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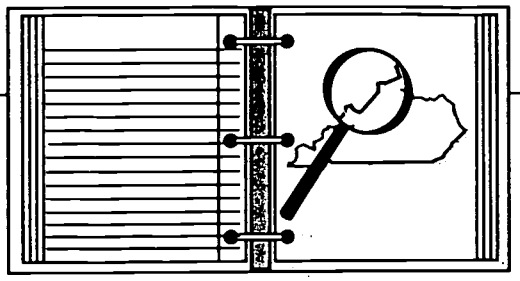
ABSTRACT

As part of an 8-year study of education reform in rural Kentucky, this report examines the primary program that has evolved in six rural elementary schools as a result of the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA), which requires that grades K-3 be replaced by a nongraded program. This change aimed to eliminate failure in the first 2 years of schooling and prepare all children for the fourth grade by allowing them to progress at their own developmental rate. Seven mandates for this primary program included developmentally appropriate practices, multiage and multiability classrooms, continuous progress, authentic assessment, qualitative reporting to parents, professional teamwork, and positive parent involvement. This report discusses the relationship of the primary program to other KERA strands, the study methodology, and findings. Reform implementation was hindered by uneven time lines, lack of guidance from the state department, slow formation and organization of school councils, uncertainties about appropriate instructional practices, and KERA mandates for "critical attributes" of primary classrooms. Primary teachers at all study schools attempted to implement the attributes within the first 2 years upon receiving training and new materials, but program implementation was slowed due to over-emphasis on the critical attributes, legislative adjustments, lack of perceived fit to reforms in grades 4-12, and questions of efficacy. Program development at the local level was influenced by principal's leadership, teacher beliefs, school climate, and local response. Attaining program goals may require reinforcing the intent of the primary program and articulating how teachers can infuse challenging content into the primary program in ways that prepare students to meet state academic expectations. Case studies of four primary schools are included. (SAS)



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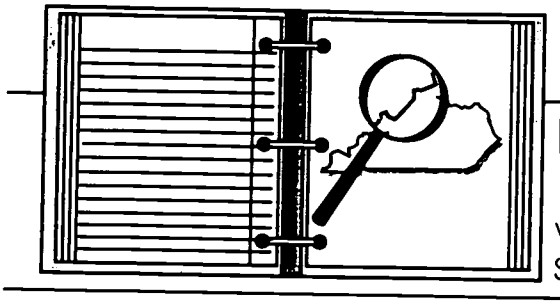

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Evolution of the Primary Program in Six Kentucky Schools

In this issue of "Notes from the Field," we examine the development of the primary program in six rural Kentucky elementary schools. AEL researchers have studied the schools throughout the past eight years, interviewing teachers, principals, central office staff, parents and students, as well as doing occasional classroom observation and reviewing documentary evidence and appropriate literature. This report is based on the entirety of our work in each school, but the most detailed description comes from the 1996-97 school year, when we narrowed the focus of our work to the class of 2006. These students were in their final year of the primary program during 1996-97. For more specific information, see the description of our research methods (p. 3); a brief summary of the law related to the primary program, including the seven critical attributes (p. 5); and a short description of the Kentucky accountability and assessment programs (p. 11).

When the primary program was first implemented following the 1990 passage of the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA), planning for and implementation of the program looked fairly similar from school to school across our study districts. In general, teachers made a good faith effort to design their programs according to guidelines from the Kentucky Department of Education. During the first two years of primary implementation in the classrooms we studied, we documented a great deal of change in instruction, assessment, and student grouping practices. Changes have persisted over time in most classrooms: flexible seating arrangements, opportunities for students to work with partners or in teams, regular use of authentic literature, increased emphasis on writing, greater use of hands-on activities, less emphasis on number and letter grades, more communication among teachers of primary students, and more contact with parents. Over time, the program evolved differently in each school, as illustrated by the four, short case studies enclosed. Some schools continue to implement KERA primary programs, while others have now opted for more traditional programs.

The Primary Program in the Context of KERA

Initial Intent

The reform legislation does not specify the intent of the primary program; it merely requires that the first four years of school (K-3) be replaced by a nongraded program. It is clear from other sources, however, that the primary program was intended to work hand-in-glove with the results-based reforms in grades 4-12. In 1990, David Hornbeck, the consultant on the curriculum portion of the reform law, explained the rationale for the primary program in his recommendations to the Task Force on Education Reform:

I recommend that we abolish grade differentials up until entry into the 4th grade. That will eliminate the possibility of "failing" kindergarten or the first grade. The basic school will, thus, extend from age 4 through roughly age 9, with the objective being to have all youngsters ready to enter the 4th grade by [age] 8-10 with parents as part of the successful partnership (Hornbeck, 1990).

