Creating Alignment Across Campus Boundaries

Robert Frost Elementary School
Bourbonnais, Illinois
Deborah J. Nuzzi, Principal

PROFILE
Grades: PK-K
School Enrollment: 358
District Enrollment: 2,450
Community: Suburban
Percentages of students:
• African-American: 8
• Asian: 2
• Hispanic: 9
• Native-American: 1
• White: 80
Poverty rate*: 24 percent
English language learners: 4 percent
PK program location: School
PK program funding: School budget and state funding

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS
• Principal’s leadership refocuses PK and K programs on elementary standards.
• Close collaboration between schools ensures alignment challenges are met.
• Professional development often happens in informal teacher get-togethers.

*Poverty rate determined by percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch
Deborah J. Nuzzi helped turn an early childhood center in the Bourbonnais, IL, school district into a starting point for schooling designed to meet state education standards. In her short tenure as principal at Robert Frost Elementary School, an hour’s drive south of Chicago, Nuzzi’s leadership has focused on building the PK-K program around Illinois Learning Standards by looking beyond what happens in a building focused on the needs of the youngest children.

Before Nuzzi’s arrival two years ago, Frost Elementary housed a PK program for at-risk students for well over a decade. She instilled a new point of view, however, by focusing on the student inside even the youngest children. “What I showed them is that you can be developmentally appropriate with these youngsters with play, but there is no reason you can’t also integrate the goal of stringent learning standards,” Nuzzi says.

All students in Bourbonnais Elementary District No. 53 start at Frost before moving to one of the district’s two schools serving grades 1 through 3. A single intermediate school handles grades 4 and 5. The district also operates an upper grades center for grades 6-8. Moving though all those schools makes alignment a bigger challenge than in schools where all the elementary grades are under one roof. For Nuzzi, the configuration made it imperative for students to start with a strong experience at Frost that would be closely connected to teachers’ expectations at the two primary schools. While third graders at both primary schools score above the state average on the Illinois Standards Achievement Test in both reading and math, Nuzzi sees alignment as a way to help more students improve achievement. “Our teachers, parents and community agencies have bought into this new vision for early learning,” she says.

PK-3 ALIGNMENT SUCCESS REQUIRES BRINGING SCHOOLS TOGETHER

Addressing alignment at the PK-K Robert Frost School meant bringing two other schools that cover grades 1 through 3 into a joint exploration of state standards and classroom expectations. The Bourbonnais group started with the Illinois Learning Standards and what third-grade students needed to know to reach state goals. Those skills were then backed down to second and first grades, kindergarten and PK. The expectations were formalized in a curriculum map showing what the district expects students to learn at each level.

Nuzzi says meetings developing the curriculum map—and ongoing meetings that look at how well schools are doing in following it—involve teachers from each grade as well as the principals at each school. “Everyone sees the continuum,” she says. At Frost, teachers meet to discuss whether learning activities and teachers’ assessments match learning goals. That produces information that is shared with teachers in the higher grades for review as well as informing internal work and planning. The PK and K teachers also see assessments from first, second and third grades to stay apprised of what’s happening up the education chain. Nuzzi says such coordinated efforts take time, but they are the best way to make sure the school is meeting what it says students and parents should expect from public education. “The main challenge is time,” Nuzzi says of the professional collaboration.
Recently, teachers in the primary grades talked about how children might work on motor skills and writing to make the physical process of writing easier for students when they reach second or third grade. The response: Frost adopted a Handwriting Without Tears program with new lessons to help children build fine- and gross-motor skills.

**PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP**

**ENFORCING FOCUS AND REMOVING DISTRACTIONS**

Aside from getting the PK-K school focused on standards and boosting teachers’ focus on curriculum and assessment issues—no small task—Nuzzi sees her biggest contribution as removing distractions from classroom learning. “My priority is how can I support teachers so they can be excellent educators of young children,” she says. “I tell them I will worry about infrastructure, money, scheduling and taking off their shoulders the things I can handle.”

