
JUST FOR THE KIDS

Report for Putnam Elementary School

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Prepared by:

**Joan Clay, Research Assistant
David Thomas, Research Assistant**



**Research and Development Center
for the Advancement of Student Learning**

222 West Laurel

Fort Collins, Colorado

970-491-3179; 970-491-3180 (FAX)

www.cahs.colostate.edu/r-dcenter/home.asp

***Colorado State University / Poudre School District
Collaborative***

*The opinions expressed in this report are solely those of the authors
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INTRODUCTION

The school studied for this report was Putnam Elementary School in Poudre School District, located in Larimer County in northern Colorado. The research was conducted in October 2003. The principal was completing her fifth year of administration at Putnam. Currently seventy percent of the 420 students are eligible for free-and-reduced lunch and 29 percent are English Language Learners (ELL). According to the 2003-2004 School Report Card, current demographics are listed by ethnicity in the following table.

Table 1 Student population by Ethnicity

| Student Ethnic Group | % of School Population |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Native American | 1 % |
| African American | 3% |
| Asian American | 1 % |
| Hispanic American | 41% |
| White | 53 % |

The school employs 34 teachers representing both full-time or part-time status, and nine paraprofessionals. Thirteen of the teachers were new to the school within the last three years. The new teachers replaced retirees and those teachers leaving to start families.

Putnam Elementary School is located in the heart of the historic section of Fort Collins, Colorado. The school's name has recently changed to Putnam Elementary School of Science. This change, to a science school, was in response to a number of factors. Among the factors was research that indicated students are more invested in learning when science is integrated through the curriculum. Additionally, the Principal recognized a science emphasis would distinguish Putnam from other neighborhood schools, thus acting as an attractor to new students who would 'choice' enroll. Putnam staff believes science is a key learning skill advancing them ahead of other students in high school and beyond. They also believe a solid science background can help students become more competitive for higher paying jobs.

Students at Putnam are actively engaged in learning all of the Poudre School District adopted curriculum in addition to an enriched science curriculum. Open Court Reading provides the basis for instruction in Literacy. "Commitment to Excellence," Putnam's theme, is promoted in their informational material, and reflects the school's overall approach to teaching and community. Materials promote the impression the school is professionally managed, and focused on delivering an excellent education to all stakeholders. Putnam's new

teacher induction program and employee recruitment efforts are examples of the school and district's support for hiring and training quality teachers and staff.

At the time of the interviews, Poudre School District was undergoing change because of the departure of the district's superintendent. This change in leadership had an impact on the individuals interviewed in terms of their perception of future programs, and inability to account for specific plans regarding the school's participation in district programs. However, administrators and faculty communicated the school's preeminent aspirations and challenges of improving and sustaining CSAP scores, raising achievement levels, and finding ways to bring English learners up to speed.

PROTOCOL OF THE STUDY

The overall structure of the district included three central stakeholder relationships.

- District, including board of education and central administration
- School, including principal and instructional staff
- Language and literacy classroom observations, including teacher and student

Individual school and classroom-level interviews were conducted for this study. PSD individuals interviewed included a member of the Board of Education, Assistant Superintendent, Staff Development Coordinator, Curriculum Generalist, and Putnam Elementary School Principal. Three focus group interviews were held which included teachers, parents, and students. The nature of this study was the *over time* identification of a school's performance on the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) versus their demographic peers. Therefore, certain criteria were used to determine those interviewed. Separate interviews were held with two teachers who had at least three years experience at the school, while the six teachers who participated in the focus group had varied lengths of service. The five parent focus group participants had been associates 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 nine student focus group participants were all fifth graders who had been at the school for at least three years.

COMMUNITY

Teachers describe the community as a high-risk school with a large population of transient families consisting mostly of middle to lower income socio-economic families and high Hispanic population. One administrator described the community as comprised of a lot of "blended" families and parents working several jobs.

