before children start first grade.

On formal assessments, the school scores well above the average for public schools in the District of Columbia. On the Stanford 9 exam, Cleveland’s second graders logged a mean score at the 58th national percentile in reading in 2002, above the district’s mean score at the 50th percentile. The 2002 math scores on the Stanford 9 were at the 74th percentile compared to the district mean at the 53rd percentile. On district exams in 2005, Cleveland students excelled in math. The school saw 95 percent of its students score proficient or better, compared to a 58 percent district average. The school’s proficiency score was up from 78 percent in 2003. On district reading exams, 64 percent of Cleveland pupils scored proficient or better compared to a 45 percent district rate. Cleveland’s scores in reading improved from a 46 percent rate on the 2003 tests. The school met all its targets for achieving Adequate Yearly Progress under the federal No Child Left Behind Act in 2005.