Finding Many Avenues To Build Unity and Focus

McFerran Preparatory Academy
Louisville, Kentucky
Carol Miller, Principal

PROFILE
Grades: PK-5
School Enrollment: 950
District Enrollment: 97,000
Community: Urban
Percentages of students:
• African-American: 50
• Asian: 0
• Hispanic: 0
• Native-American: 0
• White: 50
• Other: 0
Poverty rate*: 91 percent
English language learners: 15 percent
PK program location: School
PK program funding: Title I, Head Start and state funding

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

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS
• Teaming and collaboration among teachers reinforce alignment as a priority.
• After-school, Saturday school and summer camp help students stay on track.
• Professional development is heavily focused on expectations and alignment.
SCHOOL SNAPSHOT

TWO WORLDS, ONE SCHOOL

It would be easy for McFerran Preparatory Academy to be run like two schools. As one of a handful of pre-kindergarten centers in the district serving Louisville, KY, and surrounding Jefferson County, the building is home to about 300 PK children. The school’s 650 students in the K-5 program could easily exist in an entirely different orbit.

Principal Carol Miller, a 25-year veteran, sees her job in part to make sure the two worlds operate as one. Even though most PK students don’t feed into the upper grades at McFerran, both they and their teachers are full participants in the school. PK teachers have the same access to the school’s science specialist as other teachers, for example. And Miller takes pride in how it all fits together. “Here, school starts when you’re three years old,” she says.

The formula appears to be working. Students’ scores on Kentucky’s tests have moved up consistently. The school is already nearing the state’s 2014 proficiency goals in science, social studies and practical living skills. Progress in recent years in reading and math put the school on track in those subjects as well. The school has managed to make progress in all racial and socio-economic categories, leaving no wide achievement gaps. The evidence leads Miller to wonder aloud how children might benefit if they could start school at age two.

PK-3 ALIGNMENT

CONNECTING CURRICULUM AND LINKING TEACHERS

Making a strong connection from PK to primary grades and beyond starts as soon as school begins. PK students arrive a week after other students. During that first week, PK teachers help in kindergarten rooms, getting an up-close look at how ready their former students are for the next level. At the same time, they get a strong sense of kindergarten routines and expectations they spend the year leading their young students toward.

When the school launched the PK program more than a decade ago, it used High/Scope curriculum materials while the rest of the school was aligning instruction with Kentucky’s academic standards. Miller says the curriculum was a good fit, but the school quickly moved to tailor its PK expectations to the kindergarten expectations once the district adopted a curriculum framework.

“Now, when our kindergarten gets the former PK students in August, teachers can start in right away,” Miller says. “These children have the social skills, know their colors and shapes, and are ready for the next level.” The alignment included developing regular classroom assessments that connect student work with state standards at all levels. The school uses data from those assessments and other teacher evaluations to create a picture of student progress that can trace fifth graders all the way back to PK. Teachers also work with parents to help them understand expectations, where their children stand, and the next steps in moving toward proficiency.
Bus schedules and other factors don’t make it possible for PK and kindergarten teachers to spend regular planning time together, but teachers in other grades work not only in grade level teams but also in vertical teams, where teachers meet regularly with colleagues in the grades above and below their own. Miller carves out times during the school year for PK teachers to be part of that process as well, and she schedules time for every new teacher—regardless of the grade they’ll teach—to observe the school’s PK classes in action.

“All our PK teachers have associate’s degrees and three have four-year degrees in early childhood education. We need to make sure everyone in our building knows that these kids don’t just sing good-morning songs, read a story, have lunch, lay down for a rest and then go home,” Miller says. “All our teachers understand that PK is actually teaching important skills.”

PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP
A CRUSADER FOR ALIGNED TEACHING AND SERVICES THAT START EARLY

Miller is continually looking for ways to expand children’s access to learning opportunities. Her thought that the school could serve 2-year-olds is not so strange after considering that many students are involved in McFerran’s programs before or after school, on Saturdays and during summers. In addition, the school serves families with daytime adult ESL and GED programs that include free child care. The school also holds regular parenting classes.

