

PRINCIPALS LEAD THE WAY FOR PK-3:
Early Investment
Strong Alignment
Better Results

A P R I L 2 0 0 6

Building a Strong Foundation for Learning

Morris Early Childhood Center
Lincoln, Delaware
Beth Carlson, Principal

PROFILE

Grades: PK-1
School Enrollment: 740
District Enrollment: 4,553
Community: Suburban
Percentages of students:

- African-American: 28
- Asian: 0
- Hispanic: 13
- Native-American: 0
- White: 58
- Other: 1

Poverty rate*: 41 percent
English language learners: 1 percent
PK program location: School
PK program funding: School budget and state

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

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

- Students with developmental delays and others work side-by-side in classrooms to their mutual benefit.
- Professional development modules at the school tap into staff expertise and use classroom videotaping as a strategy for sharing and learning.
- Principal successfully led a state-wide campaign to eliminate standardized testing in kindergarten and first grade.

SCHOOL SNAPSHOT

A STUDENT-CENTERED APPROACH TO LEARNING

Morris Early Childhood Center in Lincoln, DE, was built with young learners in mind. The countertops in the school office are low enough for 4- and 5-year-olds to see over when they wander in looking for assistance or someone to talk to. The desks, bathrooms, scissors and pencils are small enough to fit in the hands of 3- to 7-year-old students. Even the school mission statement has been modified so that young people understand and use it frequently. That motto is: We come to learn.

Morris' principal, Beth Carlson, says the Lincoln community understands that a strong foundation in the early years leads to academic success for students throughout their educational careers. Morris is the only public school serving kindergarten and first-grade students in the Milford School District. "The road to high school graduation starts at Morris," she says.

The school is also home to early development and PK programs aligned with kindergarten and first grades. The early development program admits 2- to 4-year-old students with special needs. Many of the students have severe delays in language development; several children also have multiple physical handicaps. The school's PK program also primarily serves students with special needs. Applying the Developmental Indicators for the Assessment of Learning tool, school staff members screen and admit 4- and 5-year-old students based on their physical or language development needs.

Morris uses a Team Approach to Mastery (TAM) program to meet the needs of students in PK classrooms. Only nine of the 90 PK students in the school are what Carlson calls "typicals," normally developing students. In TAM classrooms, students with special needs work and learn side-by-side with their normally developing peers in classes no larger than 20. Two teachers, a regular classroom teacher and a special education teacher, lead the TAM classes.

According to Carlson, the interactions between students with special needs and other children in PK and early development classrooms contribute to the success of the programs. "The interactions between students in TAM classrooms are mutually beneficial. Students with special needs need to hear and interact with normally developing children. They can have 4-year-old conversations in ways that are much more powerful than with a teacher," she says. The success of the TAM approach in the early development and PK programs has led to its use throughout the school in four of the 19 kindergarten sections and three of the 16 first-grade classes. Carlson notes that similar success has been replicated on all levels. "I would challenge anyone to pick out the special needs students in those classrooms," she says.

MAKING CONNECTIONS TO SUPPORT LEARNING

Carlson believes the key to learning at Morris lies with its strong teaching staff. She makes sure teachers have ample time to work and learn together. PK and kindergarten teachers share daily planning time during the break between half-day programs. Grade-level teams also have formal meetings once a week: Kindergarten and PK teachers meet after school on Tuesdays, and first-grade teachers meet in grade-level teams on Wednesdays. Full faculty meetings are held at the school on at least two Monday afternoons each month. The time is reserved for conversations about issues that affect teaching and learning school-wide, such as curriculum implementation, special education research or practice, and training on new data management systems. In addition to these scheduled times, many PK-1 teachers meet informally on Thursday afternoons to continue conversations about curricula, students and teaching methods.

Through continued dialogue and research and implementation of innovative approaches, Morris' staff is creating strong connections within and between grade levels. Some of the connections are informal. "It's not unusual for a teacher to send one of their students across the hall to participate in a new reading lesson that one of their colleagues is testing to give that child extra-learning time in an area he or she may be struggling with," Carlson says.

