Breaking New Ground in Linking PK With Elementary Grades

King Elementary School
Van Buren, Arkansas
Martha Ragar, Principal

PROFILE
Grades: PK-4
School Enrollment: 302
District Enrollment: 5,797
Community: Rural
Percentages of students:
• African-American: 3
• Asian: 4
• Hispanic: 13
• Native-American: 4
• White: 71
• Other: 5
Poverty rate*: 49 percent
English language learners: 11 percent
PK program location: School
PK program funding: School budget, Title I, Head Start
and state funding

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

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS
• Being in a national network helps the school make a strong start in adding PK.
• Leadership closely monitors classroom expectations and student achievement.
• Teaming teachers across grades keeps alignment and standards at the forefront.
FORESEEING THE “WRITING ON THE WALL”

In Arkansas, King Elementary School is a pioneering laboratory for adding PK to elementary schools as the first step toward an aligned system where young students work their way toward meeting state education standards. Nurtured by a national school-improvement network and connected to a pilot state program, King’s four-year effort to add PK to the Arkansas elementary school is intended to serve as an example for other schools in the state as they opt for such programs. “It’s coming,” says Martha Ragar, the 16-year principal at the school. “The writing is on the wall even though PK is not required here.”

Seeing stronger PK programs as a way to help more students succeed in the early grades, Ragar and Van Buren school district officials joined Yale University’s School of the 21st Century network and began a program funded by the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation to help several Arkansas schools add new offerings designed to boost achievement. At King, the focus for funding and support from the Yale program was the addition of PK and expansion of before- and after-school services for all King students. “It was a great opportunity because we’d seen so many kids coming to school with no background that would help them in kindergarten,” Ragar says. “And it’s not just low-income families whose children need PK programs.”

The Yale program offered three years of funding that helped build the program, along with a supportive network that let Ragar and Van Buren officials stay in touch with other Arkansas participants and see how elementary PK programs run in other states. More recently, Arkansas lawmakers created their own pilot PK initiative, which includes King. Establishing PK comes at the same time King staff works to improve alignment between grades and connect classroom teaching and testing to state academic standards.

Getting buy-in from the staff was an initial challenge, along with finding space and scheduling the program. Keeping the focus on ways the PK program would be an asset to the school was the chief strategy for overcoming initial hurdles. Ragar says that fully integrating PK into the school has meant making it part of the alignment focus, even though students in the PK program come from across the district and some could end up attending another elementary school.

The school will soon see what its combination of PK and alignment will yield in terms of achievement, as the 2005-06 third graders are the first class with the chance to experience both. They might help improve state test scores at King, which showed a dip from 81 percent of fourth graders scoring proficient or better on the 2003 state literacy exam to just 64 percent in 2005. The percentage of King’s students scoring proficient or better on the state math test showed the same trend, dropping from 87 percent in 2003 to 64 percent in 2005.

ADDING PK TO ALIGNMENT EFFORTS

Ragar describes improving alignment as a challenging mix of increasing teachers’ knowledge of content and expectations and staying focused on state standards, which aren’t necessarily a fixed target. After King adopted a curriculum map spelling out what students should be learning at each grade level, the state updated its curriculum frameworks. Building alignment also involves making sure teachers are constantly communicating and ensuring that students move successfully through the school’s program. “You refer to
the standards, develop a plan and create rubrics that can help you see where each child is,” she says. “It’s hard work.”

The school’s curriculum from grade to grade is built around frameworks created by the state education department that connect to the Arkansas academic standards. Ragar says team meetings among teachers are the chief forum for alignment and curriculum issues. Teacher teams work with the state’s early childhood framework and kindergarten expectations to make sure those expectations meshed with what’s happening in kindergarten and PK. Teachers routinely create rubrics explaining expectations for class work, clearly defining the level of work needed to meet standards. Meanwhile, the Van Buren district tests students in elementary grades at the beginning and end of each year to measure “value added” in classrooms. “We’re trying to get better and better at marking progress,” Ragar says.

PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP
FINDING MULTIPLE OPPORTUNITIES TO KEEP IMPROVING

Ragar says a big part of her role is “keeping expectations high,” and she works on several fronts. She provides the leading voice for constantly focusing on meeting children at their own math and literacy levels and moving them toward state proficiency standards by “helping them to improve every day.” Ragar heads a team that includes two full-time curriculum coaches, and all three observe classes regularly and meet with teachers individually and in teams to discuss student work and progress.

By staying in regular contact with all teachers, asking about their needs for materials and resources, and making sure they get what they need, Ragar keeps teachers focused on the school’s alignment and achievement goals. She makes time for frequent classroom walkthroughs and participates in staff development with teachers. Ragar also sees her relationships with parents as a way to get helpful feedback that will keep the school on target.

Adding PK gave Ragar another important task: Showing how the new program should fit into the traditional elementary school. “From the beginning, we included PK in all of our support classes” like music, library, physical education and art. PK students attend school assemblies, and their classrooms are full of books, mirroring the literacy emphasis in the rest of the school. Ragar says that adding PK means complying with new regulations and can be complicated. Joining the state’s pilot PK program recently opened a new stream of funding, but it also came with new rules. “What’s called for in PK can be very different from what’s required in public schools—there are new records to keep and behind-the-scenes support and requirements people might not realize,” Ragar says. “We just did it, and now we see these children not starting kindergarten behind or as far behind as they would have been if they were home or at daycare.”

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
TEAMING TEACHERS REINFORCES ALIGNMENT EMPHASIS

King Elementary combines teachers in different grade levels for professional development and planning to help increase their focus on expectations and achievement. Teachers in PK and K, grades 1 and 2, and 3 and 4 work together on everything from professional book studies to analyzing student achievement data. In team meetings, teachers look at early childhood frameworks and kindergarten expectations to iron out PK
learning experiences and readiness issues. “It gives teachers opportunities to talk together about how concepts progress through the years,” Ragar says.

Professional development discussions also center on student work. The school’s leadership team includes a pair of curriculum coaches—one of whom is a former Reading Recovery, kindergarten and PK teacher—who work with teachers on curriculum, what students need to know and how to boost classroom learning. Teachers meet weekly with curriculum coaches and the principal, and those conversations include input from teachers about their needs. “We try to make sure we’re all working together in the same direction,” Ragar says. The school year includes 10 days where the staff works together on professional development issues. In 2004 and 2005, records show that all teachers in the school were fully certified for their teaching assignments.

**RESULTS**

**LOOKING FOR CONFIRMATION IN TEST SCORES**

The effort to add PK and increase alignment has come as King Elementary faces the challenge of improving its state test scores. The school’s downward trend on Arkansas tests from 2003 to 2005 mirrors drops in the district and state average. King met its Adequate Yearly Progress goals under the federal No Child Left Behind Act in 2005.

On state tests, 55 percent of King’s fourth graders scored proficient or better on the state literacy exam in 2005. The Van Buren district average was 59 percent, while the state average was 52 percent. In fourth-grade math, 64 percent of King students scored proficient or better on the state exam in 2005, above the 58 percent district average and the 51 percent state figure. Those numbers are down at all levels, however, from 2003, when 81 percent of King students were proficient or better in fourth-grade literacy, compared with a 77 percent district average and 62 percent state average. In math in 2003, 67 percent of King fourth graders were proficient or better, compared to a state average of 73 percent and a state average of 61 percent.

Last year, the school made a good showing in the first year of state-wide third-grade testing, with 65 percent of third graders scoring proficient or better in literacy and 72 percent proficient or better in math. Those results were far above the state averages of 51 percent and 59 percent, respectively. Ragar says results from various tests—the district measures students at the beginning and end of each year from first grade on and the school uses kindergarten and PK readiness assessments—as well as other indicators show the school is making progress. “We have a high rate of parent approval, a long waiting list for PK and our kids are happy,” she notes. “Through testing and observation, we can see that our PK program is giving children an advantage when they get to kindergarten, and we can see that it’s influencing parents, too, in the way they talk to their children and interact with them.”