

JUST FOR THE KIDS SCHOOL STUDY REPORT

Dunn Elementary School Poudre School District

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INTRODUCTION

The school studied for this report was Dunn Elementary in Poudre School District, located in Larimer County in northern Colorado. The research was conducted in May 2003. The principal was completing her 11th year of administration at Dunn. The classroom population was 417 students, 28 teachers representing both full-time or part-time status, and 15 paraprofessionals. Ten of the teachers were new within the last three years due to retirement or family reasons and not due to transferring to another school within the district.

Dunn is located in a demographically older neighborhood with a declining school-age population. They do serve an eclectic student population due to a number of unique housing arrangements in the neighborhood, i.e., a homeless shelter and various social service units. The local university's international housing is also located within the school boundary area which results in having students from at least 20 different countries. All of these factors contribute to the school receiving Title I funding. On the other hand, the principal realized that this was a serious enrollment issue and realized that in order to keep the school "alive" a new system needed to be developed. The result was introducing International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum to Dunn. This, in turn, created a dichotomy of a declining enrollment to a situation that the majority of Dunn's student population, 54 percent, is there by choice from other locations in Poudre School District.

PROTOCOL OF THE STUDY

The overall structure of the district is three central stakeholder relationships: (a) district, including board of education and central administration; (b) school, including principal and instructional staff; (c) classroom, including teacher and student. District administrators who were interviewed for this study included the superintendent, the language arts curriculum director, the staff development coordinator, and a board of education member.

Individual school and classroom-level interviews were conducted with the principal, a retired teacher, and the media specialist. There were three focus group interviews, one with teachers, another with parents, and the third with students. The nature of this study is the identification of schools that over time outperform their demographic peers on the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP). Therefore, certain criteria were used to determine those interviewed. The retired teacher and media specialist both had at least three years experience at the school, while the six teachers who participated in the focus group had varied lengths of experience. The six parent focus group participants had been associated with the school for at least three years and have had their student(s) participate in at least two years of elementary level

CSAP testing. The six student focus group participants were all fifth graders who had been at the school for at least three years.

CURRICULUM

Analysis of the data revealed a central theme of curriculum development. This theme includes four subcategories that emerged and have meaning across the district, school, and classroom levels of the schooling process. These four subcategories can be further subdivided into two pairs that appear to influence each other. One of them is the alignment of standards across the district with the expectation of those being adhered to at the school and classroom levels, and various assessments of student achievement. The other one is staff development and effective delivery practices that embraces both curriculum priorities along with various learning styles. A matrix (see Figure 1 on page 9) has been prepared to represent who influences and implements the development of curriculum at each of these levels.

Alignment of standards and assessments

The curriculum standards implemented by the district are based on the Colorado Model Content Standards. A team of teachers make up an instructional improvement committee, which align the district standards to textbook adoptions. Both central administration personnel who were interviewed noted that this process is very industrious with many involved at the school-level including teachers field testing selected lessons from books, students evaluating these lessons, and parents reviewing textbooks.

Student achievement data derived from various assessments also factor into curriculum development. The state mandated Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) was indicated to be an important test to help the district target content goals. The district also sponsors two other assessments to supplement the data derived from CSAP. These are the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) levels test for reading and Basic Reading Inventory, both given once a year. According to the language arts curriculum coordinator based on initial results of these three assessments, the decision was made to emphasize lessons targeted on reading. Since that time, a priority on writing has been introduced with an acute awareness reflected at the school level of its influence on all areas of the curriculum. Indications were also made that a new math curriculum was set to be introduced in the school year 2003-2004.

The school studied felt that the NWEA levels assessments were not only deemed important, but provided valuable information on a student's reading progress if they are given in the fall and the spring. The district has provided financial support for this effort for the school; however, due to budget cuts the school felt that they may lose this funding. In fact, their second

grade had not been able to have the pre- and post-tests that school year which was disturbing for those teachers.