Nuzzi’s previous experience in an urban school with an aligned PK and K program led her to make quality issues and collaboration throughout the elementary grades a priority. She made it more than an internal job. “We shared our vision and went into the community and shared with community groups and at parent conferences. We also got together with PK parents and said, ‘Your kids have had a great experience, but what if it was notched up and we looked more at learning standards?’ We also brought in research and case studies that showed a rise in the test scores of third graders who had that kind of PK experience,” she says. Parents and community members signaled support. “The word I used was seamless,” Nuzzi adds. “The moment you are born, you begin to learn.”

The move toward collaboration included drafting common belief statements as well as vision and mission statements intended to unify teachers. As educators worked through the planning, more and more teachers started “to realize we could make a difference” in boosting achievement. Beyond setting a vision in the school and working to remove distractions and keep the faculty moving forward, Nuzzi also sees her job as advocating in the community for stronger early childhood learning and in correspondence and meetings with state legislators and other decision makers.

**PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

**FINDING SOME UNUSUAL CHANCES FOR TEACHERS TO COLLABORATE**

The key to boosting alignment is bringing teachers together and getting them focused on expectations and student work, Nuzzi says. The school tapped a number of conventional and creative strategies. On the more conventional side, the school’s schedule allows meeting time for teachers in each grade level to talk about teaching and learning issues. Nuzzi also helps make sure the teachers in her school know about grade-level discussions in the district’s primary schools. Time is also structured to allow teachers in different grade levels to plan and train together.

On the more innovative front, Frost teachers meet six times a year with first- through third-grade teachers in other buildings and are encouraged to find even more informal opportunities to collaborate. Nuzzi invites first-, second- and third-grade teachers to Frost for lunch or coffee occasionally to share ideas. She also organized a sleepover at a local bookstore for PK-3 teachers so they could get to know one another better and talk about how they work as a team.
“In our articulation meetings between grades, we talk about what we need to do to prepare kids better for first, second and third grade, which is a way for our teachers of young children to stay on top of what the expectations are in the older grades,” Nuzzi says. Principals also work together to underscore the collaborative tone. Frost also partners with Head Start programs to share expectations and teaching strategies. The school recently began working with a school in a nearby district to start a PK program, including inviting teachers at the other school to join Frost teachers’ training. Records for the 2004-05 school year show that all of the teachers at Frost met the federal definition of being “highly qualified” for their teaching assignment.

RESULTS
LOOKING AT DATA AND LESSONS CLASSROOMS OFFER

Assessment data show Frost students making progress. On the STAR Early Literacy Assessment, kindergarten students improved in all areas from 2003 to 2004, with the biggest gains in reading comprehension. Scores rose again in 2005. A score of 600 on STAR is the goal for students entering first grade. In 2003, 41 percent of Frost’s kindergarten students didn’t meet that goal. In 2004, the school trimmed that rate to 28 percent and lowered it to 24 percent for 2005, according to the school’s improvement plan.

Improvements from stronger alignment stand to help raise student scores that are already ahead of the state average. In 2005, third graders at Noel Levasseur Elementary, one of the first- through third-grade schools in the Bourbonnais district, scored 73.8 on the third-grade Illinois reading exam, ahead of the 66.6 state average. At the other primary school, Shabbona Elementary, third-grade reading scores were 78.6. In math, Levasseur third graders scored 90.8 in 2005. Shabbona third graders scored 88.5, both above the 79.2 state average.

While Nuzzi says Frost leaders try to draw as many lessons as possible from achievement tests that compare students to other schools, the focus on alignment requires analysis of student work and classroom assessments that help pinpoint gaps in meeting state standards and reaching the expectations of upper-grade teachers. Such regular analysis offers a powerful way to stay on top of chances for improvement in teaching and student learning, the principal says. “We all spend time talking about instructional strategies and best practices,” Nuzzi adds.