Making the Most of an “I Can” Emphasis

Henry D. Lloyd School
Chicago, Illinois
Miryam Assaf-Keller, Principal

PROFILE
Grades: PK-5
School Enrollment: 1,350
District Enrollment: 426,812
Community: Urban
Percentages of students:
• African-American: 6
• Asian: 0
• Hispanic: 92
• Native-American: 0
• White: 2
Poverty rate*: 97 percent
English language learners: 48 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
• The school sees progress in getting teachers to value alignment and standards.
• PK is seen as an essential part of making improvements.
• Teacher collaboration works with reform programs to build focus.
PK ADDITION HELPS PROGRESSION OF LEARNING

PK was recently an off-campus experience at Henry D. Lloyd School in the largely Hispanic Belmont-Cragin neighborhood in northwest Chicago. In the 1990s, the school housed a single Head Start program, but its PK programs were in a storefront classroom a block away. New space created the opportunity not only get PK students in the regular school, but also to get PK and kindergarten teachers working in the same section of the building. The move made possible real alignment starting with the school’s youngest pupils, says Miryam Assaf-Keller, the 13-year principal: “We can shape the work our teachers do with PK children.”

Alignment in the school focuses not only on Illinois learning standards, but also the school’s efforts to implement the Chicago Reading Initiative, a district program to strengthen young students’ word knowledge, fluency, comprehension and writing. The school also works with the University of Illinois-Chicago to improve daily delivery of the state standards. Both programs have their beginnings in PK and build through each grade. The work on alignment and the focus on standards are showing results. The school’s overall scores on all state tests jumped from 2003-04 to 2004-05, moving from the district average to well above it. The school is still behind the state average on all tests in 2004-05, according to state records. The school made strong progress on the state’s English test for students with limited language skills. Lloyd’s score almost doubled in one year and moved ahead of the state average. The school met the Adequate Yearly Progress goals of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2005.

“For us, alignment and focusing on standards have happened at the same time. We had a situation where we could say we were making progress, but it was in very small and slow increments,” Assaf-Keller says. “We could not continue to maintain that status quo. We set up an environment where teachers were positive about learning from each other.”

PK - 3 ALIGNMENT
TEACHERS COLLABORATE WITH STANDARDS AS THE FOCUS

Greater teacher collaboration helped build a new atmosphere in the school. Lead teachers work with grade-level teams and assistance is offered swiftly when questions or problems are raised. The school’s implementation of the Chicago Reading Initiative mirrors and supports the learning progression envisioned by state standards.

That work combines with the University of Illinois-Chicago’s project, which has broken the standards down into “I Can” statements that help teachers, children and parents understand the step-by-step growth of the curriculum. In PK, that means readiness standards are translated into statements like “I can listen to a story read aloud to me” or “I can express or retell a story in my own words.” As students fulfill one step, they move to the next. Assaf-Keller says the school’s curriculum, instruction and assessment work are now based on the idea of a unified progression of skills and student performance.

The principal believes that making PK a strong part of that process is essential. “They cannot be disconnected, because PK is not just play. I believe children need time for activities built around play, because that...
is developmentally appropriate, but we set up an environment where children are playing as a way to interact and get skills in learning centers. They talk and share a book with someone else, which reinforces a reading initiative component. It’s crucial to begin at that very early age. We can’t send them to kindergarten not knowing what it means to retell a story.”

PRINCIPAL LEadership
Showing the way Improvement efforts work together

Assaf-Keller says that the time she spends focused on PK demonstrates for everyone that it’s a priority. She is also leading the change process in the school, emphasizing alignment and daily work toward standards. Another major job in leading improvement for teachers and students is keeping people positive about change and professional growth and helping others see how to combine different ideas. “My vision is to reach the level that is a truly balanced program implementing the state learning goals and Chicago Reading Initiative components with developmentally appropriate strategies,” she says. “I’ve seen programs very play-oriented where academics are totally disregarded, but I know the academics can be included.”