Other connections, however, are more formal. Because the state doesn't provide PK standards, teacher teams have worked backwards using Delaware's Kindergarten Grade Level Expectations to create developmentally appropriate standards for the PK and early development programs. Teachers have also worked with school administrators to create checklists of skills for PK-1 students. Those skills, linked directly to the state's third-grade reading tests, are assessed through daily observation of student work and computerized diagnostic tests. Teachers continue to work together to build a strong, consistent literacy focus throughout the school.

Morris teachers aren't just talking among themselves, however. Teachers and other school staff have spent considerable time and energy also connecting with their counterparts at the district's second- through fifth-grade school. Several second- and third-grade teachers have joined the informal Thursday teacher meetings at Morris to strengthen connections between grades. The district's director of early childhood education has hosted events for teachers from both schools to interact and discuss transitions between grade levels. Reading specialists and librarians from each school meet monthly. At least one in-service session a year combines teachers presenting math and reading lessons and discussing skill mastery at both schools.

Carlson is also working to create stronger connections between the school and the local Head Start program. The service provider who manages the Head Start program visits the school to learn about best practices in early childhood education. Head Start program staff members are invited to the school for in-service sessions, and Carlson has made presentations to Head Start staff and parents.

Morris has supports in place to help students who have not quite mastered necessary skills at the end of each academic year. Three of the 19 kindergarten sections are Readiness First classrooms. In each of these classrooms, about 15 students work with a teacher and paraprofessional on skills they need to master before moving on to first grade. Students transition out of the classes gradually. If, for example, a student has al-

ready mastered math objectives, they will participate in a first-grade math class and a Readiness First reading class. Students often fully transition into a first-grade classroom by the middle of the school year. A pre-second-grade program at the second- through fifth-grade elementary school operates similarly and helps students transition more easily into the curriculum, culture and expectations of second grade.

School staff and administrators are continuing to look at ways to better align learning experiences and encourage interaction between teachers and students across grade levels. The 68,000-square-foot building is currently structured so that PK and K classrooms are separated into two wings of the school. Next year, the wings of the school will be restructured to include PK, kindergarten and first-grade classrooms. “We are trying to move into PK-1 communities to promote the idea that what is happening in these classrooms is all connected,” Carlson says. In 2006-07, a kindergarten class will begin the first series of a two-year looping exercise. Children in that class will work with the same teacher who also works with kindergarten and first-grade students. Carlson expects that this looping approach will allow the teacher to accumulate more in-depth knowledge of students' personalities, learning styles, strengths and weaknesses.

PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

LEADING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE IN MIND

Carlson, a former kindergarten and first-grade teacher, says that this background helps her understand the joys, challenges and frustrations of teachers in her school. After four years at Morris—two as vice-principal and two as principal—Carlson is focused on maintaining and improving the quality early childhood learning programs at the school. She says the strong focus of the school has been a blessing for her as an instructional leader. “As a principal in a PK-6 school, I never felt like I had a full handle on everything going on curriculum-wise across the board. Here I can focus on early literacy skills, early mathematics—that makes all the difference.”

Carlson is focused on building a strong staff to support her vision of early childhood learning. “Most people think teaching here would be a day in the park. They don’t have a real understanding of what early childhood teaching and learning is. Play is the work of childhood. It’s our job to structure it in a way that helps students learn.” When Carlson interviews people for teaching positions at the school, she looks for what she calls “born developmentalists”—people who understand child development with all its pathways, and understand that young children should not only learn to read in classrooms, but also learn how to be kind to one another. “You can teach someone how to deliver a reading curriculum,” Carlson says. “Someone’s mindset about how children learn and grow is more difficult to change.”