Choice allows parents to send their children to their school of preference regardless of location. "Choice sets up an interesting dynamic, a somewhat competitive dynamic," explained one administrator. On the one hand, parents seek a school with a high level of academic success as measured by CSAP scores. While on the other hand, parents seek a

school providing a supportive social environment. In making their choice, parents want the best school, and many see the curriculum largely determined by CSAP.

Many claim the demographics have changed over the last few years from a more homogenous town to one with increasing spotted neighborhoods of mixed income levels and non-traditional families. Limits on growth in Fort Collins will continue to push housing prices higher making what many believe to be a less affordable community for young families.

Parents claimed, “If everyone in our neighborhood came to Putnam that were supposed to, we’d have a completely different group of children running around the halls. But since Putnam is a school of choice, and so many in the neighborhood have left, we’re just trying to keep what we have so we can keep our funding.”

SCHOOL COMMUNITY

School Culture

Students described their classrooms as fun and helpful to other students. They like to play and get along with others. They described themselves as helpful, nice, and friendly. The school stresses kids need to understand they are all valued. Teachers explain students know their school cares about them by the amount of time teachers invest in their students and families. One teacher commented, “Students know we care when they get hugs and positive reinforcement.”

Parents describe the school’s culture as, “Everyone is kind, generous, helpful, and not critical.” The school encourages parents to become more involved by sending notes home on student performance and school activities including a special parent newsletter that reaches out to the community and the parents. Teachers indicated that parents, due to their own educational experiences, might be intimidated to participate in the school. Teaching staff appeared sensitive to this issue, and were exploring ways to invite more parents to participate in school programs.

Changes and Challenges

Improving and sustaining CSAP scores, raising achievement levels, and finding ways to bring English language learners up to speed are seen as the school’s primary challenges. Delivering effective teaching services that help teachers improve their skills is another noted challenge. Managing budget cuts was determined as an important new task in meeting the district and schools primary goals and, as one board member stated, “It’s important to keep the projected \$2.4 million in cuts away from the classroom.” This indicates that both the school and the district are focused on sustaining and protecting student learning at the classroom level.

Define Success

Success is defined differently across the diverse group of administrators and faculty. However, they share a common view that CSAP is, and should be, the major measurement, but not the sole measurement of a school and students' success. Teachers define success by the level of comfort they have with what they are teaching and that children are excited to learn. The district defines the school's success primarily by CSAP test scores. Parents define success by whether or not their children are reading and working at their current grade levels, and are happy and enjoy what they are doing.

District administrators define success by a student's employability skills and career awareness. Administrators also point to character and how well students work with other people, as key measures of their success.

Parental Involvement

The school sees parental involvement as one of its primary challenges. For example, teachers indicate that many times a child's homework is not being done or done on the bus ride to and from school. Administrators and teachers alike speculate that some parents are reluctant to come to school because they did not have a good experience when they were in school. To improve parental involvement, teachers ask parents to sign a homework planner that documents a child's homework assignment. Teachers believe the plan is encouraging parents to call with any questions or comments, and involving them in their child's learning.

As one teacher commented, "Parental involvement is a challenge not because they do not care...it's because they do not understand the importance or even if they do, it's not in their culture and a part of their life." This teacher also noted that parents tend to be more involved in the lower grades. Parents defined the school's climate as producing happy children in a safe environment. The culture of the school is described as "welcoming and friendly." Parents comment that teachers know whom my children are supporting the feeling of a safe environment caring about the parents and their children.

CURRICULUM

All students have the advantage of one hour of direct instruction daily in a small literacy group. Additional literacy instruction is given through the Science curriculum. Every Day Math promotes student involvement in higher-level thinking and problem solving for at least one hour each day.