This recommendation suggests two major goals for the primary program: (1) eliminating failure in the first two years of schooling and (2) preparing all children for the fourth grade. The idea was that schools would give children a positive start where they could progress at their own developmental rate. This would eliminate the stigma and negative consequences of "failing" early in one's schooling. At the same time, however, students would be expected to demonstrate the skills and capabilities needed for fourth grade.

Shortly after the passage of KERA, the Kentucky Department of Education developed seven critical attributes to guide schools in implementing the nongraded primary

This synthesis of findings is part of a qualitative study of education reform in rural Kentucky being conducted by the Appalachia Educational Laboratory (AEL) to provide feedback to educators and policymakers on the implementation of the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) of 1990. Four researchers are documenting reform efforts in four rural Kentucky districts that have been assigned the pseudonyms of Lamont County, Newtown Independent, Orange County, and Vanderbilt County. For more information about this project, contact Pam Coe (800-624-9120), or Patty Kannapel (502-[illegible]-0324), or AEL, P.O. Box 1348, Charleston, WV 25325-1348.

program (see p. 5). It was believed that these program attributes would enable students to progress at their own rate and also, through hands-on activities, group work, and authentic assessment, help them achieve the higher-level skills that would be tested in fourth grade. The critical attributes quickly became the linchpin of the primary program.

Legislative Adjustments

In 1992, the legislature adopted the seven critical attributes into law, making the primary program the only aspect of KERA that mandated particular classroom practices. Also in 1992, the legislature moved up the implementation time lines suggested by the state department of education. The state department suggested full implementation by the 1995-96 school year (Kentucky Department of Education, 1991); the legislature required schools to fully implement the primary program by 1993-94.

Later, in response to teacher complaints, the 1994 General Assembly enacted legislation designed to give greater flexibility to the program. By this time, it was widely recognized that teachers were focused on and struggling with the multiage critical attribute; they also questioned including five-year-olds in the program. The legislature made two changes: permitting entry-level students to be grouped in self-contained classrooms, and making the extent of multiage/multiability grouping more flexible. A legislator who supported those changes explained that he hoped that the increased flexibility would result in teachers focusing more on the overall intent of the program and less on multiaging as an end in itself.

In 1998, the legislature passed HB484, which created a new section of KRS Chapter 158, where all the provisions for the primary program can be found in one place.

Relationship of Primary Program to Other KERA Strands

To understand primary program implementation in the study schools, one must recognize that Kentucky's primary program is but one component of a massive restructuring of the state's education system. Reflecting a new philosophy that would become known as "systemic reform" (Murphy, 1990; Smith & O'Day, 1990), the reform package shifted the focus from teacher input to student results, gave schools autonomy to decide how to help students achieve reform goals, but held them accountable for student performance as measured by a performance-based assessment instrument, the Kentucky Instructional Results Information System (KIRIS). Thus, while primary teachers were required to implement new instructional, assessment, and grouping practices, they and their colleagues in higher grades were also held accountable for student performance. Schools, through their school-based decision-making councils, were given autonomy to decide how to help students achieve KERA goals.

Another reform measure affecting the primary program was reorganization of the state department of education, which was meant to enhance the department's capacity to facilitate rather than monitor reform. KERA required the new state department to provide curriculum guidelines to assist districts in aligning curriculum to KERA goals and expectations. The law required all positions in the department to be terminated on June 30, 1991, and an appointed commissioner (replacing the elected chief state school officer) to institute a newly designed department on July 1, 1991. So during the entire first year of KERA implementation, department staff were trying to provide direction, but were uncertain as to what role they might (or might not) play in the new department.

To provide the massive amount of teacher training needed to implement the reforms, funding for professional development was greatly increased over the six-year period, from $1 per student in 1990 to $23 per student in 1996-97. Smaller districts were required to pool these resources in professional development consortia. By 1992, regional service centers were in place to provide districts with technical assistance.

Recognizing that students arrive at school in various stages of readiness to learn, the legislature included in KERA a number of programs schools could use to help students overcome barriers to learning. These included preschool programs for at-risk four-year-olds and for three- and four-year-olds with handicaps or developmental delays; integrated services (family resource and youth services centers) to help students overcome social, emotional, and physical barriers to learning; and extended school services (ESS) for students who needed additional time to meet the mandated outcomes.

Components of KERA were phased in. State-sponsored professional development during the 1990-92 school years was required in seven areas: the reform act itself, school-based decisionmaking, performance-based student assessment, nongraded primary, research-based instructional practices, instructional uses of technology, and cultural diversity. Extended school services was begun in 1990-91. School-based decision making (SBDM) was required in at least one school in each district by July 1991 and in all schools (except those in one-school districts or that had met their accountability goals) by 1996. Preschool programs were instituted in 1990-91, and the integrated services grants were made on a competitive basis in June 1992. The primary program was initiated in 1992-93, after a year of planning and professional development.

