Creating Networks to Support Student Success

Plains Elementary School
South Hadley, Massachusetts
Jill Flanders, Principal

PROFILE

Grades: PK-1
School Enrollment: 364
District Enrollment: 2,333
Community: Suburban
Percentages of students:
- African-American: 1
- Asian: 0
- Hispanic: 1
- Native-American: 0
- White: 98
- Other: 0
Poverty rate*: 10 percent
English language learners: 0 percent
PK program location: School and community
PK program funding: School budget and private grants

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

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

- A community network connects private PK programs with standards for learning in the public elementary school.

- Principal plays an active role on a state-wide campaign to expand and improve early learning.

- School focuses on early intervention and tailors instruction and supports to improve academic achievement of students with special needs.
SCHOOL SNAPSHOT
BUILDING BROAD-BASED SUPPORT FOR EARLY LEARNING

In 1999, Jill Flanders accepted the position of principal at Plains Elementary School, the only public school serving PK through first-grade students in the South Hadley Public Schools. Her first challenge was to implement the district’s call for full-day kindergarten. It was unclear if the Plains facility would be able to make four additional classrooms available in order to enroll all the suburban community’s kindergarten children in full-day programs. The events that followed catapulted Flanders into a significant leadership role in South Hadley, MA, as she worked to align public and private PK programs and early elementary grades.

To address the initial space issue, the district superintendent scheduled a meeting between public school staff and administrators, and staff and administrators from Mount Holyoke College, a small liberal arts school for women in South Hadley. The college housed its own PK and kindergarten programs. The group, including Flanders, met to discuss the challenges and benefits of full-day kindergarten and early learning opportunities for children throughout South Hadley, as well as the potential use of Mount Holyoke’s facilities or those of others to house public kindergarten programs.

South Hadley Public Schools has implemented its full-day kindergarten initiative in phases. One or two classrooms and work spaces have been reconstituted into kindergarten classrooms in Plains each school year since 2000. Plains currently houses seven full-day sections of kindergarten. Next year, implementation will be completed with the addition of an eighth kindergarten classroom.

While Flanders has been able to find space for all of these public kindergarten classrooms within the school building, the conversations with Mount Holyoke College leaders marked the start of a new problem-solving approach in South Hadley. In fall 2000, Flanders and others applied for a grant through the Hampshire Educational Collaborative (HEC), a non-profit, multi-service agency. At the same time, they began to organize monthly meetings involving private PK and child care providers, Mount Holyoke faculty, public school administrators, pediatricians and social service providers. Called the South Hadley Network for Children, the group now works to identify programs and services—many also funded through grants from the HEC—to provide South Hadley children with the early supports they need to succeed.

PK-3 ALIGNMENT
BUILDING BRIDGES BETWEEN COMMUNITY AND SCHOOL-BASED LEARNING

Through the Network for Children, HEC, and South Hadley Public School programs and services, the South Hadley community has focused on creating a cohesive system of educational and developmental supports that are directly linked to the state’s educational standards and the needs of the community.

Flanders says that the Network’s primary focus is connecting the community’s private PK programs and child care services to the academic learning standards and developmental supports offered at Plains Elementary School. She says that while Plains’ PK- through first-grade classes are aligned within the school and to standards for students in second and third grades, community-based programs often operate in isolation.
“We need to make sure that those programs are connected to the learning taking place at Plains, and even to the skills students need to master early on, so they can do well once they leave Plains,” she says.

Plains currently offers six half-day PK sections to 3- and 4-year-olds on Mondays through Thursdays, as well as full-day kindergarten and first-grade classes. Forty-five percent of the public school’s PK students have been diagnosed with special needs. The remaining 55 percent have what Flanders describes as at-risk factors—they come from single-parent families or families below the poverty level. Each Plains PK classroom serves no more than 15 students and is staffed by a fully certified teacher and paraprofessional. Students also regularly work with speech and language pathologists and occupational therapists to address specific learning challenges.

But students in these PK classrooms aren’t the only ones who benefit from the program’s staff expertise. On Fridays, occupational and language therapists from Plains Elementary meet with individual students in private child care programs and homes. Some parents bring their children to the school to work with its staff. “We serve students on a case-by-case basis,” says Flanders. “We want to make sure we are using the expertise of our staff to its fullest potential, getting to know young children in our area, and meeting their needs before they enter the school doors for kindergarten.”

Students who work with Plains staff outside the school-based PK program are identified during Network for Children meetings, or through referrals from the Hampshire Educational Collaborative, pediatricians, or private screenings. As students are identified, Flanders works with parents, care providers and school staff to create a special assistance plan that meets the particular needs of each student. “What we are trying to do here is provide a menu of options for parents and students in the community. If parents want their children to attend a full-day PK program, for example, they can still benefit from the specialized staff in the public school. It’s about finding something that works for each individual child and family,” Flanders says.

In 2004, the Massachusetts Department of Education released a series of academic standards for early childhood programs. Plains PK teachers were pleased that the standards they had developed through conversations with kindergarten, first- and second-grade teachers, and those they had met through the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) accreditation process were already aligned to the new state standards.

