Alignment That Makes House Calls

Cottonwood Elementary School
Yakima, Washington
David Levad, Principal

PROFILE

Grades: PK-5
School Enrollment: 450
District Enrollment: 4,400
Community: Rural
Percentages of students:
• African-American: 1
• Asian: 1
• Hispanic: 16
• Native-American: 1
• White: 81
Poverty rate*: 30 percent
English language learners: 5 percent
PK program location: School and home
PK program funding: School budget, state and federal funding

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

• Parent-child program boosts school interest and awareness in early success.

• PK emphasis highlights the role of parent involvement and support for learning.

• Scores in upper grades reflect the stronger start by young children.

*Poverty rate determined by percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch
SCHOOL SNAPSHOT
RESOURCES TARGETED ON YOUNGEST CHILDREN

Reaching out to prepare PK students for the expectations of elementary school and state standards is the focus of Cottonwood Elementary’s increasing involvement in early childhood issues. In addition to housing a district-led PK program for special needs children, Cottonwood became part of the national Parent-Child Home Program in 2001. The program involves home visits by trained paraprofessionals who work with children and parents on school readiness. The home-visit program, in turn, has increased cooperation with local Head Start programs, creating a wider web of programs that build the skills, particularly in language and reading, of children getting ready to enter kindergarten.

Veteran principal David Levad says teachers throughout the school see the importance of the PK efforts. “I’m lucky because my staff has bought into the importance of early intervention and how that makes life easier in early elementary,” he says. Momentum for expanding readiness efforts with younger children is increased by the program’s obvious successes, the principal adds. Pre-testing and post-testing help document achievement gains, showing language skills surpassing expectations. Beyond PK, the school also sees a positive trend in its results. Scores by third graders on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills are up over the past six years, according to state reports, with Cottonwood students scoring well above the national average in both reading and math. On fourth-grade scores from the Washington Assessment of Student Learning, the school has kept pace with the state average or scored slightly above it in recent years.

PK-3 ALIGNMENT
PROGRAM MAKES READINESS A PRIORITY

The primary alignment initiative at Cottonwood involves preparing more children in Yakima, which is located near the foothills of the Cascade Mountains, to meet expectations the school sets for kindergartners. Throughout the school, the major focus is on literacy, with pre-literacy skills at the forefront, Levad says. “K-3 is really about learning to read, and that’s dependent on the language the child brings to the task,” he says. “Research shows kids from low-income homes probably know less than half as many words as other kids coming to school.”

The PK program at Cottonwood serves a specific population. The school houses the district’s PK program for special education students—about 50 half-day pupils. To reach beyond that group, Cottonwood joined the national Parent-Child Home Program in 2001. Based in New York, the program includes about 140 sites across the country. Built around intensive home visits, the program stresses quality parent-child verbal interaction and “language-rich home environments” for children beginning at ages 2 and 3. At Cottonwood, the program operates out of the same office as the school’s PK program. Home visitors see families twice a week for 23 weeks over two years. Participants come from low-income families, and many of the parents involved didn’t graduate from high school. About half the students are from Hispanic families. Children get a book and toy on the first visit each week, and the school’s representative reads with the children. Over the course of the program, the visitor models teaching and communication techniques for parents. The five visitors at Cottonwood meet weekly with the program director to report on the visits and to log student progress.
In Cottonwood’s K-5 classrooms, alignment efforts focus on putting the state’s grade-level expectations into practice and connecting teaching at all grade levels to the Washington State Learning Goals and the state’s Essential Academic Learning Requirements, the principal says. The grade-level guidelines from the state published in 2004 and 2005 are helping Cottonwood create a roadmap for what students should be learning each year. Energy in physical science, for example, is on the fourth-grade curriculum list while students in first grade may cover more fundamental concepts of motion. In math, students begin learning number concepts in kindergarten, start to focus on topics like measurement in second grade, and work on graphing and some simple geometry concepts in fourth grade. The alignment documents challenge teachers to think not only about how thoroughly content is covered, but also about how students gain ever-deeper experiences with procedures and more complex concepts. The state’s curriculum expectations also state that teachers should address “cognitive demand” in alignment discussions—moving from simple tasks like recalling facts to bigger challenges like analyzing ideas or synthesizing information from various sources.