Study Methodology

Research Methods

This report is based on findings from AEL's longitudinal study of primary program implementation in four rural districts. From 1991 through 1995, we studied the primary program along with other aspects of KERA implementation in all 15 elementary schools in the four districts. Beginning in 1996-97, we narrowed our focus to six schools and to a specific cohort of students within those schools: the class of 2006. This study sample of six schools includes two schools in western Kentucky, two in central Kentucky, and two in eastern Kentucky. Four of the schools are located in towns, while two are in outlying communities or rural areas. Five are located in county districts; one is in a small, independent school district. The schools range in size from about 80 students to about 500 students. One of the schools has fewer than 30 percent of students on free/reduced-priced lunch; the remainder range from 50 to 60 percent.

The study is qualitative in nature: we rely on interviews, observations, and review of documents to provide information. In 1996-97, two researchers visited the six study schools in October, November or December, January, February, and April. The February visit at all schools was spent interviewing primary teachers at all levels. The remaining visits were spent interviewing principals and observing and interviewing upper-primary teachers. In addition to regular field visits, two researchers visited each district together in May and met separately with administrators and with upper-primary teachers at each school to share preliminary findings and obtain feedback.

The list below details the body of interviews and observations conducted in the two phases of research. Because the primary was only one component of KERA that we studied from 1991-1995, our investigation of it was not as intensive during that phase of the research as it was in 1996-97. The number of interviews shown below is a count of the total number of interviews conducted with each role group—not the total number of individuals interviewed. For instance in 1996-97, only six principals were interviewed, but they were interviewed at least three times. Likewise, upper-primary teachers were interviewed 3-5 times each in 1996-97. There were not nearly as many repeat interviews during the 1991-95 phase, so those counts are closer to the actual number of persons interviewed.

	1991-95	1996-97	Total to date
Number of interviews with:			
Principals	60	22	82
Primary teachers	124	87	211
Intermediate teachers	55	0	55
Parents	30	0	30
Primary students	19	0	19
Hours of observation in:			
Primary classrooms	100+	86	186+

Key documents were also reviewed, such as primary program action plans and annual evaluations, school transformation plans, school council minutes, school board minutes, and local newspapers. During the 1996-97 school year, we copied and analyzed lesson plans from September through April for the 17 upper-primary teachers.

In addition to local fieldwork, we have gathered information at the state level throughout our study. Activities that provided information for this report include a 1993 interview with officials at the Kentucky Department of Education who were responsible for primary program implementation, a 1996 interview with one of the legislators instrumental in legislative changes to the primary statutes, a 1997 conversation with a former department official who helped get the primary program off the ground, observation of regular meetings of the Kentucky Board of Education since 1992, observation of professional development sessions relative to the primary program (including that provided by the state department: Primary Institutes and KELP training), and review of key state-level documents.

Data Analysis

Data for 1996-97 were analyzed at mid-year and again at the end of the school year. The summary of findings agreed upon by the research team was shared with administrators and teachers in the local districts at small group meetings. Input obtained during these meetings provided some new information and helped refine the analysis. At the end of the school year, the research team generated a set of overall findings across the schools, as well as findings specific to each of the case-study schools. In addition, lesson plans were analyzed to determine what content teachers covered, and with what frequency each subject area was covered in the lesson plans.

Findings

Implementation of the Program: Getting Started

Radical change is a difficult and often messy process, an observation well documented by the education change literature (see Fullan, 1996.) The implementation of the primary program in the study districts was no exception. With increased professional development, primary teachers made many positive changes in the early years. They were hampered, however, by uneven implementation time lines and lack of guidance from a state department undergoing reorganization. The primary program was implemented on schedule but without some of the supports built into the law. For instance, in three schools, the primary program was well underway before family resource centers were established; the remaining three schools are not yet served by these centers. The extended school services program was available early on, but in most of our study schools it was offered only to students in the fourth or higher grades. Alignment of curriculum with KERA goals and expectations lagged considerably behind primary implementation in the few study schools that have accomplished it at all. Only three of the six schools had councils at the time they were first implementing the primary program. The councils that were in place were busy getting organized and trying to determine their areas of responsibility. These councils were content to allow primary teachers to plan their own programs without a strong hand from the council—a practice that has continued to this day in all but one school. The different time lines contributed to the primary program being implemented almost as a reform unto itself, rather than as an interconnected part of a larger reform.