“The same is true with bilingualism,” the principal adds. “We want children to develop cognitive skills in their native language but also introduce English.”

In such a large school, the principal’s leadership has been carried out partly through a leadership team that helps teachers understand the change process, see ways to strengthen alignment and adhere to learning standards. “Now we use e-mail to discuss ideas and teachers bring student work to grade-level meetings to discuss how well we’re hitting the standards,” Assaf-Keller says. “Teachers are asking the question, ‘How do you think we can get progress?’ That’s nice.”

The school also sends the message home. Parents get updates every two weeks on the skills their children will be working on. The information is intended to help parents talk to their young children about what they are learning and what they read. Assaf-Keller says the notes also spur many families to reinforce classroom learning at home. Notice that the school will be covering magnetism may lead some families to search for magnets around the house or start conversations about how one concept relates to others learned in previous weeks. The school schedules regular time for families to have short conversations on any topic and offers Saturday and before-school tutoring and after-school activities, which draw more than 500 students.

Professional development
Teacher collaboration reinforces standards and alignment focus

Teacher collaboration at Lloyd reinforces alignment. Teachers from the same grade level meet regularly to talk about student work or other issues. Lead teachers also work with grade-level teams to answer to classroom teachers’ questions about improving practice or implementing new techniques. “Vertical teams” of teachers from different grade levels meet monthly to discuss how students are meeting expectations or how concepts and standards might be covered at different levels. Through a district program, teachers in their first three years meet regularly with mentors to visit classrooms or to get other forms of coaching.
“A professional learning community environment has been set, and that’s taken a while,” Assaf-Keller says. “Now teachers don’t feel intimidated going to a colleague, and we do walkthroughs to observe each other’s classes. I’m not involved with discipline, so I spend a lot of time working with teachers and visiting classrooms, too.”

Focusing on alignment and standards is a constant task. Assaf-Keller says teachers have freedom to design their own lessons and learning activities. But, she says, “it’s still easy to say ‘I’m going to do this in the classroom because it looks like a fun activity.’ We have to keep asking how what we’re doing has a true relationship with our learning standards.”

Officials say the partnership with the University of Illinois-Chicago has helped speed the focus on academic standards. Lloyd is about to become a demonstration school for the university alignment system, with teachers positioned to coach their peers in other schools. Assaf-Keller says the school is working with individual teachers to help identify strengths that could be shared with other schools.

Like many urban schools, Lloyd faces the challenge of hiring and retaining well-trained teachers. In 2005, records show that 17 percent of Lloyd’s teachers held emergency or provisional certificates, well above the district’s 4 percent average. About 11 percent of the school’s classes were led by teachers not considered “highly qualified.” That rate was equal to the district average and below the average for Lloyd’s region of the Chicago district.

RESULTS

AHEAD OF THE CHICAGO AVERAGE BUT BEHIND THE ILLINOIS MARK

Lloyd’s work on alignment coincided with a small gain on the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) from 2003-04 to 2004-05. During that time, district and state average scores remained almost flat. Lloyd’s overall score rose from a 53.8 on ISAT in 2003-04 to 57.8 in 2004-05. The Chicago average was 47.0 in 2004-05, while the state average was 68.9.

On the ISAT exams, Lloyd’s third graders scored a 50.0 in 2004-05 compared to the 42.1 district average and 66.6 state average. In math, Lloyd third graders scored 70.8, above the Chicago average of 55.2 and nearing the 79.2 state average. In science, Lloyd fourth graders scored 57.9 in 2004-05, between the district average (43.3) and the state average (71.4).

Lloyd’s big success in 2005 came in testing of its English language learners. Their average score almost doubled in one year and moved ahead of the state average. The school met the Adequate Yearly Progress goals of the NCLB in 2005.

Beyond state tests, PK teachers use the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Literacy Skills tests to measure early literacy skills. In addition to test scores, the school uses its internal data on how well students are mastering the “I Can” statements to judge progress. Lloyd’s administrators and lead teachers are trying to use more grade-level planning time to discuss assessment results and what they mean for school improvement efforts.