Principals are accountable for district-wide curriculum taught in the classroom. The principal interviewed for this report expressed that the teachers at the school understood that deviation from this expectation was not acceptable. All of the teachers interviewed are very aware that this was one area that the principal absolutely does not tolerate. The teachers also felt that this positively impacts the relationship among teachers, since they all have to adhere to the same expectations. Teachers also indicated that being able to access data regarding student performance was beneficial in being able to better focus their instruction. Differentiating instruction for more homogenous grouping based on student achievement data derived from continuous assessments throughout the year provided both students and parents the best progress information.

The district utilizes a combination of district-wide and site-based curriculum development. Dunn Elementary adopted International Baccalaureate (IB) Curriculum six years ago in response to the changing needs of their international neighborhood population. This decision has resulted in some positive CSAP results for the school with one of the contributing factors being the IB inquiry model to learning. This method is highly intensive with students and teachers asking questions about the content being studied. The teachers interviewed stated that they felt CSAP was a test on measuring “thinking” versus isolated skills; therefore, the inquiry method aligns nicely with that assessment.

A member in the teacher focus group provided a good description of how IB benefits ALL students:

“It lets the high kids soar and it brings the bottom up. It doesn’t leave anyone out. It doesn’t - they learn to ask these questions that are behind you and they just learn that wherever they’re at with questioning is an OK place to be because that’s what the information they’re needing and they learn to ask different questions. And I’ve seen it empower those low kids, that they are right in there with those high kids and they don’t know the difference. And neither would probably someone else walking into the school not knowing. And they’re engaged.”

The students interviewed agreed that the teachers never make a student feel like they don’t know how to do a task, and they interact with students who are having trouble on a one-on-one basis and never calling it to everyone’s attention.

Other factors viewed as having a positive effect on student achievement are that each student reads to the principal twice a year, so she is able to personally stay aware of their progress. Also, each student receives an individual conference regarding their CSAP scores. This explicitly lets students and parents know that each and every student’s progress is a priority at this school.

Staff development and delivery practices

Staff development for effective delivery practices seemed to be in congruence at both the district and school level. The two major district-wide curriculum changes that have been made in the last five years were based on the results of CSAP. Staff development training for all teachers implementing these changes was offered to make sure that there was an understanding that the correct lessons were used to target any particular skill.

The first district-wide curriculum change was that every elementary school in the district has a literacy program. This is also in compliance with the Colorado Basic Literacy Act that states that by third grade all students will be reading at grade level. The district chose Open Court Reading program as the model that *every* elementary school would adopt. McGraw Hill's web-site on Open Court Reading describes it as a research-based curriculum grounded in systematic, explicit instruction of phonemic awareness, phonics and word knowledge, comprehension skills and strategies, inquiry skills and strategies, and writing and language arts skills and strategies. The principal stated that some of the teachers needed to be convinced that this methodology was in the best interest of the students. However, all of the teachers who were interviewed indicated that Open Court has had a huge, positive impact in student reading achievement due to how well it aligns with CSAP and also provides a common vocabulary.

The second district-wide curriculum change was in the area of writing. The model adopted was Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory's Six-Trait, which focuses on six qualities. The six traits include ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, and conventions.

There are also two other district-wide curriculums in place for students with special needs. One of them is Soar to Success, which is used for Title I students and those needing individual literacy plans. The other is High Point aimed at students for whom English is a second language.

Staff development at the school level is mainly centered on their IB partner school in the district. The teachers partake in peer coaching with this school, which they feel provides them some insightful critical reflection on their delivery practices. The principal is also highly recognized for her ability to both write and obtain grants to help supplement instructional needs for the at-risk population. Unfortunately, the reality is that most of these were either running out due to either time limits or lack of funding resources.

