Building a Movement: Early Childhood Education as the Foundation for Success

Jefferson Elementary
Norman, Oklahoma
Kathy Taber, Principal

PROFILE
Grades: PK-5
School Enrollment: 350
District Enrollment: 12,596
Community: Suburban
Percentages of students:
- African-American: 8
- Asian: 1
- Hispanic: 4
- Native-American: 8
- White: 78
- Other: 1
Poverty rate*: 64 percent
English language learners: 5 percent
PK program location: School
PK program funding: State funding and school budget

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

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS
- School piloted first PK program in the system, which has served as a district model.
- Extended professional development time is offered to staff in the summer.
- Music, physical education and other resource teachers incorporate learning standards into activities.
SCHOOL SNAPSHOT

A DISTRICT MODEL FOR EARLY LEARNING

Jefferson Elementary School occupies the site of the first school building erected in Norman, OK, in 1894. A working-class suburb about 20 miles south of Oklahoma City, the east side of Norman has a significant number of families living in poverty. Many parents of children at Jefferson have not attended college. Families often live in crowded, single-room apartments.

District leaders of the Norman Public Schools approached Kathy Taber in 1998 to open the system’s first pilot PK program at Jefferson. For years, the principal had been urging district officials to pay more attention to early learning. She saw a need to begin reaching children at younger ages to better prepare them for success in school. Taber, who has been honored as a National Distinguished Principal by the U.S. Department of Education and the National Association of Elementary School Principals, frequently sent research to district leaders on the positive impact of early learning. She extolled the benefits of full-day kindergarten programs and integrating parents more fully into classrooms. For a time, those pleas were ignored. Most district administrators, she remembers, didn’t fully appreciate the importance of early childhood education. “I was a thorn in their side, but I just kept telling them we needed these early childhood programs,” she says.

Her persistence paid off. When the PK program opened at Jefferson, it quickly became a magnet for parents who recognized the value of quality early learning based in an elementary school setting. Because of the pilot’s success, there are now PK programs in 14 of the district’s 15 elementary schools.

Jefferson has also served as an impetus for a district initiative called Bright Beginnings, which sends school district teachers into community-based child care centers to provide two hours of early learning instruction to children. For two years, Jefferson piloted the system’s first partnership with a community-based Head Start center. This inspired the district to seek more partnerships with quality child care programs. Jefferson also started the district’s first full-day kindergarten program, which has laid the groundwork for the district’s move next fall to offer free full-day kindergarten.

PK-3 ALIGNMENT

A SEAMLESS CONTINUUM OF LEARNING

Classroom teachers and staff leaders at Jefferson have worked in grade-level teams and across grades to dissect the state’s standards through a process of detailed curriculum mapping. These maps help teachers understand what skills students are expected to know in different grades and foster a more coherent flow of instructional strategies.

Unit plans for each grade are posted in a workroom so that all teachers, librarians, music teachers and physical education staff can communicate across grade levels and make learning connections for students. Each Wednesday, grade-level teams meet with math and reading specialists, who provide instructional support and address challenges teachers may face. These grade-level teams also meet with the media resource specialist and the principal. Each quarter, Taber pays for release time for all resource teachers, so they will be able to sit down together and analyze curriculum maps. This process enables a physical
education teacher or a music teacher, for example, to think about ways they can incorporate learning standards into their own activities. In addition, faculty meetings are held once a week after school, providing opportunities for teachers and school leaders to discuss alignment issues and work collaboratively on curriculum development.

“I really see this as a continuum that starts with pre-kindergarten and continues,” Taber says. “I want to make sure everyone is on the same page.”

**PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP**

**EARNING RESPECT AS A CONTINUOUS LEARNER**

For Taber, being a leader first means being a student who seeks opportunities to learn from others. The principal has put this philosophy into practice as she has evolved into a school and district leader. “I hire great people, and I learn a lot from them,” she says. “I’m not big on top-down management or power through title or position. I believe you earn your respect.”

Taber believes she earns the respect of her staff by becoming an active member of learning communities created by teachers at Jefferson to improve their knowledge base and instructional strategies. During the summer, for example, she often joins teachers who meet in study groups to discuss books or articles as part of their professional development.

The principal distinguished herself early on by persistently lobbying district officials to expand educational opportunities for young children in Norman. Despite initial apathy, district administrators grew to recognize the principal’s vision and called on her to open the system’s first school-based pre-kindergarten program. Taber has also been influential in pushing the district to adopt full-day kindergarten next fall.

**PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

**BUILDING STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION**

Teachers at Jefferson have an array of professional development opportunities throughout the school year and summer months. This is a particular area of interest for Taber, who completed her doctoral work in professional development.

For the past three years, teachers have attended a summer retreat to plan together across grade levels. Jefferson has also received a professional development grant through a state technology organization funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Through this grant, the school is moving through a professional development process called lesson study. This involves teachers planning a lesson together and then observing each other to determine strengths and weaknesses as each teacher presents the lesson on a different day. The lesson is then continually improved.

As part of the school system’s adoption of a guided reading curriculum, which centers on focused reading instruction in student groups, teachers have attended workshops on how to manage small learning centers within the classroom. Taber, for example, visits classrooms where guided reading instruction is taking place. She videotapes teachers’ lessons to observe teacher-student interactions. She then meets individually with
teachers after they have viewed the taped lesson to discuss how instruction can be improved. “Instead of me saying this was good or bad, they look at it and say, ‘I can do a better job,’” Taber says. “It’s a more formative process.”

Teachers from each grade will also receive district-wide professional development training as the district moves to full-day kindergarten next fall. Teachers from Jefferson have attended district-sponsored workshops featuring national experts in curriculum and instruction. Teachers and administrators also participate in ongoing classes held at the district’s professional development center. For Taber, the key is facilitating her staff to take these varied opportunities and transfer the lessons learned into improved instructional practices in the classroom. “It’s the principal’s job to help teachers see the connections—that it’s not just isolated training they attend and they never think about again,” she says.

All teachers and teaching assistants at Jefferson meet highly qualified teaching status as defined by the No Child Left Behind Act. Teachers in PK-1 classrooms must have an early childhood certificate. All other teachers are required to be certified in elementary education. One third of Jefferson’s teachers have master’s degrees.

RESULTS
CREATING A FOUNDATION FOR SUCCESS

Classroom observations, surveys of parents and other assessment measures used by the school show that children who attend the PK program are entering kindergarten more prepared to learn.

Teachers report that kindergarten and first-grade students with PK experience are more confident in the school setting, demonstrate more developed early literacy abilities, and recognize shapes and patterns. “They are ready to do the business of school,” Taber says. “All this allows the teacher to move into the real content of the grade level, rather than spending six weeks building social skills.”

In 1997-98, the year before a PK program opened at Jefferson, third graders reached 56 percent national ranking in reading and 66 percent in math on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. In the 2004-05 school year, third graders were in the 90th percentile for reading and 80th percentile for math. According to their 2005 school report card, Jefferson Elementary met Adequate Yearly Progress.

School district officials often choose Jefferson to host educators from other communities interested in learning about quality early childhood programs.