The early professional development available to primary teachers offered a variety of instructional approaches from which to choose. In addition, the state department offered some early "primary institutes" that focused on the philosophy behind the program. Teachers we spoke to at these sessions, however, expressed impatience with discussions of the primary program philosophy. Because they were required to have a program up and running by the next school year, they wanted help with the practicalities of day-to-day operation of a multiage primary classroom. Perhaps in response to such complaints, professional development soon began to focus almost exclusively on instructional practices in multiage settings and was conducted by a variety of providers, some of whom gave conflicting information as to what was appropriate primary practice. Because everyone (council members, principals, and teachers) was equally unsure as to what actually constituted appropriate practice, certain "myths" ("you can never use textbooks again," "you can't teach spelling or phonics," "you can't drill students on math facts") became prevalent and were implemented for a time.

In addition to the primary institutes, the state department of education provided early guidance to primary teachers with the publication of two documents that included both philosophical and practical information (Kentucky Department of Education, 1991, 1993). Because the department was reorganizing simultaneously with primary program implementation, however, consistent guidance from the state was difficult to maintain. Continual shifting of state department personnel responsible for the primary program added to the difficulty.

Confusion in the early years of primary program implementation may have been exacerbated by the 1992 adoption of the critical attributes into statute. KERA established six broad goals for all students to achieve by the twelfth grade. Decisions about how to get students there were left to the professional educators in schools and classrooms. In the primary program, however, the seven critical attributes specified how classrooms were to operate and look. This mandate, combined with a lack of early information on the specific content primary teachers should be teaching, meant that, initially, primary teachers in our study schools paid more attention to the critical attributes than to the KERA goals and academic expectations. They devoted more overtime hours than teachers at other grade levels during 1991-94; they had neither the time nor the energy to worry about the fit between what they were doing and overall KERA goals and expectations. Even given these problems, however, primary teachers instituted a number of positive changes in their classrooms.

Changes in Primary Classrooms We Studied

In the first two years of primary program implementation (1992–93 and 1993–94), primary teachers at all study schools—in an attempt to implement the attributes—made changes in their approaches to instruction, assessment, grouping practices, reporting methods, working with other teachers, and working with parents. Teachers at some schools changed their practices substantially, while those at other schools were more cautious.

With the new professional development money from KERA, virtually all primary teachers in the study schools received copious training, purchased new materials, and experimented with new instructional practices. They learned about instructional approaches that were compatible with the program, such as involving students in their learning through learning centers,

cooperative group activities, and hands-on math and science instruction. Real-life application of skills and integration of subject matter were stressed in professional development sessions on literature-based instruction and thematic units. Teachers reported being overwhelmed at the time and energy it took to make these changes. Yet, of all the changes primary teachers have made, these have persisted more than the others, reportedly because teachers have had success with many of the new approaches. Even though teachers have opted not to continue some of the new practices, primary classrooms at all study schools look different now than when our study began. For instance, primary teachers at all schools have rearranged their classrooms to eliminate desks in straight rows and developed arrangements that enable students to interact with one another and work together. Most teachers give students frequent opportunities to work with partners or in small groups. As a consequence of the strong writing emphasis on the state

Overview of the Primary Program Requirements

KERA mandates that grades K-3 be replaced with a nongraded primary program. The rationale behind the nongraded program is that students will progress at their own rate through the primary years without experiencing the stigma of early school failure. Implementation of the primary program began in 1992-93 after a year of planning and professional development, and the program was to be fully implemented in all elementary schools by the beginning of the 1993-94 school year.

Full implementation of the primary program means that seven critical attributes must be addressed to some degree in every primary classroom in the state. These seven critical attributes were designed to enable primary students to achieve the six broad learning goals specified in the reform law.

(1) **Developmentally Appropriate Practices:** Curriculum and instruction that address the physical, social, intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic/artistic needs of young learners and that allow them to progress through an integrated curriculum at their own rate and pace.

(2) **Multiage and Multiability Classrooms:** Flexible grouping and regrouping of children of different ages, sex, and abilities who may be assigned to the same teacher(s) for more than one year.

(3) **Continuous Progress:** Students progress through the primary school program at their own rate without comparisons to the rates of others or consideration of the number of years in school. Retention and promotion within the primary school program are not compatible with continuous progress.

(4) **Authentic Assessment:** Assessment that occurs continually in the context of the learning environment and reflects actual learning experiences that can be documented through observation, anecdotal records, journals, logs, work samples, conferences, and other methods.

(5) **Qualitative Reporting:** The communication of children's progress to families through various home-school methods of communication that focus on the growth and development of the whole child.

(6) **Professional Teamwork:** All professional staff—including primary teachers, administrators, special education teachers, teacher assistants/aides, itinerant teachers, and support personnel—communicate and plan on a regular basis to meet the needs of groups as well as individual children.

