Aligning Programs and Supports With Student and Family Needs
Sanchez Elementary School
Austin, Texas
Azucena Garcia, Principal

PROFILE
Grades: PK-5
School Enrollment: 667
District Enrollment: 80,000
Community: Urban
Percentage of students:
• African-American: 3
• Asian: 0
• Hispanic: 94
• Native-American: 0
• White: 3
Poverty rate*: 87 percent
English language learners: 40 percent
PK program location: School
PK program funding: School budget and Title I

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

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS
• PK teachers worked with others in the district to establish PK guidelines aligned with K-3 standards.
• School uses transition programs to help its English language learners achieve at grade level.
• Half-day substitutes and parent employees allow teachers to work and learn together.
Sanchez Elementary School has a strong history of student success. In 2005-06, the school saw a dramatic increase in student enrollment—from 450 students in recent years, to nearly 670 students in fall 2005. Most of the new students entering the school live in nearby apartment complexes and are recent immigrants from El Salvador, Guatemala and Ecuador. According to Principal Azucena Garcia, the school’s current challenge is making sure that these new students benefit from the aligned programs, teaching practices, expectations and standards established during and before her time at the school.

Garcia says a major strategy for helping all students in the school succeed is the creation of a strong early level of learning, beginning in PK and building through the end of third grade when students must pass state assessments in order to be promoted to fourth grade. “It’s of the utmost importance that children establish a love of learning and literacy foundation during their early years, so that they can succeed as they continue to move through grade levels,” Garcia says.

PK-3 ALIGNMENT
ALIGNING PROGRAMS WITH ONE ANOTHER—AND WITH STUDENT AND FAMILY NEEDS

Sanchez teachers and staff have been proactive in making sure their PK through third-grade programs are high quality, well aligned, and meet the needs of children and families. Sanchez’s PK program is one of two in the district that are accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. Garcia says that while accreditation took a lot of effort to attain, the benefits of a high-quality program were worth the preparation time. During the accreditation process, teachers were offered intensive professional development and opportunities to visit model programs and schools. The best practices they learned through those experiences helped boost the quality of Sanchez’s program and ensure children’s first experiences in the school prepared them for those to follow.

Five years ago, the Austin Independent School District (AISD) developed and disseminated curricula for grades K-12 throughout the school system. Teachers and administrators across the city recognized a need for PK guidelines that aligned with the K-12 standards and benchmarks, offered formal measures of student work and tracked students’ progress through the important first year of learning. Two Sanchez teachers joined a city-wide task force that developed those standards and assessments. The guidelines they created are being implemented across the district for the first time in the 2005-06 school year.

One of the primary goals of the task force was to develop assessments that would help PK teachers track individual student achievement throughout the year, and make sure students were on track to do well on formal district assessments in kindergarten through third grade. While AISD has traditionally administered the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test to half of Austin’s PK students to assess development and achievement, Sanchez believes that the new methods will allow teachers to better track student work and better inform teaching and learning in the school. “Now, the reports PK teachers create are much more like progress reports used at other grade levels,” she says. “Teachers can identify trends in individual students, such as cognitive readiness, that will help inform not only their practice, but also the practice of kindergarten teachers in the school.”
Sanchez staff members have established transition programs to help the nearly 270 students in the school who are English language learners (ELL) achieve at grade level. Three PK and kindergarten classrooms are designated as bilingual classrooms. ELL students in those classrooms receive instruction in Spanish. In second grade, students who are at or above grade level in their dominant language move into transition classrooms. In those classrooms, led by bilingual teachers, students receive intense ESL supports, while working and learning beside children whose primary language is English. In this way, other students serve as models, and ELL students are able to continue to learn grade-level material, while increasing their language skills.

