A Transformed School’s Journey to Excellence

Deep Creek Elementary
Baltimore, Maryland
Anissa Brown Dennis, Principal

PROFILE
Grades: PK-5
School Enrollment: 575
District Enrollment: 107,000
Community: Urban
Percentages of students:
  • African-American: 75
  • Asian: 1
  • Hispanic: 6
  • Native-American: 1
  • White: 17
Poverty rate*: 77 percent
English language learners: 15 percent
PK program location: School
PK program funding: School budget and Title I

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

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS
• Principal’s commitment to PK-3 learning turned around failing school.
• Consistent reading and math curriculum for PK-3 creates seamless learning.
• Summer and after-school learning opportunities target struggling students.
SCHOOL SNAPSHOT

RAISING EXPECTATIONS FOR PK-3 LEARNING

Deep Creek Elementary School sits in a working class neighborhood in southeast Baltimore, MD. The once-thriving steel mills that for years provided high school graduates a road to the middle class have been dramatically downsized. Parents often work at two jobs to make ends meet. Almost all students come from nearby apartments and their families move frequently, giving the school a transient student population. Deep Creek has the second-highest student poverty level of Baltimore County’s 104 elementary schools.

When principal Anissa Brown Dennis arrived at Deep Creek in 2001, she inherited one of the district’s lowest-performing elementary schools. Third graders were reading at a first-grade level. Morale and expectations among staff had hit bottom. “The biggest challenge was getting the teachers to believe that no matter what conditions students were coming from, they could perform,” Dennis says. “I didn’t want excuses. I said, ‘Let’s just do it.’”

With a focus on PK-3 alignment, professional development and strong leadership, Dennis helped turn the school around in just four years. The school has been recognized by the school system for its progress. In the 2005-06 school year, it is meeting Adequate Yearly Progress for all subgroups of children as required by the No Child Left Behind Act.

PK-3 ALIGNMENT

COHERENT CURRICULUM SERIES AND COMMON PLANNING TIME FOR TEACHERS PROVIDE FOCUS

Turning around performance at Deep Creek, Dennis insisted, would begin with a renewed commitment to improving teaching and learning from PK through third grade. This vision started with recognizing PK as the beginning of a continuum of learning that extends from kindergarten through third grade.

The principal turned to early childhood staff in the district’s central office for help. Early childhood experts visited the school for teacher observations, shared research on best practices and maintained a consistent level of communication with teachers and administrative staff. Using funds provided by the district, full-time teacher aides were hired for both PK and kindergarten classes. The school also included feedback from PK teachers as it revised a school improvement plan to reflect a more coherent approach to PK-3.

The next strategy focused on aligning the school’s reading and math programs. Deep Creek became a pilot school in the district for implementing Open Court Reading, a researched-based curriculum grounded in explicit instruction of phonemic awareness and comprehension skills. Pre-kindergarten and K-3 students use the same Open Court series. The reading curriculum for PK emphasizes rich language experiences through rhymes, songs and poems. Each month the school’s literacy team, which includes a reading coach, reading specialist, teacher mentor, speech pathologist and the principal, meets to discuss students’ progress. PK students also use the same mathematics curriculum series published by McGraw-Hill as do students in first through fifth grades, helping further create strong alignment.
The Maryland curriculum goals, indicators and objectives are aligned from PK-3 in all content areas. Beginning in PK, students are held accountable for learning specific objectives in reading, writing and math.

Deep Creek also uses a block schedule that allows teachers to meet both within and across grade levels. During team meetings across all grades, teachers share common planning time to work together, discuss problem areas and back map the curriculum, or walk the curriculum backwards by grade down to PK, to ensure alignment. Teachers also plan collaboratively in grade-level teams for two and one-half hours each month with the school’s administrative team. During these meetings, teachers are asked to share information about the progress of each student. Data is used to identify and target students’ weaknesses.

Recognizing that the needs of all students cannot be met during the course of the traditional school day or year, Deep Creek has also created a system of additional supports for students. A summer program that targets children entering kindergarten and first grade provides a setting of small classes and personal instruction for students struggling with basic skills. After-school tutorial programs are conducted in the spring to help students not meeting grade-level standards. Parents who serve as teachers’ assistants rotate among all PK and kindergarten classrooms to support teachers and help alignment throughout the grades.

PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP
PUTTING VISION INTO PRACTICE

Dennis draws on her experience as a former first- and second-grade teacher to be a hands-on school leader who understands the dynamics of early childhood learning. The principal is present at every literacy team meeting and sets high expectations for her staff and students. “For me, the biggest thing is making sure teachers are aware of professional development opportunities and keeping them in touch with early childhood development,” she says. Dennis describes her key leadership strategies as:

• Articulating a clear vision for PK-3 learning connections
• Motivating staff to create positive changes in the classroom
• Offering professional development support for teachers
• Promoting collaboration among staff and building professional learning communities
• Encouraging the use of data to drive decisions

The principal also emphasizes engaging parents from different backgrounds to become more active in their children’s education as a critical element to student success. One of the apartment complexes near the school donated three empty apartments for Deep Creek to host parent-teacher conferences, parent nights and other events to engage family members at the school. The school provides an interpreter for Spanish speakers.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
PREPARING TO MEET THE NEEDS OF ALL STUDENTS

Much of the professional development at Deep Creek is grounded in helping teachers become more effective reading instructors. This includes ongoing support for teaching the five essential components of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, reading fluency, vocabulary development and reading comprehen-
sion strategies. Kindergarten teachers have opportunities to visit other successful schools to observe reading instruction. New teachers attend training workshops before they begin teaching the school’s reading series.

Teachers are trained in behavior management strategies to ensure that the instructional program is implemented with consistency. Staff also has opportunities to learn about models and strategies for differentiated instruction in mixed-ability classes so that the individual needs of students are addressed, including those with special needs.

All teachers at Deep Creek meet the state’s highly qualified definition under the No Child Left Behind Act. The law requires teachers to hold a bachelor’s degree, obtain full state certification, and demonstrate subject-matter competency in the core academic subjects they teach. In addition, 46 percent of teachers at the school hold master’s degrees.

RESULTS

FOCUS ON EARLY INTERVENTION BUILDS FOUNDATION FOR SUCCESS

The principal’s insistence on strengthening the PK-3 continuum has translated into dramatic gains at this once-failing school. In 2005, the Maryland State Department of Education awarded the school $3,000 for outstanding student achievement scores on state assessments.

In 2003, only 38 percent of third graders at Deep Creek met proficiency standards on state reading tests. Seventy-five percent of third graders reached this level in 2005. Just over one-half of the third graders met proficiency levels in math in 2003. By 2005, 71 percent received proficiency scores. The school is also meeting Adequate Yearly Progress in all student subgroups as measured by the No Child Left Behind Act.

Along with test score gains, Dennis points to a new attitude among teachers and school staff. Expectations for students have increased. While the challenges of educating children growing up in poverty remain, teachers believe all students will learn. The principal credits her staff with embracing strategies for improving teaching and learning in the early elementary grades as the key to Deep Creek’s notable turnaround.

“We have been really successful in making the shift to understanding that PK-3 is so important,” Dennis says. “I’ve consistently focused on providing additional support in the PK-3 primary grades to ensure students receive a solid start. This has made a huge difference in the success of our students in grades four and five. Less support and interventions are needed in the intermediate grades because of our focus on early intervention.”