Redefining Leadership and Community Connections

North Woods International School
La Crosse, Wisconsin
Jane Morken, Principal

PROFILE
Grades: PK-5
School Enrollment: 357
District Enrollment: 7,500
Community: Suburban
Percentages of students:
• African-American: 5
• Asian: 30
• Hispanic: 1
• Native-American: 1
• White: 63
Poverty rate*: 51 percent
English language learners: 23 percent
PK program location: School and community
PK program funding: School budget, Title I and state funding

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS
• Principal creates alignment between school and community-based early childhood education.
• International focus provides unifying theme across grade levels.
• Partnership with university provides Spanish language opportunities.

*Poverty rate determined by percentage of students eligible for

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

APRIL 2006

PRINCIPALS LEAD THE WAY FOR PK-3 | REDEFINING LEADERSHIP AND COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS
COMMUNITY CONNECTION: BRIDGING THE DIVIDE BETWEEN SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY-BASED EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS

The School District of La Crosse, WI, stretches across a 100-square-mile vicinity along the Mississippi River. North Woods International School, a PK-5 school in the district, has a multicultural curriculum with the goal of promoting respect and knowledge of different cultural traditions. The school has cultivated relationships with sister cities in China, Ireland, Norway, Germany, Russia and France. The school also serves as a professional development site for University of Wisconsin-La Crosse Spanish language majors studying to become teachers. Through this university partnership, the school is able to offer Spanish instruction for all PK-5 students.

Along with a cadre of other elementary school principals in La Crosse, North Woods’ principal Jane Morken began advocating for stronger PK-3 connections in the district during the late 1990s. While the city had offered a hodgepodge of community-based early childhood programs targeting low-income children since 1965, the principals believed that the district needed to deepen connections with these programs and offer high-quality PK classes in its 10 elementary schools.

The school board directed the principals and community-based early childhood providers to study possibilities and report back with ideas. As a result, principals and community leaders established the Community Collaboration for Four-Year-Olds to begin making connections between school- and community-based providers of early childhood services. Members included Jane Morken, other district principals and staff, community childcare directors, private pre-school providers, and representatives from family resource centers and public health facilities.

In 1999, the district adopted the recommendations of that working group to begin incorporating PK into both community centers and elementary schools. Under this model, the divide between community- and school-based early childhood education is being bridged through a more cohesive and collaborative system. Today, eight community-based sites and eight PK-5 schools in La Crosse offer coordinated early learning experiences for 4-year-olds.

INTERNATIONAL CURRICULUM PROVIDES UNIFYING THEME

At North Woods, what happens in PK is not isolated from the goals of the entire school community. “It really starts with a vision, and you have to articulate it to teachers,” Morken says.

Morken articulates her vision in small and large ways, such as doing as much of the teachers’ paperwork as possible to give them more time for coordinating and improving teaching. On a larger scale, when North Woods became an international school, teachers and school leadership teams discussed whether PK would be included in this process. Teachers from PK through second grade met for a series of meetings to discuss age-appropriate ways the international curriculum could best be applied in the classroom. Teachers
acknowledged the value of PK learning and its relevance to success and development in the early elementary grades. A consensus emerged that PK should be included in the transformation to an international school.

Today, PK-5 students are learning Spanish through a partnership with the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse. The university’s foreign language department sends college students to North Woods two times during the week as instructors. Each grade level also has a different international sister city partnership, and lessons about cultural diversity and respect for native traditions are shared across grade levels in a way that provides a unifying theme at the school. The entire school is studying India and sharing thematic lessons about the geographic, cultural and religious diversity of the world’s largest democracy.

The Wisconsin early learning standards guide PK curriculum at North Woods and throughout the district. Morken says these standards are aligned with National Association for the Education of Young Children guidelines as well as with the state standards for K-12. Teachers from each grade are also represented on district curriculum development committees that focus on alignment and address academic concepts or themes to be reflected in work across PK-5. School district teachers also teach in the community-based PK programs to ensure alignment in the classrooms.

The principal further strengthens alignment by designing the school day so teachers can meet within and across grade levels as often as possible. When students are in art, music or physical education classes, for example, Morken has created common planning time for staff. And one day each month substitutes are brought in to cover classes for a half-day so that teachers can meet in a four-hour block. Morken says she stays in the loop with staff to help clear roadblocks created through frustration or lack of knowledge.

**PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP**

**CREATING A COMMUNITY OF PROBLEM SOLVERS**

Morken serves as both the leader of North Woods International School and as the district supervisor of young children. In her district capacity, Morken meets monthly with teachers, principals, child care program directors and parents to build and strengthen relationships among the early childhood community in La Crosse. The principal also continues to sit on the Community Collaboration for Four-Year-Olds.

Bringing together staff from community-based early childhood programs and schools has not been easy. Particularly in the beginning, Morken recalls, staff at some community centers offering early childhood programs felt that the district’s push to incorporate PK into elementary schools and forge connections with their centers would threaten their roles and businesses. “We had to deal with differences in standards, ideas about meeting times and expectations for early childhood development,” she says. “We had to just keep at it and meet, meet, meet. We had to form a community of problem solvers. My challenge continues to be working with the community and school district so that everyone is on the same page.”

One aspect of Morken’s community collaboration work has been her involvement in creating a course for child care program staff and school district teachers. The Wisconsin Early Learning Standards class, started in 2006, allows child care staff and teachers to earn credit from a local technical college and two universities. “This may seem like a simple task, but the barriers and competition have been broken, and cooperation has prevailed,” she says.
Morken was also integral in working with the La Crosse community to help establish the Hamilton Family Learning Center, a PK-2 facility created by Head Start and school district leaders to provide an all-day program that would serve both children and parents. Parents can join playgroups with their children and take GED classes and other continuing education programs through a partnership with a local technical institute and university. Parents are encouraged to become active participants at the school.

For the past three years, Morken has also directed city-wide professional development workshops for PK, kindergarten and first-grade teachers. At the state and national level, she is often asked to speak at early childhood education conferences, and in the 2005-06 school year Morken represented her school and district as a presenter at the National Association for the Education of Young Children conference in Washington, DC.

**PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

**RAISING THE BAR EVERY DAY**

Teachers at North Woods have myriad opportunities to improve their professional skills. Each month, teachers formally meet for planning time that includes a review of emerging literature in early education and a discussion of techniques to improve instructional practice.

Teachers also are given individual release time to attend workshops and training on particular subjects and brief the staff on what they learned. A North Woods teacher attended a district workshop, for example, on silent instruction, designed to use the blackboard and other nonverbal activities as a way of engaging students who rarely participate in class discussions. Other staff members learned about the instructional approach when she gave a presentation at the school.

The district hosts a data retreat for teachers and administrators in June, when math and reading scores are analyzed, and an expert addresses using data to improve student performance. Teachers have a chance to work as a group and incorporate ideas into their classroom instructional strategies.

Morken has also organized conferences that bring together PK teachers, kindergarten teachers and child care workers for collaborative discussions about alignment and common goals. The principal meets with all PK teachers once a month and kindergarten teachers three times a year. These formal professional development sessions complement ongoing staff development throughout the week.

Building a strong staff that can improve through professional development begins with hiring qualified teachers. PK through third-grade teachers must have bachelor's degrees, preferably with a concentration in early childhood.

**RESULTS**

**COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS CREATE PRAGMATIC SOLUTIONS**

Principals and leaders of community-based early childhood centers undertook an ambitious effort to bridge longstanding divisions and overcome institutional barriers when they launched a collaborative effort to more
effectively serve young children in La Crosse. Morken had no illusions about the challenges. She knew that bringing together an array of community-based providers and school leaders would be an uphill climb.

Six years after school district officials and community-based early childhood providers formed a coalition and agreed to work together, the fruits of that labor are evident in a new level of cooperation and engagement between the once isolated communities. Eighty percent of the city’s 4-year-olds are now enrolled in PK programs at school- or community-based centers. Head Start professionals and school district staff members are working together, rather than protecting turf.

Along with systematic improvements at the district and community levels, Morken points to increased interaction across grade levels at her school as a key to helping students make strong developmental progression into the early elementary grades. Kindergarten and first-grade teachers report that children who have participated in PK are more prepared to learn, have fewer discipline problems and demonstrate better fine-motor abilities and verbal facility. Strong foundational literacy skills are reflected in state assessment exams: Third-graders scoring proficiency increased from 54 percent in 1998 to 76 percent in 2005. North Woods has also met Adequate Yearly Progress as measured by the No Child Left Behind Act.