An Early Start in PK Puts School in Leading Role

Paradise Valley Elementary School
Casper, Wyoming
Christine Frude, Principal

PROFILE
Grades: PK-6
School Enrollment: 430
District Enrollment: 11,500
Community: Rural
Percentages of students:
• African-American: 0
• Asian: 2
• Hispanic: 3
• Native-American: 0
• White: 95
Poverty rate*: 47 percent
English language learners: 1 percent
PK program location: School
PK program funding: School budget, state funding and federal special education funding

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS
• Principal’s experience with early childhood lends itself to building a PK program.
• A college’s clashing PK philosophy helps the school define its alignment plan.
• Alignment focus sparks advocacy for social services to meet students’ needs.

*Poverty rate determined by percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch
Paradise Valley Elementary School is leading the movement toward connecting PK to public schools in Wyoming. The school not only offers an experienced example of creating an in-school PK program aligned to the school’s primary curriculum, but it also works to build connections with local PK providers, and spread the word about kindergarten readiness and state early learning standards. “My first job in teaching was working in a Head Start program as I worked my way through college,” says Principal Christine Frude, explaining one reason why she sees herself as a natural crusader for improving and expanding PK while building stronger alignment in early grades.

On the western edge of the river town of Casper—a crossroads for early westward routes like the Oregon Trail, the Mormon Trail and others—Paradise Valley Elementary developed its pioneering PK program after teachers sought a way to help the younger siblings of children they saw struggling from the earliest months of their schooling. Focused on at-risk students from low-income families, the program started in the early 1990s with seed funding from the Wyoming Community Foundation. As the program became established, grants from other business and community groups helped keep the program going until a mix of district, state and federal funding began sustaining the half-day sessions known as the All Ready Preschool.

Frude says the PK program is a leading factor in a 50 percent reduction in the percentage of kindergarten students identified with learning disabilities. The school’s fourth graders recently exceeded the state average on reading and writing sections of the Proficiency Assessment for Wyoming Skills. Math scores, however, remain below the state average. The school has shown marked progress in improving the scores of special education students on the state assessments.

PK-3 ALIGNMENT
DEFINING THE RIGHT APPROACH TO EARLY LEARNING

Principal Frude says a “savvy” curriculum and instruction staff at the Natrona County School District helped define alignment for Paradise Valley and assisted the school in making strides toward a coordinated approach to meeting state standards. The state’s early childhood readiness standards are connected to state education standards, offering a clear map toward meeting elementary proficiency goals beginning in PK. Frude says a challenge to that roadmap, however, has been the dominant philosophy in the university-level teacher-training program that supplies the Natrona district with most of its teachers.

The college program emphasizes the importance of play in PK programs, which causes instant friction with the school’s approach of viewing play as only one of many key learning activities in PK that can be tied to developmentally appropriate experiences that help move children toward kindergarten readiness goals. Frude says the differing approaches cause some conflict. “There has been a real struggle with our university about what the research is saying,” she notes. “It’s a challenge for us to train and retrain teachers in terms of saying here is the curriculum and showing them that it’s aligned.”

The PK experience at Paradise Valley is heavily focused on helping students through developmental stages and providing an array of learning experiences. Small literacy groups meet daily. Some 3-year-olds may sit
on a teacher’s lap, turning pages of a book and discussing pictures. Another group may work with a volunteer parent or aide identifying letters in their name or participating in a rhyming activity. “There are sand and water tables, dramatic play centers, art and science centers; but every day we do things with our preschoolers that we’d teach or show our own children to help them learn,” Frude says. “We try to find out what each child already knows or has an understanding of and to link their learning to it.”

**Principal Leadership**

**Taking a Leading Role in State and Local PK Initiatives**

With roots in Head Start and an early job as a kindergarten teacher, Frude says her early childhood background helped her land a principal job 17 years ago. It also put her in a position to see ways Paradise Valley could benefit from adding PK to the elementary school. Frude says acceptance of the program wasn’t automatic when, more than a decade ago, two Reading Recovery teachers started the push.

“Communicating the vision to the staff is a big role,” Frude says. “One of the barriers in the beginning was that the staff didn’t really understand the importance of early childhood. They were asking why they had to give up space for it.” One of the principal’s chief strategies focused on helping teachers see how brain research underscored the importance of giving students positive learning experiences in the earliest years to improve children’s success throughout school. After dealing with some initial administrative issues when the program started, Frude says the results quickly began to offer the best testimony for the program. “As they got kids in the classroom who went through PK, teachers saw there was a huge difference,” Frude says.

Her experience making PK a key first step in stronger alignment led Frude to leadership positions in state education policy circles. At the district level, she works with 13 principals in Casper who now have PK in their schools, leading training and hiring. In 2000, the governor appointed her to the Wyoming Early Childhood Development Council, where she served two years as chair before her term ended in 2005. During that time, Frude was also named Wyoming’s National Distinguished Principal in a state-by-state recognition program of the National Association of Elementary School Principals. Frude’s advocacy has helped push the state to see ways PK connects to social services such as early hearing screenings. Wyoming now uses part of its federal welfare funding to help support PK.

**Professional Development**

**Alignment Discussions Range From Assessment to Quality Teaching**

Paradise Valley includes all its PK teachers in teacher training sessions and follow-up activities to promote alignment and ensure the faculty sees itself as a unit. The school also created vertical teams of teachers from different grade levels that meet on monthly professional development days to discuss alignment issues like expectations and how well students are meeting Wyoming’s proficiency standards. The school aligns its assessments to district and state assessments, so teachers often have data and student work to inform their discussions about achievement and progress.

To focus on the quality of PK teaching, the school recently joined a University of Virginia (UVA) program to examine student and teacher interaction in PK classrooms. My Teaching Partner is an Internet-based curriculum and consulting program designed by UVA instructional technology faculty and students to upgrade
teaching practice. Paradise Valley’s PK literacy coordinator took the lead in training. The program involves videotaping classes and looking at different components of teaching quality.

State records show that in 2004-05, all of Paradise Valley’s teachers met the criteria as highly qualified for their teaching assignment. Almost two-thirds of the school’s teachers held master’s degrees, compared to the state’s 33 percent average.

**RESULTS**

**ALIGNMENT YIELDS PROGRESS IN LITERACY**

PK program evaluation data shows that the percentage of students identified with learning disabilities has been cut in half since the PK program began. This seems to confirm PK teachers’ belief that their efforts are helping prepare more students to face the challenges of kindergarten.

State test scores show that the school’s performance has improved in recent years. In 2005, 52 percent of the school’s fourth graders scored proficient or better on the Proficiency Assessment for Wyoming Skills, slightly above the 48 percent state average. The 2005 rate exceeded Paradise Valley’s three-year reading assessment average of 40 percent of students scoring proficient or better. The school’s fourth-grade writing scores topped the state average and also showed a noticeable improvement over Paradise Valley’s three-year trend. Math, however, remains a challenge. Just 29 percent of Paradise Valley’s fourth graders scored proficient or better on math in 2005, down from the school’s three-year trend and the 39 percent state average.

Paradise Valley has shown success in recent years in helping more students with individual education plans improve their scores on the state exams. On measures of compliance with the federal No Child Left Behind Act, the school fell short of the state target for math achievement by students from low-income families. Frude says the school also analyzes how well its PK students score on kindergarten assessments and uses tests aligned with state standards to measure student progress toward learning goals both within the school and as compared to other schools in the district.