Aligning Expectations and Practices to Ensure Success

Rolling Hills Elementary School
Orlando, Florida
Patrick Galatowitsch, Principal

PROFILE
Grades: PK-5
School Enrollment: 809
District Enrollment: 177,000
Community: Urban
Percentages of students:
  • African-American: 82
  • Asian: 1
  • Hispanic: 11
  • Native-American: 1
  • White: 4
  • Other: 1
Poverty rate*: 93 percent
English language learners: 17 percent
PK program location: School
PK program funding: School budget

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

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS
• Rolling Hills, a near-failing school in 1997, went on to gain national recognition for student achievement and closing the achievement gap.
• A school-wide retention policy ensures that students meet grade-level standards before they are promoted.
• High mobility rates present significant challenges, which are overcome through alignment of expectations, standards, curricula and supplementary programs.
RAISING EXPECTATIONS

Rolling Hills Elementary School sits in the middle of a high-poverty area in Orlando, FL. The school serves a highly transient population: Students often live with a number of family members and friends over the year. It is not unusual for the school to admit or lose up to 40 of its 800 students each week. In 1997, the school was notified that if student achievement did not improve, Rolling Hills would be one of the first failing schools in the state. Student reading achievement was 28 percent on national assessments. Mathematics achievement was 32 percent, while only 29 percent met the minimum requirement of the Florida Writes assessment.

Patrick Galatowitsch, who became principal of Rolling Hills in 1996, understood that in order for student achievement to improve, the school climate needed to change. He worked to create a new school climate where teachers and administrators hold high expectations for every child and don’t use students’ challenges—including their poverty level, family background, race, ethnicity or mobility—as excuses for low achievement.

One of Galatowitsch’s first steps was ending the practice of passing students who had not yet met grade-level standards. In 1996-97, the school retained more than 100 students across grade levels. Over the next few years, Galatowitsch built a highly skilled teaching staff, who shared his vision for student achievement and implemented strategies, programs and curricula that helped boost student learning and create consistency throughout the school.

In January 2003, Rolling Hills was recognized by President George Bush and Secretary of Education Rod Paige for its success in closing the achievement gap. In May 2004, Rolling Hills was one of six schools in the nation to earn the Fordham University National School Change Award. In 2004-05, 67 percent of the school’s students passed the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test Reading assessment, 55 percent passed the mathematics assessment, and 71 percent met high standards on Florida Writes.

CREATING A CONSISTENT APPROACH

Galatowitsch and the school staff have worked to create a culture of high expectations for all students in the school. “We aren’t going to blame parents or the mobility rate. We are just going to have to realize that there are real challenges for our students, and we are going to have to work that much harder to make sure students succeed,” he says.

School staff members have worked to overcome the school’s high-mobility challenge in part by focusing on alignment and structure in and across grade levels. Teachers meet every year to discuss Florida’s statewide standards system and make sure that curricula, teaching strategies and assessments align with those standards. At that time, fifth-grade teachers meet initially in grade-level teams. They meet next with fourth-
grade teachers to talk about what students should know and be able to do when they enter fifth grade. Fourth-grade teachers then meet with third-grade teachers, and so on. According to Galatowitsch, this approach helps ensure consistency in teachers’ understanding of standards and expectations, and helps create a strongly aligned system that moves students towards success.

Teachers in the school also work to develop consistency within their classrooms. “It’s important that these students, who so often don’t have consistent routines at home, are able to fall into a rhythm at school,” says one first-grade teacher. “We want to make sure that students entering the school are entering into a continuum,” Galatowitsch says. “They should be getting the same essential level of service in first grade as they are in fifth. That’s what we strive for.”

The school has implemented several programs to help align teaching and learning across grade levels in the school. For example, Breakthrough to Literacy, a McGraw Hill literacy program, is implemented in PK-2 grade classrooms. Costing nearly $16,000 for full implementation in each classroom, the program reinforces critical elements of phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, fluency and comprehension. Through this program, students receive whole-class instruction and also spend 15-20 minutes on computer-based tutorials during class time. They read stories or have stories read to them on computers, and are then asked comprehension questions about what they have read or heard. Teachers can monitor data produced through the program, identify areas where students need improvement, and manipulate the program to target computer time to students’ specific needs. Teachers also share Breakthrough data across grade levels, so teachers better understand students’ developmental levels and current achievement rates.