(7) **Positive Parent Involvement:** Relationships between school and home, individuals, or groups that enhance communication, promote understanding, and increase opportunities for children to experience success.

No process was mandated for teacher use to determine if students have successfully completed the primary program, but two tools were provided. The Kentucky Department of Education developed an interim process for determining successful completion of the primary program, which was adopted into regulation by the State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education in December 1992. The interim regulation was meant to be replaced by the Kentucky Early Learning Profile (KELP). The KELP is an instrument designed to support appropriate curriculum and instruction in the primary program, verify successful completion of the primary program, communicate with and involve parents in the assessment process, and constitute a staff development program on using authentic assessment. This primary assessment tool was not intended to mirror the fourth-grade assessment, but was designed to provide students with opportunities to develop activities that lay the foundation for the fourth-grade assessment. The KELP was developed by the state's assessment contractor, piloted during the 1992-93 school year, and field tested in 1993-94. Training in use of the KELP was made available to primary teachers across the state in the summer of 1994. Concerns about the amount of paperwork associated with the KELP kept it from being mandatory. Currently, schools may use the "interim" regulation, the KELP, or some similar process to verify successful completion of the primary program.

assessment, primary teachers incorporate a great deal of writing in their classrooms. In addition, authentic literature—real books or stories, not material written specifically for classroom instruction—is frequently a part of the primary reading program. The result of these changes is that instruction in primary classrooms is more interactive, hands-on, and connected to real-life experiences than previously.

In addition to instructional changes, primary teachers have attempted working with groups of students with wide ranges of abilities and ages and have begun to think about and work out ways to allow students to progress at their own rate. Some teachers developed structures within their own single- or dual-age classrooms for allowing students to progress at their own rate in certain subjects (see Kessinger Elementary case history). At one school, teachers used flexible grouping and regrouping for mathematics instruction, assessing and reshuffling student groups at the end of each unit (see Orange County Elementary case history).

Teachers have also made changes in their assessment and reporting practices in response to the critical attributes. At one school, teachers use the state-provided assessment/reporting tool, the Kentucky Early Learning Profile (KELP), a voluntary record keeping/assessment program appropriate for the primary program, made available in 1994. The KELP learning descriptors gave primary teachers the first state department guidance on specific content primary students should master before entering fourth grade. The KELP includes methods for monitoring student progress and reporting to parents not with letter grades, but in narrative. In addition, progress reports are shared with parents face-to-face at regular intervals during the year. Teachers report that the KELP is time-consuming, but provides a great deal of information about student progress (see Orange County Elementary case history). At schools not using the KELP, teachers initially implemented new methods of authentic assessment, and replaced traditional report cards with progress reports that were meant to provide more detailed information to parents. There has been a general lack of satisfaction with these strategies, but primary teachers at most schools still rely less on numerical and letter grades than in the past.

Primary teachers also communicate with one another and with parents more than in the past. Teacher teams that worked and planned together were created at nearly all schools at some point in implementation. Although this practice is not now as common as initially, teachers continue to report that they feel less isolated, sharing more with other teachers than before. Similarly, in response to the critical attributes, all six schools made a strong effort to reach out to parents through parent meetings, conferences, classroom newsletters, creation of parent-teacher organizations, or parent volunteer programs. Schools have relaxed their efforts in this area, but the level of parent involvement at most study schools is still higher than previously.

The changes in primary classrooms have not been readily accepted by all teachers. Many teachers feared that movement away from the traditional, teacher-directed scope and sequence approach to instruction would result in the young students learning less. Some teachers may have interpreted "allows [students] to progress at their own rate" to mean that students should not be challenged academically. As soon as the first group of primary students entered fourth grade, we began to hear comparisons of them to previous fourth graders. We were told by some parents and teachers that students coming out of the primary program had weak spelling skills and hadn't memorized their math facts. To balance those complaints, parents and fourth-grade teachers also told us that the exiting primary students were "better thinkers," asked more questions, and were better creative writers. However, we still detect a lingering perception among upper-grade teachers that the primary program does not adequately prepare students for fourth grade. We have no evidence in our study districts or statewide that primary program implementation impedes student performance on the state assessment program. In fact, fourth-grade students statewide have outperformed students at grades 8 and 11/12 on KIRIS (Kentucky Department of Education, 1996).

Slowing Down

Changes in primary classrooms have been substantial, but movement toward greater implementation of the primary program has slowed considerably in our study schools. Generally, primary teachers seem to have settled into an approach comfortable for them, whether it equates to primary program implementation or not. The reasons vary from one school to the next. Four factors were relevant at most schools: (1) emphasis on the critical attributes rather than on the overall purpose of the primary program, (2) legislative adjustments to the primary program, (3) lack of perceived fit between primary program and results-based reform in grades 4-12, and (4) questions of efficacy, linked to teacher belief systems.