Carlson works to spread her philosophies on the importance of early childhood education at the district level, too. “The district is on the precipice of a huge expansion. Any time we meet in task forces to talk about the direction of our district, we try to bring a focus to early childhood,” she says. Carlson is particularly active in advocating for increased building capacity for full-day PK and kindergarten programs in the schools. “I would love to expand our programs,” she says. “The issue right now is a facilities issue, not a community need or district commitment issue.”

Carlson has also tried to keep members of the state legislature focused on what’s best for young learners in Delaware. In 2003, she led a state-wide campaign to eliminate standardized testing procedures in kindergar-

ten and first grade. “I had a philosophical problem with the way students were being assessed on standardized tests and how that was impacting teaching and learning at the school,” she says.

Carlson worked with the state association of elementary school principals to survey other elementary school principals and teachers in the state about their perceptions of the testing system. The survey results were overwhelming: Educators across the state were frustrated with the system, which took a lot of class time away from teaching while yielding little, if any, useful information. Carlson worked with other schools to gather assessments that more accurately gauged student development and academic progress. They took the information to education committees at the state House and Senate. Their proposal to eliminate testing procedures in kindergarten and first grade passed unanimously. Six weeks later, the governor signed a new bill mandating that the state testing program involve students from second to 10th grade.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

IDENTIFYING AN OPPORTUNITY FOR SHARED LEARNING

In 2003, the Delaware Board of Education (BOE) implemented a new professional development program. Under the new system, teachers who clock 90 hours of BOE-approved professional development each year receive a two percent pay increase on the state-funded portion of their salary. Carlson saw this as an opportunity to increase the number of professional development opportunities for teachers, build more cohesive teaching methods within the school, and tap into the rich experience and knowledge of Morris’ teaching staff.

She developed a series of professional development activities tied to a theme, submitted her plan to the BOE, received approval, and encouraged teaching staff to participate in the new opportunities. The first series, initiated during the 2003-04 school year, focused on reading comprehension strategies. During that year, the district’s reading specialist led in-service sessions that taught teachers new strategies from the field. Teachers participated in book groups, where they read and shared ideas from district-purchased literature. Teachers were also trained in inquiry-based teaching strategies that prompted students to become more engaged in their own learning.

Under Morris’ professional development plan, teachers also videotaped lessons in their classrooms, and were required to view and comment on the videotaped work of their colleagues. Carlson believes this was key to building cohesive teaching strategies throughout the school. “Because I’m in classrooms every day, I see the unique approaches teachers are using in their classrooms. While I can communicate those things to other teachers, it’s much more powerful and effective if teachers see it playing out in other classrooms.”

According to Carlson, encouraging teachers to learn from one another and tying their learning to a theme has made an impact at Morris. “Teachers began using the same language and talking to one another on a regular basis about literacy strategies and classroom activities,” she notes. Carlson and school staff continue to identify and build state approved professional development modules tied to school goals. Last year, teachers learned about beginning writing strategies. Next year, Carlson is hoping to involve the district’s child psychologist in a series of professional development opportunities around understanding and molding children’s social and emotional skills.

RESULTS

STAYING ACCOUNTABLE AND COMMUNICATING RESULTS

Just because Carlson led a state-wide effort to eliminate standardized tests at kindergarten and first-grade levels doesn't mean that she opposes accountability. To the contrary, Carlson believes it is Morris' job to give students a strong foundation in reading and writing with issues of child development and developmentally appropriate teaching and learning in mind. "We have a strong sense of accountability here, for making sure that by the time our students do get to third grade and take the tests, they pass with flying colors," she says. The school has consistently met its Adequate Yearly Progress goals and has been recognized as a superior school in Delaware.

The school team makes sure they communicate classroom-level assessment results to parents and families, as well as to teachers at Morris and the feeder school. Report cards with checklists of developmental and readiness skills—and lots of space for teacher comments—are sent home three times a year. Carlson makes a point of reading every report card, so she can help assess where students might need extra help and communicate with parents about ways the school can help improve student performance in key developmental areas.