

Rena Elementary Van Buren School District

School Context

Van Buren School District is located in the River Valley Region of Northwest Arkansas, and serves approximately 5,500 students in kindergarten through twelfth grade. Rena Elementary is one of six elementary schools in the Van Buren School District. Rena has a total enrollment of approximately 400 students in kindergarten through fourth grade. The motto for Rena Elementary is “Reaching out to every child to nurture active learning.” Teacher collaboration and support is a key component at Rena Elementary. Teachers at Rena are grouped into grade-level teams and meet regularly for professional development, which is seen as critical.

As reported below, the district’s population is notably different from the state as a whole, and Rena's student population is different from the district. With respect to ethnicity, the Van Buren School District serves substantially fewer African-Americans and considerably more Hispanic students than the state average. The number of students eligible for Free and Reduced Lunch in the Van Buren School District is less than the state average. The district also serves more migrant students than the state as a whole. The student population at Rena is different from the district in terms of demographics and services offered. The elementary serves fewer Hispanic students and reports no students as Limited English Proficient.

In 2003 and 2004, Rena Elementary met adequate yearly progress (AYP), as required by No Child Left Behind. In Arkansas, schools must make AYP on the state-mandated Benchmark exams, which are criterion-referenced tests in mathematics and literacy. In 2003 and 2004, the elementary level Benchmark exams were administered in grades 4, 6, and 8. Beginning in 2005, the Benchmark exams in math and literacy were administered in grades 3 through 8. Arkansas’ annual AYP goals are determined by the Arkansas Department of Education (arkedu.state.ar.us/nochild/ayp_improvement.html), and are part of the state’s plan, which has been approved by the U. S. Department of Education. The district and the school outperformed 4th grade state averages on Math and Literacy Benchmark exams in 2003 and 2004.

Student Demographics (2004): *The Van Buren School District serves 9.4 % Hispanic students and 1.8% African-American students, compared to the state averages of 5.3% and 22.9% respectively.*

	Rena Elementary	Van Buren District	Arkansas
% White	93.6	83.9	70.1
% African-American	1.2	1.8	22.9
% Hispanic	2.5	9.4	5.3
% Other	2.7	4.9	1.7

School Support Services (2004): *The Van Buren School District, on average, serves 45.0% of students through the Free and Reduced Lunch Program, while the state serves 44.2%. Rena Elementary serves 42.4% of their students through the Free and Reduced Lunch Program.*

	Rena Elementary	Van Buren District	Arkansas
% Free and Reduced Lunch	42.4	45.0	44.2
% English as a Second Language	1.0	6.2	2.8
% Special Education	16.4	13.3	11.3
% Migrant	0.7	4.4	1.5

Assessments by Grade: *Rena Elementary and the Van Buren School District continue to exceed 4th grade state proficiency averages for Benchmark exams.*

		Rena Elementary	Van Buren District	Arkansas
Literacy % Proficient	2002	84.1	75.4	57.9
	2003	86.1	77.3	62.0
	2004	89.0	82.1	69.3
Math % Proficient	2002	79.3	71.7	49.2
	2003	81.0	72.7	61.0
	2004	78.1	79.1	65.2

Curriculum and Academic Goals

The Van Buren School District approaches curriculum development as an ongoing process and academic goals are developed using the state frameworks. Curriculum in the Van Buren School District is mandated by the district and has been designed by content specialists who take broad state frameworks and create more specific standards for teachers. Cross-content committees work on curriculum at the secondary level and grade level committees design curriculum at the elementary level. The district focuses on allowing teachers to design curriculum because they will be teaching the content.

Rena Elementary is a part of the curriculum development process. Teachers at varying grade levels used the state standards as a framework for creating essential questions. The school uses “central questions and backward design,” which identifies a broad question that covers several standards and essential questions that lead to the big question. Teachers also supplement curriculum, as mandated by the district, as necessary and base their curricular decisions on data.

Staff Selection and Capacity Building

The Van Buren School District places much emphasis on professional development while maintaining competitive salaries. Teachers meet in cluster groups of grade-level teams for professional development for 80 minutes, two times per week. Programs to assist new teachers

are currently being developed using input from first year teachers. The district recognizes that maintaining competitive teacher salaries is crucial for recruiting and retaining teachers.

Rena Elementary School is dedicated to rigorous staff selection and is committed to the creation of strong instructional leaders. Although the principal makes the final decision on candidate selection, teachers are also involved in the selection of new classroom teachers and principals. Every candidate is interviewed by at least one mentor or master teacher and one classroom teacher. Strong instructional leaders are trained by using the TAP program and teachers are also monetarily compensated when they engage in additional professional development. Mentor teachers are district trainers for classroom instructional programs such as Step Up to Reading and Early Literacy Learning in Arkansas (ELLA). Additionally, teachers are allowed to visit other classrooms at their school and other schools, and are encouraged to share what they learned with the rest of the staff.

The Van Buren School District and Rena Elementary utilize an innovative new program to attract, retain, and motivate high-caliber people to the teaching profession.