The change to a science school was designed to better align the curriculum and improve student achievement, which as one teacher claims, "Has created a lot of alignment in our curriculum, and has had a large impact on teachers." The impact has been a positive one in the sense that teachers have grown professionally, and staff reports they are more unified and confident in their mission and abilities. The negative aspects of the change reflect in the

increased pressure to deliver a new and different curriculum, and the anxiety associated with the uncertainty of implementing a science curriculum.

Interestingly, teachers felt the uncertainty of the success of the new curriculum was a gamble and risk to themselves in terms of learning new skills and how kids would react to the new curriculum. The outcome has been a positive experience overall for students and teachers. As one administrator said, “It’s great to see a fourth grader talking to a second grader about the same science topics.” Teachers feel rewarded and more invested in the school when the results of their efforts are evident in student growth.

The school curriculum committee looks at CSAP data and determines what they need to work on for the next school year with their students. The committee then designs a unit to address those needs. The district plays only a facilitative role in the selection of curriculum. As one administrator pointed out, “We let teachers and principals drive the decision making processes for curriculum selection.” Administrators and teachers agree it is critical to involve teachers in curriculum development.

Students felt the best things about their school is “that it’s a science school” and the access they have to tools that help them learn such as computer labs, calculators, computers, and reference books to help them “look things up.” Students report that the after-school programs “help you with your homework” and are consistent with what teachers report as key tools to help students find a “place other than home” to do their work.

CSAP

Focus on CSAP as a method of measuring student achievement, has resulted in a more data-driven philosophy. The district’s utilization of “CSAP Analyzer,” a document reporting each student’s CSAP score, is an example of how teachers and students can focus on student achievement issues and attendant strategies.

A board member commented, “Bolstering those areas of weakness has proven itself to work well.” In further support of this strategy, Putnam is utilizing district-developed software to correlate CSAP with other measures (demographics and data) to find new ways of developing curriculum.

Teachers view CSAP as a good standard to follow. Further, they see CSAP as holding schools and teachers accountable for what children are learning. However, it is generally believed that CSAP is just one piece of the child’s educational picture. Administrators believe that CSAP is important to the parents and the community as a way of “judging” the school system.

Teachers believe using CSAP is a “good shift in testing because it’s only fair to show the kids this is what you need to know, and this is what we are going to test you on.” It appears

the district and school is aligned in terms of constructing curriculum and teaching to a common standard.

The data revealed CSAP has provided new focus and support in learning, i.e. CSAP results are due to direct instruction and small group focus on literacy, and raising expectations. CSAP is important because it has “raised the bar” and has put the focus on writing. The negative aspects are when scores are used to compare schools.

Some parents indicated a concern that some teaching was driven by CSAP scores. Other parents indicated a dislike over the stress that accompanies CSAP, and add that CSAP should not be the sole indicator of a child’s learning. While parents are concerned about CSAP they were generally appreciative of the school and teachers efforts to create an atmosphere of support to children during the testing period.

Students report CSAP scores were important to them because it lets teachers know a students level of achievement. Students report the results made them feel “kind of happy.” Some students expressed mixed feelings due to high scores on some parts of the test and lower scores on other parts. Most students reported they felt nervous and had butterflies in their stomach.

INSTRUCTIONAL STAFF

Challenges

Teachers expressed frustration about “balancing” their teaching load with learning new programs. This sense of frustration is borne out of not being in control of their time. As one teacher stated, “It’s difficult to fit everything in when you’re not given more time to do it.” While the time pressures are significant, the consensus among teachers is Putnam has the hardest working teachers in the district. “Everybody puts in so much time to get their kids to be successful”, said one teacher. In part, teachers see collaboration as necessary to meet their task and, as one teacher stated, “Collaboration helps keep all the kids in the school on the same page, and helps to ensure they accomplish their tasks.”

Good Teaching

Teachers agree that good teaching is engaging students in learning. Teachers who are actively involved with each student and their family helps build trust and achievement. Building character in kids, and making sure that every child meets their highest potential, is the central theme from this group of teachers.