Obscured purpose of primary program. A basic problem that plagued implementation of the primary program at our study schools from the beginning was that the program's overall goal quickly became lost in the single-minded focus on implementing the seven

The Need for Leadership: Kessinger Elementary School Primary Program

Overview

The factors that appeared to influence the evolution of the primary program at Kessinger Elementary School most strongly were local ones: leadership, teacher beliefs, and school climate. Interestingly, many primary teachers at Kessinger appeared to grasp the intent of the primary program and to agree with the overall philosophy of allowing students to progress at their own rate through an instructional program geared to the needs of young learners. The primary program might have been implemented in a consistent direction had the faculty been able to pull together toward a common vision. But the opportunity to do so was impeded by frequent changes in principals, coupled with a longstanding lack of cohesiveness among the teachers. Differing philosophies among teachers that had been largely dormant pre-KERA "when teachers had the freedom to teach as they saw fit within their own classrooms" were brought to the forefront when the faculty was called upon to create a coherent primary program.

Kessinger Elementary is located in a small, rural county whose economy is based largely on agriculture. In spite of an increase in the local tax rate and more state funding after passage of KERA, lack of industry and tourism in the county causes the district to struggle financially. A great deal of turnover in school and district leadership is due, in part, to the district's lower administrator salaries. Five principals have served Kessinger in the eight years since the passage of KERA.

History of the Primary Program

When KERA passed, Kessinger teachers exhibited varying degrees of enthusiasm for the nongraded primary program. Generally, primary teachers were willing to give the program a try and planned to implement it as specified by state guidelines. Some teachers, however, found the primary philosophy closely aligned to their own belief systems and were eager to begin implementation, while others were skeptical and wanted to proceed more slowly. These different viewpoints exacerbated existing tensions among the faculty. The principal was uncomfortable with the conflict that arose from trying to arrive at a common vision. When differences of opinion surfaced at the first meeting to plan the primary, the principal delayed the planning process to provide a cooling-off period. Instead, the controversy heated up.

By 1992-93, Kessinger teachers had been unable to agree on a primary configuration, so they implemented two different approaches. One team implemented a K-3 arrangement at one end of the hall, while another implemented a dual-age arrangement (K-1, 1-2, and 2-3) at the other end. Neither team had common planning time for its members, and teachers on both teams reported at mid-year that they were exhausted and frustrated from trying to implement new instructional programs without support or time to interact with their peers. Teachers on both teams tried different strategies for student grouping but were unable to settle on a strategy satisfactory to all. By the end of the year, teachers on the K-3 team began to differ among themselves, with some supporting the K-3 arrangement, others favoring a dual-age configuration, and others coming to believe that single-grading was desirable.

In 1993-94, the frustration and confusion regarding the Kessinger primary program reached a peak. Teachers still had not agreed on the appropriate configuration, and a new source of conflict arose when some teachers began to push to exclude kindergarten students from the program. Teachers moved kindergarten in and out of the program during the school year, shifting students among teachers. A parent complained that her child changed classes four times during the year as the teachers wavered on kindergarten inclusion. Another parent described the primary program as "a mess" and reported that the two factions of primary teachers were constantly bickering. The teachers themselves contemplated having a "negotiator" from the state department come talk to them.

After the 1993-94 school year, the Kessinger principal opted to return to the classroom. The School-Based Decision Making (SBDM) council hired a principal from outside the district who initiated and supported a move to dual-age classrooms with some ability grouping for skills. The primary configuration at Kessinger in 1994-95 was K-1, 1-2, and 2-3. Teachers kept their students in dual-age groups for a period of time each day, but students spent the bulk of the day in ability groups, mostly by grade. The disagreement over kindergarten inclusion in the primary program continued.

This second (since our study began) principal resigned for a better offer in another district at the end of 1994-95. The SBDM council, on a split vote with no principal yet on board, voted to switch to a single-grade configuration the following year. The move was supported by intermediate-grade teachers, as well as some parents. The council subsequently hired a new principal, who

set out to support the program that was already in place. She divided Kessinger teachers into single-grade teams and, for the first time, teams were given common planning time. Although teachers appeared to get along better, there were signs that factionalism continued. The principal reported that they were still "fighting the battle" in the school and with the community about what was expected of multiage classrooms. A veteran faculty member reported that KERA had divided the school into "for" and "against" factions, and that teachers wasted a lot of time pulling in different directions and trying to win support for their views.