The principal stated the following with respect to the influence that staff development has on good teaching and how it ultimately impacts the students:

...(good teaching is) "knowing where the kids are, and good teachers know their subject matter and are well trained, use multiple approaches to get to the students, and know kids' learning styles, know their kids really well in lots of different things, and to give them specific feedback on how they're doing, and that they're competent."

COMMUNITY

Poudre School District is experiencing declining student enrollment. This change in demographics is primarily the result of the high number of layoffs that some of the larger corporations in the community have been experiencing. Unfortunately, this ultimately results in less money for the district. This situation is also countered with the growth of schools with the majority of their population from low social economic status. These schools are often in need of more resources to help their students overcome their educational hurdles. According to the staff development director and the superintendent, the good news is that, overall, the community is financially supportive as indicated by the passing bond issues and mill levies.

Culture/Leadership

The district interviews resonated with very positive responses as to what they felt was a reflection of whom and what they represented. These included “excellent teaching staff,” “professional learning organization,” and “focus on relationship development and collaboration.” The major area that was determined in need of most improvement was the funding inequity among those schools in lower socio-economic status (SES) neighborhoods and those in higher ones. On this subject, the staff development director stated that based on research, schools need to quit worrying about the home environment and worry more about what happens when kids come to school because that is what they (school staff) can control.

The teachers and the parents interviewed used the word “visionary” to describe the school principal. Her ability to be continually responsive to changing neighborhood demographics and provide services for a variety of academic needs was deemed an impressive mission. One parent stated that the bond the principal creates with each and every one of the students sets an example of a work ethic that includes having knowledge of kids, curriculum, and achievement.

To help ease some of the pressure that students feel during CSAP testing, the school provides snacks and extra recesses that the students stated they looked forward to during this stressful time. Before the CSAP exams of this current school year, the students were given water bottles with the slogan, “IB Students Rock.” When the school receives the results from CSAP, they celebrate the scores with an assembly. Overall, the school attempts to remove some of the stress that accompanies this event.

The students painted the best picture of the classroom environment. The IB profiles — knowledgeable communicators, open minded risk-takers, caring inquirers, and reflective thinkers — were used as an explanation of how they were supposed to organize themselves. There are also IB attitudes as to how students should reflect on their behavior and work. These include

enthusiastic, curious, creative, communicative, and respectful. On a monthly basis, there is Good Citizen Assembly where two to three students are selected based on a positive display of IB attitudes and profiles.

The students were also quite adamant about how much they enjoyed the Basic Enrichment Acceleration Technology (BEAT) program, which is offered to fourth through sixth graders four times a year. The students found these extra study activities stimulating, and liked the idea of giving a presentation on an area of their interest. All of the students in this focus group had a good understanding of school and education, and one of them did a good job summarizing a purpose of education:

“You have to have an education to get a job, even if it’s not the job that you wanted because if you want a certain job but you have to work up to it, so you have to have enough education to get in to the first stage of the job and then you’ll gradually grow more educated about that topic and then you’ll be what you want to be.”

Parents

All of the district personnel made encouraging comments about the high level of support that the majority of the parents in the community are able to provide the district. This level of support was evident at the school level, and the word collaboration was used by both school staff and parents to describe their relationship. The school was appreciative of the good attendance at parent-teacher conferences. They also welcome involvement by parents who have specific knowledge in a unit for the BEAT instruction.

From the teachers’ perspective, they felt it was their responsibility to let parents know what is occurring in the classroom so the parents had information on how to support their children. The school indicated that parental involvement is viewed as part of the overall success of the school.

Businesses

At the district level, a large local technology company was named several times as the primary business supporter in the community. Beyond this, there was mention that Rotary has essay competitions and a volunteer agency has a poetry contest.

The school does not have any formalized business alliances. Members of a local church volunteer at the school and education majors from the local university provide tutoring and in-class support.