Teachers believe having their students involved in lessons will motivate them to come to school to see what is next. Teachers commented they are always looking for the teachable moments, expanding on those moments, and doing something different that makes learning fun for the students. Teachers perceive learning as both the teacher and the student’s

responsibility. The emotional attachment and the strong normative commitment to the job as teacher and learner are an extension of their own personal values.

Professional Development

A committee of teachers and administrators help plan and deliver professional development. Teachers describe professional development as “spontaneous.” Other views note that, “Professional development feels like: ok we have a date here. Let’s fill it.” Most teachers feel the district is not taking into consideration the larger picture of teaching and professional development needs. Professional development is not strategic in design or purpose, and there does not seem to be a formal system in place for professional development or evaluation.

Parents perceive a lot of training takes place. They agree it is a “good idea to keep teachers fresh with new ideas and keep them excited about their job.” In light of the superintendent’s departure, teachers expressed concern over who is making the decisions regarding professional development. The district does provide a comprehensive new teacher induction service that helps new teachers understand their role, responsibilities, and standards for teaching.

The mentoring program is seen as an important district program supporting teacher professional development. This comprehensive mentoring program supports instructional development and other professional practices aimed at improving student learning. Creating a collaborative culture where professionals work hard to support each other in an effort to do what is best for Putnam students, is the ultimate goal of the mentoring program. As one teacher commented, “The mentoring program has been absolutely fabulous. The district sets aside money and provides a wealth of information and material. And they observe teachers and do peer coaching.”

Staff Evaluation

Teachers value feedback as critical to improving their performance and student growth. New teacher evaluations are conducted every year for a teacher’s first three years of teaching. Upon completion of three years of teaching, a major evaluation takes place every third year. The principal conducts classroom observations to evaluate teaching skills and to determine if lessons are tied to standards. Teachers agree that some form of peer evaluation would be an attractive and helpful process. Overall, teachers are in favor of evaluation and see it as a way to improve their own skills and help children learn and achieve. The Principal is evaluated by the district, teachers, parents and the superintendent.

Collaboration and Communication

Teachers say collaboration helps them to focus on the same thing. Others described collaboration as extremely high because decisions are made in a manner involving everyone. Teachers practice strong collaboration within each grade level. Teachers meet weekly within

their grades to discuss curriculum issues, and invite experts in to inform them on academic and social issues as needed.

The Putnam teachers met with local junior high school teachers to discuss specific student behavior issues, and to improve their general understanding of the challenges their students will face in transitioning to junior high school. The school is presently considering scheduling a 'late start' day each month to provide time needed for vertical collaboration.

The school supports teacher collaboration and professional development via formal settings such as once a week within grade level meetings, once a week within grade level with literacy staff, and twice a month meetings with teachers across all grades including Impacts Teachers. Four times each year teachers and staff meet during early release periods for the purposes of planning, staff training and presentations on inquiry based instruction.

SUMMARY

Putnam's science based curriculum has created a unique niche for the school in the Poudre School District. This niche provides both new opportunities and problems for Putnam. Initially, staff viewed the curriculum with some degree of anxiety both in terms of their ability to teach the curriculum and uncertainty about acceptance by students. However, both concerns were overcome with a purposeful and thoughtful execution of a program that was professionally implemented.

Keys to the successful implementation of the science curriculum were in the alignment of their vision and mission to curriculum development and delivery, teacher collaboration, and community and district support. As a result, the school is focused on a curriculum that trains and educates its students in science as the "pathway" to success for their students and the community at large.

Teachers share in the school's vision and mission; they feel a sense of ownership and participation that is producing a strong collaborative culture. Teachers and staff utilize data to assess their strengths and weaknesses. They work with district staff and within their various committees to support existing programs and build new ones. The Putnam School of Science involves the community and the district in their efforts and strategies. Leadership and teamwork are the driving forces providing the impetus and energy for imagination and generation of innovative teaching, and programs that contribute to student growth.