The school has also worked to align its efforts with meeting the social and emotional needs of students and their families. Through a district-level partnership with Child, Inc., a local nonprofit committed to strengthening families and coordinating services to ensure school readiness, two “visiting teachers” are assigned to the three bilingual PK classrooms. Along with the school’s parent support specialist, who focuses on the needs of children and families in K-6, those teachers match families with services to help them overcome challenges in their daily lives. They help parents get insurance, find jobs, and apply for federal and state services that will improve their lives, and those of their children. As parents’ and students’ social and emotional needs are met, parents are more apt to be involved in the school, and children are able to come to school ready to learn.

PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

A “HOME-GROWN” LEADER

Garcia started her career at Sanchez as a teacher 13 years ago. She also served as assistant principal in the building before being named principal in 2003. She says that her experience serving in various roles has helped her develop an inclusive leadership style that builds a solid culture of commitment, responsibility and teamwork. “I know there is a lot of expertise within the school,” she says. “There is not a decision I make without first seeking input from other experts working here.”

The principal’s understanding of the strengths, skills and ambitions of teachers allows her to make important connections that affect teaching and learning within, and beyond, Sanchez. Each year, Garcia designates “teacher leaders” at the school. Those teachers lead training sessions during grade-level and vertical team meetings. After evaluating their work with other teachers and within classrooms, Garcia identifies teachers with potential as school leaders, and has nominated several faculty members for a local university’s principal-ship program.

On a district level, Garcia works with other principals to ensure that the alignment she and others are creating at the early elementary level is connected to the work being done through the high school level. Principals from eight local elementary schools, two middle schools and one high school meet monthly to make connections between buildings. Garcia says that not only is the district-level vertical team a professional support for her, but the activities that the group organizes also help students and families understand that the path that begins in PK at Sanchez leads to high school graduation—and beyond.
Garcia says she understands the importance of teachers regularly working together within and across grade-level teams. To this end, substitute teachers are brought into classes for a half day twice a year so that teachers can participate in structured conversations and professional development. Student learning dictates topics for the grade-level team meetings. One team, for example, noticed its students needed extra help in language arts. Teachers pored over students’ mid-year writing samples, discussed teaching strategies with the school’s curriculum specialist and developed a plan to improve their students’ writing skills.

Half-day substitute teachers are also used to allow teachers across grade levels to observe their colleague’s classrooms and discuss curricula, standards and assessments. Teachers also meet after school in vertical teams every six weeks to discuss alignment issues.

Garcia believes that weekly common planning time for grade-level teams is a key professional development opportunity at Sanchez. Kindergarten through third-grade teachers meet for planning while students attend gym, music or art classes. Because PK students do not participate in any of these classes, the school developed a program to allow PK teachers to meet regularly, without taking learning time away from students. Through the Parent Advocates for Literacy (PALS) program, parents are trained in early language development skills, and are hired on a part-time, hourly basis to work with students. PALS lead PK classrooms at least once a week so that teachers can meet for planning time. They also help teachers deliver literacy instruction in the classrooms.

According to Garcia, common planning time, continuous conversations among teaching staff and teacher-led problem solving are essential to the school’s culture and success. “Teachers understand student development between grades, they see those connections, and are used to working with one another, so there is no getting-to-know-you time. It’s about having the time to really work together on how to solve problems and make teaching and learning more effective,” she says.

Conversations also foster consistency in teaching methods within the school—something Garcia says is important to the newer members of Sanchez’s student body. “We have to make sure that instruction is aligned so that as students move through the grades, they don’t have to readjust to curriculum, expectations and opportunities. The only way to ensure that is to have conversations.”

**RESULTS**

**100 PERCENT PASS READING TEST**

According to Garcia, students’ scores on the third-grade, state-wide assessments are a testament to the strength of the school’s PK-3 programs. To be considered for fourth-grade promotion, third graders must pass the reading portion of Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills on one of a possible three attempts. In 2004-05, 97 percent of Sanchez students passed the test on their first attempt. For the past three years, 100 percent of students have passed the test on at least one administration. “All the preparation for the test doesn’t start at third grade,” Garcia says. “For our students to do well it’s important that they make gains at all levels and that learning is aligned through and beyond third grade.” In 2005, the school met all its targets for achieving Adequate Yearly Progress under the federal No Child Left Behind Act.