Status of the Primary Program in the 1996-97 School Year

At the end of 1995-96, the third principal resigned to return to her home county. A new principal was hired and set about to bring the primary program "into compliance" with state requirements in 1996-97. This fourth principal, however, came on too strong for some teachers and was unable to intervene successfully. She attributed the problems in the primary to the lack of continuity in leadership. She said she had tried to help with this, but conceded that "there are times when my vision impedes the process." At the end of the school year, she resigned because she did not feel she had sufficient support to be an effective leader. The ongoing turmoil at Kessinger had considerably less detrimental effect on the primary program in particular and instruction in general than one might expect. In fact, Kessinger earned rewards in the second accountability cycle (1994-95 and 1995-96). By 1996-97, Kessinger primary teachers, as a group, did not seem to have been defeated by the conflict that had become a way of life at the school. Classroom observations at Kessinger revealed that very little instructional time was wasted and that teachers were generally focused on helping students succeed. The majority of Kessinger primary teachers continued to implement many practices consistent with the primary philosophy. Many struggled within the single-grade structure to manage a continuous progress model in their classrooms, or exchanged students with other teachers. For instance, at least two teachers established individualized reading programs for students within their own classrooms. Two teachers of different grade levels combined their classes three times a week to teach science, planning units together after school and on weekends.

Teachers who supported fuller implementation of the primary program were not vocal in their views, but seemed to have decided that the best way to manage the situation was to try to do what they thought best for students within their own classrooms or in conjunction with another, like-minded teacher. Teachers who opposed the primary program were more vocal. Generally, the teachers we interviewed and observed, whether they supported the primary concept or not, seemed to be conscientious and devoted to helping students learn. The two factions of teachers had simply been unable to arrive at a meeting of the minds with regard to the primary program. Those who opposed the program, including some parents, were more vocal and influential than supporters. The latter group continued to support the primary program and implement it to the best of their ability within a structure that was not conducive to the primary concept.

Summary

The Kessinger case illustrates how inconsistencies in leadership can seriously impede a school's progress, particularly in a school where a faculty that lacks cohesiveness is called on to make major programmatic and instructional changes. In the early stages of primary program implementation, teachers were left mostly on their own to work out their differences. At that time, most of the teachers were willing to at least give the program a try, although there were varying levels of enthusiasm. When things did not go well at first, teachers had only their own belief systems and past experience to fall back on in knowing what to do next. Those who had been skeptical about the program returned to practices they had previously found successful. Those who supported the philosophy forged on, widening the chasm between the two camps of teachers. By the time a principal was hired who understood and supported the primary program philosophy, the factions were well-entrenched and difficult to bring together. The constant change in leadership since that time has made the problem worse. By the time each new principal had begun to grasp the nature of the problem, the year was nearly over and then the principal moved on to another job. The school has a desperate need for continuity in leadership to get the primary program and the school on track.

The future of the primary program at Kessinger is uncertain. At the time of this writing, the Kessinger SBDM council had hired a new principal, this time someone from within the district. The primary program has switched to a K, 1-2, 3 configuration in an attempt to bring the program into compliance. It remains to be seen what role the fifth principal will play in shaping the direction of the primary program. Because she has several years of experience in the school district, she may have greater insight into the problems than have previous principals. Whether her familiarity with Kessinger and its teachers will be an asset or a liability depends not only on her ability to bring the faculty together, but on the teachers' own willingness to trust one another enough to ignore past differences and make another attempt at developing a common vision for students.

Tradition, Tradition: Newtown Elementary School Primary Program

Overview

The local factor that most heavily influenced the development of the primary program at Newtown Elementary School was a longstanding tradition of excellence in education, as evidenced by some of the highest standardized test scores in the state and a college attendance rate of more than 90 percent. This tradition reinforced teachers' deeply felt belief in the value of the rigorous traditional program the school provided. In addition, strong parental involvement and teachers' feelings of empowerment created a positive school climate. When the school won rewards after the first biennium of KIRIS testing, these factors were reinforced, and there was even less incentive for change.

Newtown Elementary School is located in an independent school district operated by a small town since the early years of the century. Newtown prides itself on raising enough local tax revenue to support a highly successful school system, whose students have outperformed those in any of the nearby rural county districts. Parents have traditionally been highly invested in their children's education, and middle class families from a number of nearby districts have paid tuition to send their children to the independent district.

History of the Primary Program

The principal at the school when the program was being developed encouraged teachers and parents to take leadership and gave them unstinted support. Planning for the primary program was accomplished mostly through the efforts of one or two enthusiastic teachers, who were interested in receiving additional training to implement the new program. Most of the faculty remained skeptical of the mandated changes.

