

**PRINCIPALS LEAD THE WAY FOR PK-3:**  
Early Investment  
Strong Alignment  
Better Results

A P R I L 2 0 0 6

*Measuring Students Against Standards Starts Early*

Columbia Elementary School  
Rochester, Indiana  
Cheryl Downs, Principal

**PROFILE**

Grades: PK-2  
 School Enrollment: 443  
 District Enrollment: 1,950  
 Community: Rural  
 Percentage of students:

- African-American: 1
- Asian: 0
- Hispanic: 2
- Native-American: 0
- White: 89
- Other: 8 percent multiracial

Poverty rate\*: 40 percent  
 English language learners: 1 percent  
 PK program location: School  
 PK program funding: School budget and federal funding

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

**PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS**

- Reconfiguration of district’s elementary schools sparked a new early childhood focus.
- Principal pushes data analysis and shares findings with parents and the public.
- Assessments provide a regular snapshot of how well students are meeting standards.

## SCHOOL SNAPSHOT

### RENOVATION OFFERS A CHANCE FOR REINVENTION

Teachers and school leaders tried to take full advantage of the opportunity to remake Columbia Elementary School after the school district decided to reconfigure its two elementary schools. The change involved physical renovations to convert Columbia to a PK-2 school for the entire district. In the process, teachers gained an unusual chance to rethink teaching and curriculum in the school. Principal Cheryl Downs says the project—which included adding PK classes—led to a total transformation. Teachers not only helped plan renovations and gained an active voice in construction issues from design of exits to bathrooms, they also redefined the school’s mission of giving children a strong and connected first experience in school.

Downs is outspoken on the need for strong education experiences for young children. She says her experience as a teacher demonstrated how many kids were on an uphill path by the time they entered school in kindergarten. “I saw that a lot of kids who were really struggling had given up on themselves by fifth grade,” she says. “And I knew it was critical to address gaps in the learning experience by second grade or it just felt like they might never get it.”

Formal results at Columbia are connected to students’ scores on state exams once they reach third or fourth grade at George M. Riddle Elementary School, which covers grades 3-5. There, third-grade students’ scores have jumped from 67 percent passing the Indiana math test in 2003 to 81 percent in 2006. A similar increase was logged in language arts—from 66 percent passing state tests in 2003 to 82 percent in 2006. The results are well above state averages, which hover around 75 percent. In 2004, the school met the Adequate Yearly Progress goals of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, exceeding state percentages for passing in reading and math.

## PK-3 ALIGNMENT

### STANDARDS, ASSESSMENTS AND ANALYSIS TIGHTLY CONNECTED

Teachers and administrators at Columbia worked to use PK to help students succeed starting in kindergarten and to establish clear alignment in K-2. The school created a PK program that covers basic Indiana kindergarten standards for shapes, colors, numbers to 10, writing one’s name and more. In writing, K-2 classes are aligned using a 12-stage rubric, with students expected to work through four stages each year. In reading, K-2 teachers use a similar teaching process and assess students’ reading level four times a year, charting the results and comparing them to past years. In math, weekly assessments offer snapshots in K-2, showing how students are meeting state standards both in what’s been covered and in their knowledge of the skills coming up. The principal and teachers also work on alignment issues with their colleagues at the elementary school that serves students beginning in third grade.

Downs says that beyond making sure standards are covered and skills build from grade to grade, the school also identified “power standards” that teachers agreed are the most important skills for building a strong foundation for students. Those skills get extra attention. Downs sees PK and the early grades as “power years” that set the stage for what students can accomplish in school. The school stays focused on the windows of opportunity that are opening—and even starting to close, she says—in a child’s development and makes the most of chances to stimulate students. “Phonemic awareness is vitally important between ages 3

and 5—the awareness of print and recognizing letter-sound associations,” the 11-year principal notes. “We know we have to start early to get children what they need.”

## PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

### FINDING THE WIDEST AUDIENCE FOR THE READINESS MESSAGE

Downs works on many fronts. She is eager to help teachers learn to use data better. She wants teachers to know how to analyze and use research to improve their practice. She says she is responsible for making sure all faculty members are on board with the school’s improvement priorities. She also is a crusader for making sure every child is ready to succeed in kindergarten, including those in the community who don’t participate in Columbia’s PK program.

Since the school added PK, Downs informs community PK, Head Start and child care providers about the strengths and weaknesses revealed in spring assessments of the fall’s incoming kindergarten classes. The information on visual and motor skills, speech needs, vocabulary development, letter and sound awareness and language concepts is also used in the school’s PK class. The results may lead Downs to urge local programs to beef up skills like knowing the difference between being over, on or under an object or exposure to concepts like quantity or time. Adopting the slogan “Frontload for Success,” Downs says sharing data from the spring assessments with parents and PK providers has been a big hit: “They’re happy to get it and, in fact, the more specific we are, the better they like it.”

“There are developmental windows that are closing before we can get our hands on our students,” Downs says. “If we can get literacy awareness started before they get here, we have a better chance for successful, happy learners.” Seeing the urgency of succeeding with students in the early grades also drives the principal to encourage teachers to use results of writing, reading and math assessments to analyze and modify their own work. It also pushes Downs to stay abreast of best practices and findings from brain research and news on other fronts to help teachers think about which approaches will work better than others.

## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

### EXPERIENCE IN EXPERIMENTATION

The faculty works together on many of the school improvement themes. Teachers meet for 45 minutes each week for grade-level collaboration and to identify students needing tutoring on different standards. Teachers also use planning time to share what is working in each subject and suggest solutions to common concerns. Special-area teachers cover classes during the common weekly planning time. The school also uses its technology experts to help teachers stay abreast of assessments and how results can be sorted and analyzed to identify areas for improvement.

Sharing the wisdom gained from assessments drives teachers’ work inside the school. Teachers study student work and test scores to decide ways to remove barriers to learning. Downs says the staff is familiar with the process of formulating theories, restructuring teaching methods, testing new strategies and ultimately improving student learning.

Downs says the process was challenging for some teachers initially because of the time it took and the frustration that can grow from trial and error. After giving the system a chance, however, teachers now see that

the data also provides them with “personal proof” of what their work is yielding for students. “Our collective kindergarten data over several years indicates we are having more success and fewer failures in the primary grades,” the principal says. “Our community is happy with that. We have seen results, and that has helped us raise our expectations.”

## RESULTS

### **TEACHERS CONSTANTLY WORKING WITH ACHIEVEMENT DATA**

State-wide testing results from George M. Riddle Elementary School, the school in the Rochester Community School Corporation that covers grades 3-5, show students improving. Third-grade students’ passing rates have jumped from 67 percent passing the Indiana math test in 2003 to 81 percent in 2006. The state tests shows a similar increase in language arts—from 66 percent passing the state test in 2003 to 82 percent in 2006. The results are well above state averages, which hover around 75 percent. In 2004, the school met the Adequate Yearly Progress goals of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, exceeding state passing percentages in reading and math. The federal report for 2004 also shows all of the school’s teachers are considered “highly qualified” for their teaching assignment.

Perhaps more important, the school collects reams of its own data: using spring kindergarten screenings to analyze PK students’ strengths and weaknesses and regularly assessing students in K-2 to show how students are faring on state standards. Downs says the flow of information keeps teachers at Columbia on track with meeting increased achievement goals. Downs says a top goal is making sure all the information the school collects about achievement is used to help Columbia improve. That means sharing information with the community to gain support and show how the school helps students to improve. “A big part of the job is communication,” Downs adds. “I recently wrote an article for the local paper talking about reading beginning at home. We want to communicate to our public that we are a learning center and, if you have concerns, come and see us.”