According to Galatowitsch, the strength of the school’s PK program is another key to student success. Many students enter kindergarten without the prerequisite skills for success: They can’t follow more than single-step instructions or hold a crayon, pencil or even a book. Galatowitsch says this results from the type of care they receive in the numerous child care centers in the neighborhood surrounding the school. “These programs lack structure and are more about profit-margin than education. We want to make sure that students are prepared to learn and are already learning well before they enter kindergarten,” he says. “The sooner we can get students in the school and start working with them, the more chance they have to do well.”

Florida’s new voluntary PK law means that more PK classrooms will be housed in public schools in upcoming years. Galatowitsch is eager to start the 2006-07 school year with three PK classrooms, two more than the previous year.

**PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP**

**LEADING REFORMS WITH TEACHERS AND STUDENTS IN MIND**

When Galatowitsch came to Rolling Hills in 1996, the school began to change. Students were no longer simply passed through the system, teachers were held accountable for classroom learning, and excuses about student achievement were no longer tolerated. Galatowitsch’s strong vision for learning became the driving force behind reforms that have greatly improved student achievement and led to national recognition.
Rolling Hills teachers say they appreciate Galatowitsch’s inclusive, supportive leadership style. “Patrick sees teachers as classroom experts,” says a first-grade teacher. “He trusts us, knows our strengths and weaknesses, and makes sure we have the supports we need to be effective.”

The principal also values teachers’ views and looks to them for fresh program ideas. “I believe in feeding innovation at the school,” he says. “If a teacher approaches me with an idea, I trust their expertise and want to give them an opportunity to use new strategies to benefit students.”

Galatowitsch seeks out opportunities to learn about national best practices that can be applied at Rolling Hills. He participates in the International Center for Leadership in Education’s successful practices network, sharing data, experiences, technical assistance, research and best practices with other administrators and teachers. Through this network, Galatowitsch has positioned himself and the school in the center of national conversations about best practices related to student achievement.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
CREATING A CULTURE OF CONTINUOUS LEARNING

Galatowitsch strives to create a culture of continuous learning for Rolling Hills teachers. “Teachers are encouraged to work together to develop curricula, discuss strategies and challenges, and observe one another’s work,” he says. If teachers need more than the shared-planning time to improve curricula or determine benchmarks, Galatowitsch hires substitute teachers for their classrooms so those meetings can take place.

Eight teachers in the school are Nationally Board Certified. As part of their certification requirements, they mentor new teachers in best practices at the classroom level. This practice has helped create a culture where teachers readily talk and work with one another to plan lessons, and discuss successes and challenges in their classrooms.

This year, Galatowitsch is teaching an instructional strategies course on Wednesday afternoons. Eighty-five percent of the teaching staff has signed on to learn about how they can teach children in more engaging ways. Galatowitsch has offered those teachers an opportunity to attend the International Center for Leadership in Education’s annual model schools conference with him in summer 2006. “ICLE challenges educators to think about what we are doing and how we are teaching children to be successful in an ever-changing world,” Galatowitsch says. “The more teachers understand what those skills are, the more they will be able to work outside the rubrics of what children need to know.”

Galatowitsch also encourages teacher participation in annual conferences. Teachers share their experiences and knowledge and learn from the experiences of other administrators and teachers at conferences sponsored by organizations, such as the National Association of Elementary School Principals, National Blue Ribbon Schools and National School Board Association.
RESULTS

REMOVING BARRIERS TO STUDENT SUCCESS

According to Galatowitsch, Rolling Hills’ strong focus on standards-based teaching and learning and high expectations has led to student and school success. When the state of Florida implemented high-stakes testing for third graders in 2003, the school was prepared to handle that challenge. “We had already been working very closely to make sure standards and benchmarks were aligned across grade levels, and students were meeting those standards before moving to the next grade. We knew we would be on track,” he says.

Students’ scores on standardized tests continue to show that he is correct. For the fifth consecutive year, the school met Florida’s achievement standards, up from nearly failing school status in 1997.

Rolling Hills, however, did not meet federal Adequate Yearly Progress guidelines in 2004-05, which means Galatowitsch and school staff are continuing to look for ways to improve instruction, help students overcome obstacles to learning, and increase student achievement. In summer 2006, Rolling Hills expects a turnover of 200 to 300 students. “Because we always have new faces coming through the door, we always have more work to do,” says Galatowitsch.