Flanders says the state standards have helped the South Hadley community begin to increase the quality of its community-based early child care programs. Plains and HEC staff have disseminated the standards to private programs, and begun a series of conversations about how the standards will and should impact the quality of care and programming offered in South Hadley. Flanders, for example, facilitated a conversation in March 2006 between Plains PK and kindergarten teachers and teachers from private providers. The discussion centered around developmentally appropriate teaching strategies and skills for 3- to 5-year-olds. The HEC has also started providing supports to private programs working towards NAEYC accreditation.
PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

BUILDING COALITIONS TO IMPROVE LEARNING

Flanders says that her approach to leading an effective early childhood learning community aligned with elementary school standards in South Hadley has revealed that the school doesn’t hold a monopoly on learning in the community. “My job is to think about what’s best for children, and connect school resources with others, so that we move toward meeting not only school, but also district, community and state-wide education goals,” she says.

Flanders also works to improve the quality of early childhood education at the state level. Since 2002, she has participated on the advisory committee for the Early Education for All Campaign. Launched in 2000, the campaign addresses the pressing need for high-quality early education in Massachusetts. Flanders also served on the policy committee for the campaign, which developed and proposed legislation that lays out essential elements of a universally accessible, high-quality early education program, and calls for a special commission on full-day kindergarten. While that legislation has not yet been passed, the group’s work has prompted the state to develop the new Department of Early Education and Care. The new agency combines the previous functions of the Office of Child Care Services with those of the Early Learning Services Division at the state Department of Education. Combining these two agencies will lead to a more coordinated, comprehensive system of early education and care in Massachusetts.

In South Hadley, Flanders continues to serve a leadership role on the Network for Children executive board. At monthly meetings, Flanders identifies areas where her school team can better align their work with that of community-based programs. The group is doing more than just coordinating services and programs, however. They are working to develop a plan to build two PK-4 community schools in South Hadley. These new schools would create space for additional PK classrooms, help further align grade levels, and serve as a community hub for child and family services and supports.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

TYING TRAINING TO STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Flanders also plays a key role in facilitating conversations about best practices in early childhood learning at the school level. In monthly faculty meetings, teachers discuss issues related to curriculum and child development. During the 2005-06 school year, the school team has used these monthly sessions to build a portfolio of reading comprehension strategies that can be used in all classrooms throughout the school. “Everyone is a part of those conversations,” says Flanders. “PK, kindergarten and first-grade teachers can connect about the reading comprehension issue and discuss what it means for students in their grade level.”

Teachers also meet in grade-level teams once a month. At these after-school meetings, grade-level coordinators and teachers are encouraged to raise challenges found in their classrooms. Teachers work with one another to solve problems, from student behavior to curriculum implementation.

In addition to monthly sessions, school faculty also meet for two full days and two half days annually to learn about developmentally appropriate reading, writing and mathematics readiness skills, and find out how they can help children improve those skills. According to Flanders, specific topics for in-service sessions are usually determined by fourth-graders’ performance on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System,
the state's formal assessment to measure students' proficiency in English language arts, mathematics, and science and technology.

Plains teachers are encouraged to work and learn with teachers from Mosier Elementary, the second- to fifth-grade feeder school for Plains students. Twenty-five kindergarten, first- and second-grade teachers spend additional time after school in study groups. Last year, a group of teachers met throughout the year to discuss how phonetics can be infused into the reading and writing curricula in the schools. This year, teachers meet periodically to talk about reading comprehension. Teachers are monetarily compensated for their additional time, and they are encouraged to share information from their discussions with and across grade-level teams.

**RESULTS**

**IDENTIFYING SUCCESSES AND AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT**

While Plains Elementary School students do not participate in formal assessments, teachers use a checklist based on skills tied to PK-1 state standards to assess students’ development and performance in key subject areas. Report cards, generated three times each year, help the school staff identify areas for improvement by individual students and groups of students within grade levels.

Flanders says that attention to students with special needs in the school and community is making an impact on student achievement. As a result of aggressive identification and screening procedures in the community, more students enter PK with an Individual Education Program (IEP) than in previous years. From 2003-06, the number of students on IEPs has remained at about 40. Flanders says, however, that the school's early intervention strategies help students graduate from their IEPs before they leave Plains. “Generally, by the end of kindergarten, only 10-15 students still have IEPs,” she says. “All but eight to 10 students with IEPs meet their program’s goals before they move on to second grade.”

The Adequate Yearly Progress determination in Plains is directly tied to Mosier Elementary’s fourth-grade Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System results. In 2004-05, Plains did not meet AYP in special needs or low-income subgroups in English language arts or math. Flanders says that one of her current challenges is articulating to district and state officials the differences between student achievement among those with special needs compared and those of typical populations. “Through our informal assessments and work with individual students, we know that students with special needs are making academic progress,” she says. “They are not yet at the same level as their peers in subject areas, but they are making marked progress from where they started with us in PK.”

Flanders is unabashedly enthusiastic about the continued work of the Network for Children in South Hadley, and says that other communities can learn from the Network’s experience in improving learning experiences for young children. “Part of our success is directly related to the committed people in South Hadley looking at these issues,” she says. “But part of what we do can certainly be replicated in other communities to improve teaching and learning in and outside of schools.”