Besides Miller’s work on campus, she is involved in the Kentucky Association of Elementary School Principals, advocating for increased state preschool funding and more resources for early childhood programs, including full-day kindergarten—a district-funded program in Kentucky. Miller also serves on a district early childhood committee working on-aligning PK and kindergarten.

“Times are really changing, and getting more kids in PK is a real need,” she says. “In my area, parents are working. If they don’t come to school, a lot these kids are staying home with a relative and sitting in front of TV. When many of our children start PK, they don’t know their own names. You ask them their names, and they say ‘Little Man’ or ‘Puddin.’ You ask again and they say the same thing.” Miller says that an aligned program of curriculum and services starting in PK can forcefully address children’s needs and get help for parents while engaging them in school. Another result is that children learn more.

Miller cites the case of a fifth-grade girl who started PK at McFerran and, because she was identified as autistic, required an assistant. Through the years, the school provided speech and language assistance and worked to improve her other developmental skills. At the same time, teachers communicated regularly about the girl’s progress and readiness from grade to grade. Each year, she required fewer services. By the time the girl reached fifth grade, she no longer needed any special services and was faring well on her own in a regular class. “It’s a wonderful example of everything we’re trying to do, and why PK needs to be part of school,” Miller says.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
OFFERING TEACHERS MANY WAYS TO REFLECT ON THEIR WORK

A big part of creating alignment at McFerran is the structured way the school keeps teachers in contact with one another and focuses them on student work and progress. Teachers plan in grade-level groups and meet
in vertical teams. “They ask questions like, ‘What does this group know,’ or ‘How did they do on the last test?’ They look for gaps and how we can fill them. They talk about expectations,” Miller says.

This formal professional development time is reinforced by a culture where teachers are expected to spend time talking and visiting one another’s classrooms to learn or reflect on their own practice. That kind of atmosphere makes it more natural for a PK teacher to find a way to send a child to a kindergarten reading group if they need the challenge, or for a third-grade teacher to send a pupil to a lower-grade class as a way to reinforce a concept and build self-esteem. PK and kindergarten teachers meet several times a year to discuss progress. Similar meetings after spring break begin to focus on ways to improve learning activities or curriculum for the following year to better align expectations or standards. Miller also encourages teachers to use each other as resources if children are having trouble. She says the children’s teachers in earlier years are often able to provide background or thoughts on how to help the child.

Miller says this focus on alignment and standards is part of an emphasis on teacher quality. A University of Louisville professional development school, McFerran attracts teacher-education students from the nearby campus to work frequently with the school’s teachers. The emphasis on professional development has led some teachers to rethink their career options—some PK teachers have become certified to teach elementary grades, while one elementary teacher wanted to move to PK. Miller says a strong group of teachers helps McFerran achieve its positive results. The school reports that all of its teachers were certified for their assignment in 2005. That same year, 83 percent of the school’s K-5 teachers held a master’s degree or equivalent, according to school records.

**RESULTS**

**SCORES ON THE RISE**

While McFerran teachers spend a good deal of time reviewing student work and gauging progress on the school’s expectations or state standards, the ultimate scorecard remains Kentucky’s high-stakes Commonwealth Accountability Testing System index. Expecting steady progress toward proficiency goals set for each school in 2014, McFerran has made solid progress. In 1999, the school’s overall academic score was 57.3. Reaching 100 on the 140-point scale is the target for 2014. By 2002, the school’s academic index was up to 70.8. The school recorded an 87.5 index in 2005, when the state average for elementary schools was 80.

In 2005, McFerran neared the 100 mark in science, social studies and practical living skills. Scores in reading and math are in the mid- to upper-80s, while arts and writing scores lag in the mid-70s, although that is still above the state average. On the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills exam in 2005, McFerran’s third graders scored in the 52nd percentile overall, up from the 41st percentile in 2000, but still below state and district averages.

Miller says the school takes pride in these improving results, and she is quick to point out that the scores show only a slight achievement gap based on race or family income. In 2005, white students scored 89.6 overall on Kentucky’s tests, while African-American students scored 84.6. In reading, white students scored 81.3, while African-American students scored 80. The school made Adequate Yearly Progress in all categories under the No Child Left Behind Act.