**Principal Leadership**

**Standards and Accountability Help Clarify Priorities**

Levad says that when the state adopted learning standards along with accompanying testing and school accountability, the importance of alignment and readiness initiatives quickly rose. “Standards-based reform started just after our school opened in the mid-1990s,” Levad says. “High stakes assessment helped people realize you can’t start with third or fourth grade. You have to start early.” Levad says the Parent-Child Home Program seemed like a good match when the school realized the need “to do something in early childhood education to help these kids come in with a chance to be successful.”

The Parent-Child Home Program was initiated after the West Valley school district raised extra funds to help the school emphasize early intervention. Levad appointed a committee of educators and community members who who oversaw the program. “It sounded like the intervention we needed because there was a literacy focus and also a socialization aspect,” he recalls. The panel recommended that the school find ways to intervene with at-risk students as early as possible. That meant that the school also focused on kindergarten for children with no PK experience, leading to an extended-day kindergarten program, which now serves the entire district. At the same time, new early childhood state funding became available that now funds much of the home-visit and extended-day kindergarten programs. Levad works with a principal in a neighboring district to help create PK home-visit services there, and the Cottonwood program recently added health screenings and a Head Start connection.

**Professional Development**

**Training Includes Advice, Models for Parents**

The experience with the Parent-Child Home Program provides Cottonwood Elementary with a corps of paraprofessionals trained to help parents see how they can reinforce learning at home. The national program trains local staff to tell and show parents how to engage in “quality play” and literacy experiences. The program says such a “light touch” helps empower parents and builds pride in their ability to help in their children’s education from the earliest ages. The experience with children as young as 2 or 3 also led the staff to learn about new kinds of assessment that more closely monitor students against developmental milestones, Levad says.
At the district level, kindergarten teachers worked together to compile a recommended list of entry-level skills that will help children succeed in school. The list of critical skills is posted for families across the community on the school district Web site, offering examples of what young children should know and be able to do, with the most important skills highlighted.

Levd says that the early childhood focus is an effort that’s won the support of the wider school staff. Readiness, he says, is a constant theme for the school’s highly qualified faculty. State records show that Cottonwood’s teaching staff has slightly more experience than the state average, with 58 percent holding at least a master’s degree, just below the 61 percent state average.

**RESULTS**

**ACHIEVEMENT GROWTH “MORE THAN YOU WOULD ANTICIPATE”**

In 2005, Cottonwood Elementary met all requirements under the federal definition of Adequate Yearly Progress under the No Child Left Behind Act, and the school’s scores on state tests show progress at staying at or above the state average. Third-grade scores on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills show Cottonwood students rising from around the national average in 1999 to well above it in 2005. Reading scores moved from the 53rd national percentile in 1999 to the 63rd percentile in 2005. In math, third-grade performance rose from the 45th percentile in 1999 to the 71st percentile in 2005. In fourth grade, results on the Washington Assessment of Student Learning are also moving up. Nearly 88 percent of Cottonwood students met state standards on the reading test in 2005, compared to an 80 percent state average. In writing, two-thirds of Cottonwood students met state standards in 2005, above the 58 percent state average. In math, 64 percent of fourth graders met state standards in 2005 compared to a 61 percent state average.

Levd says results of assessments in kindergarten and anecdotal observations from the PK programs also regularly gauge school performance and show positive results. “The data shows growth in language specifically—way more than you would anticipate,” he says. The school recently received a state academic achievement award based on reading scores over the past three years.

The principal says the research-based track record of the Parent-Child Home Program creates expectations that achievement should increase not just during the years a student spends at Cottonwood, but throughout the student’s school experience. Research on the national program reports that students who participated for at least two years met or exceed the national average on standardized elementary reading and math tests. Research also indicates that participants have a high school graduation rate 20 percent higher than students from families with similar incomes, according to the program’s literature. Cottonwood’s principal says the school is sold on the value of strong PK experiences. “I’m lucky because my staff has bought into the importance of early intervention and how that makes life easier in early elementary,” Levad says.