The Teacher Advancement Program (TAP) was introduced in 1999 by the Milken Family Foundation, and has been endorsed by the Education Leaders Council. TAP's goal is to draw more talented people to the teaching profession and to keep them teaching by making it more attractive and rewarding to be a teacher. Under the TAP system, effective teachers can “earn higher salaries and advance professionally, just as in other careers.” Currently the TAP program, called ARTAP to representative the Arkansas branch, is in practice in twelve model school sites within the state. Van Buren School District hosts eight of the twelve schools.

Instructional Programs, Practices, & Arrangements

The Van Buren School District focuses on instructional arrangements, both yearly and daily, that are driven by curriculum needs and state requirements. The schedule for the 2004-2005 school year was designed by a personnel and policy committee. The district allows each grade level to decide how to schedule the school day, in terms of how much time to spend on content, and ensures that the scheduling meets state requirements.

Rena Elementary uses research-based instructional programs, aligns curriculum with state standards, and includes parents in instructional practices. Rena Elementary teachers focus on acquiring and implementing research-based curriculum programs (as required by the district). State Benchmark items are used to create reading, writing, and math prompts, which students complete weekly. Students are also introduced to practice Benchmark exams to help alleviate anxiety by familiarizing them with the testing format. The school provides parents with activities and book lists for summer use with their child.

Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, & Use of Data

The Van Buren School District has recently added new positions at the district level to effectively manage, analyze, and disseminate educational data. The district is committed to improving the managing of student data and has recently created four new positions: director of secondary curriculum, director of elementary curriculum, director of special programs, and

director of accountability and assessment. The district models its assessments after state assessments and shares assessment results in curriculum meetings. Data are used in these meetings to focus on modifications and instructional strategies.

Rena Elementary utilizes data and frequent observations to evaluate teachers and to increase student achievement. Teachers at Rena are frequently observed by their principal and other mentor or master teachers. After three years of teaching, teachers are required to develop an improvement plan and show documentation to demonstrate progress. To assess student achievement at the classroom level, students identify lesson objectives frequently during lessons. At the school level, testing data are collected from a variety of sources (Arkansas Benchmark, SAT-9, ITBS), and is used to set goals. Teachers are trained by their principal to interpret test data for student use. School level mid-term and quarterly assessments (designed by master teachers) are disaggregated in the same fashion as the state exams and data are used immediately by teachers to target problems in mastering classroom content. Student achievement is a school-wide goal which involves everyone at Rena Elementary.

Recognition, Intervention, & Adjustment

The Van Buren School district recognizes successful teachers and provides intervention programs, as needed, for all students. Performance-based pay (provided by the Milliken Foundation through the TAP program) is available for any teacher in participating schools in the Van Buren district and is based on scores from observations in three categories: responsibilities checklist (skills, knowledge, and responsibility), classroom gains, and school wide gains. Performance pay is also weighted: 50% is classroom based, 30% comes from teacher evaluations, and 20% is based on school performance. For students, the district provides after school programs, summer school, and summer breakfast and lunch programs.

Rena Elementary teachers target students needing additional academic assistance and approach this as a school wide goal. Reports of students with Academic Improvement Plans (AIPs) are posted in the teacher's professional development room and progress is documented and updated regularly. Teachers target students with lower scores, recognizing they have more room and need for academic growth. Teacher collaboration is a common method for helping struggling students. For example, if a student is achieving at a lower grade level, Rena teachers may meet with grade appropriate teachers to plan student intervention.

Factors Influencing Educational Practices

Local Influences, Relationships, & Communications

The Van Buren School Districts boasts an active and supportive school board, an energetic PTA, and parental support. The Board of Education for Van Buren Schools is very supportive and strives to meet school funding needs. Parents and the local PTA are very active at the school, district, and state level and the district focuses on educating parents on the academic needs of their children.

Resource Allocation

The Van Buren School District has a local Educational Foundation, supportive local businesses, and the district works together to allocate funding. The Educational Foundation of Van Buren provides over \$160,000 per year for classrooms through innovative grants. The Foundation awards grants for entire grade levels as well. Additionally, several local businesses offer discounts for teachers or matching grants. Each year, principals meet with the superintendent to specify needs for their school; special needs are frequently met as well.

The Van Buren Community supports district wide efforts to improve financial resources. On September 16, 2003, the community endorsed the “visionary work of many dedicated people across our school district. Supporting our proposal to bring outstanding facilities to each of our schools – a proposal that will positively affect every child in every school – required refinancing current debt and increasing millage by 3.9 mills.” The community supported the plan by a 3-to-1 margin showing its support for Van Buren public schools.

Core Beliefs About Teaching & Learning and Organizational Knowledge

The Van Buren School District believes all children can learn and focuses on how to make it happen. The district consistently seeks improvement at all levels and feels this is vital for helping every child learn. The strength of the district can be found in its school leadership and the strength of the schools is supportive teachers who are willing to work together and put in extra time to meet goals. Improving literacy is a major goal for the district and one of the major challenges it faces is an increasingly diverse population.