SUMMARY

The visionary leadership at Dunn Elementary is the main contributing factor to the school being able to respond to changes in demographics, which includes declining enrollment and a significant international population. The International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum with the inquiry model of instruction allows both students and teachers alike to explore a subject in a safe learning environment. This curriculum is proving to meet the achievement and social needs of all students, and has lead this school to become a highly sought after school of choice with 54 percent of their population coming from other areas in the district. One teacher interviewed used these words to describe what students need from schools,

“The kids deserve more than a heart, they also deserve a brain and they deserve the whole package, so to speak.”

The school also demonstrates a high quality of collaboration with parents. Not only is the assistance from parents welcomed, but they are also asked to participate and possibly lead various activities. The students stated that they felt respected by the principal and the teachers. They also appreciated the one-on-one attention they periodically receive from the principal.

Dunn should be proud of their continuous, high quality of success, and that all of those involved with the school community understand the role they play in this accomplishment. The researchers are grateful to the Dunn school community for participating in extensive interviews, thoughtful reflection, and for opening hearts and minds to the children they serve.

Figure 1. What Everyone Talked About

Curriculum

	Alignment of Standards	Assessments	Staff Development	Delivery Practices
District	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Colorado Model Content Standards • Data-driven • Graduated priorities: reading and writing, now math • Textbook adoption 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) • Northwest Evaluation Association levels test for reading • Basic Reading Inventory 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on leadership that grows within system • Six traits of Writing • District-wide curriculum change, all trained 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open court reading • Pathways • Literacy program in every elementary school • Soar to Success (individual literacy plan) • High point (ESL)
School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principal is accountable for and expects adherence • International Baccalaureate (IB) • IB basis of accountability and strategic plan • Common Vocabulary 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CSAP tests important, so too are levels tests • CSAP tests stress students and parents • Adopt a class program to support those taking tests 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Site based needs of school • Principal is a good grant writer to find money for desired training • Step Up and Six Traits of Writing • Math Model Teacher Education Program 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inquiry Method and reflection of practice • Writing Matrix • Basic Enrichment Acceleration Technology (BEAT) • Reading/Writing tied to math
Classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curriculum development is in the best interest of students • Aligning textbook language with CSAP language so students are familiar with terms • Homogenous grouping 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continuous, authentic assessment • Conference with every single student about their CSAP score • Each student reads to principal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good teachers know their subject matter and are well trained in order to use multiple approaches for student's learning styles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students are engaged, never bored • Differentiate and teach to the learning style and learning world of the student • Tutoring made available for all

Figure 2. What Most Talked About

School Community

	Culture/Leadership	Parents	Businesses
District	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Site-based district • Professional learning organization • Excellent teaching staff • Focus on relationship development/collaboration • Overall goal for schools is understanding school community • Area of improvement is funding equity between lower SES and higher SES schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supportive • Primarily a well-educated population • Play a huge part in the education of their child • Are encouraged to be involved • Many have experienced lay-offs, which is a factor to a declining enrollment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local technology company donates a lot of equipment and subsequent training to both students and teachers • Rotary has essay competitions • Local volunteer agency has a yearly poetry contest.
School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responsive to changing demographics; such as, declining neighborhood enrollment • School of choice (54%) • Serve a diverse population, including those from homeless shelter, various social service units, and at least 20 different countries due to proximity to CSU international housing • Hard, work ethic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Welcomed • Very supportive and parent led initiatives supported • Some may help teach BEAT • Good attendance at conferences • Parents involvement is viewed as part of school success 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A local church provides a lot of volunteers • No formalized long-term business alliances are in place • Student council business sold bracelets to raise money for deactivation of land mines
Classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students ability ranges from highly gifted to basic functioning • All students can learn • IB attitudes and profiles are respected and understood by the students • Good Citizen Awards • Individual student identity is encouraged through classroom activities and multiple after school opportunities • Students' empowered 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers feel that they should let parents know what is occurring in the classroom and how the parents can assist • Communication is very good and there is always an opportunity to have a parent teacher conference. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local university provides tutoring and in-class support