The initial primary program plan specified three-year, multiage classrooms, with a separate kindergarten program. Primary teachers had access to a broad spectrum of training opportunities, but not all availed themselves of the full range. Teachers and students were divided into multiyear primary families, with groups of teachers sharing students. Students studied reading and math in skill groups (largely single age) but were taught "themes" (usually science and social studies) in the multiage setting. Teachers reported that it was difficult to keep the attention of and involve students across such a wide age range.

The first year of implementation, some teachers continued to use mostly traditional methods but supplemented them with some new approaches, including learning centers, sustained silent reading, journal writing, and some hands-on math and science projects. Nearly all teachers rearranged their classrooms so that desks were in clusters or students were seated around tables rather than in straight rows facing front. Many engaged in joint planning. Some teachers shelved their textbooks and taught thematically.

Teachers struggled with the logistics of keeping anecdotal records of student performance but many began ensuring that their students kept portfolios of work. (The content of the portfolios and the number of pieces of work varied from teacher to teacher.) Student progress was reported on a skills checklist with a narrative section rather than a traditional report card. Parents lamented the elimination of letter grades and reported that neither they nor their children could tell from the progress reports just how the students were doing.

The multiyear families at Newtown Elementary changed quickly to dual-age, self-contained classrooms, and later they changed again to essentially single-age units. The dual-age rooms were taught as split classes in some cases, with little mixing of the two age groups for instructional purposes. Joint planning decreased to cooperation among grade-level teachers, with the exception of planning for periodic schoolwide themes.

Instruction remained largely traditional, with a skills emphasis. Even so, teachers at higher grade levels reported that some primary students were coming to them without the necessary proficiencies. Shortly, even teachers who had enthusiastically embraced new methods returned to stressing skills, either on their own or as a result of encouragement from others. Textbooks, worksheets, phonics workbooks, and spelling books were very much in evidence. Some teachers, especially at the third-grade level, opted to give number or letter grades on student work.

These traditional approaches were reinforced by the KIRIS results: the school earned rewards in the first two accountability cycles. The success of the "tried and true" methods convinced school personnel that they were on the right track and should persevere. Most parents were pleased with the school's approach; they had been uncomfortable with the year or two of cautious experimentation that followed the initial primary implementation.

Status of the Primary Program in the 1996-97 School Year

Newtown Elementary has retained some of the new strategies encouraged by the primary program. Teachers report that primary students are writing more now than in the past. Students work in groups more than they did before KERA, according to the principal. Hands-on math and science have proven helpful and interesting for most teachers and students, although the extent to which these approaches are used varies by teacher. Teachers are conscious of the individual skill levels of students and try to take them into account. Some teachers group students by skill level for reading or math instruction. Others give whole class instruction in the basic subject areas but require less of students who have lower skill levels.

The school personnel seem comfortable with their current approach in the primary program, and show no movement toward more or less implementation. Since the start of KERA, the faculty has been confident that their students will be successful on the statewide assessment and that their school will continue to be recognized as one of the most academically rigorous and successful schools in the area.

Summary

Newtown Elementary School was proud of its primary program before KERA. The faculty has used the primary program professional development to increase their repertoire of techniques and materials. They have made some lasting changes, such as increasing the amount of writing done by primary students. But, for the most part, they have approached change with great caution. Their KIRIS scores—like their previous scores on standardized tests—have been high enough to convince them that their approach is correct and that their traditionally high academic standards will be maintained.

Change and Change Again: Orange County Elementary School Primary Program

Overview

At Orange County Elementary School, local factors facilitated the development of the most fully fleshed out primary program implementation we observed: a strong principal, teachers who trusted the principal and accepted her leadership, and a felt need for change because the school was not a high-achieving school prior to KERA.

Orange County Elementary is located in a large, rural, eastern Kentucky school district. During primary program implementation, the school moved into a new building designed to encourage flexible grouping and regrouping of students and professional teamwork among the faculty. School climate is positive, and the faculty is developing a common, child-centered vision. When the first KIRIS results were reported, the school had the largest gains of any elementary school in the district and earned rewards after the second biennium as well. The faculty prided itself on what the school had been able to accomplish.

In spite of success on KIRIS while implementing a relatively innovative primary program, faculty members became fearful they could not continue improving without increasing the fit between the primary program and the KIRIS-driven upper elementary grades. Their solution resulted in a return to more traditional forms of instruction at the upper primary level, although continuous progress and other aspects of the primary program were still emphasized.

History of the Primary Program

A new principal, who provided vigorous leadership, came to the school shortly before KERA. Some of the faculty were initially leery of the new principal's strong advocacy of the nongraded primary program and research-based curriculum innovations, but the principal won their support by demonstrating respect for their professional opinions and decisions. From the beginning, teachers have been child-oriented; they are determined to make sure their students, mostly from nonadvantaged backgrounds, have the opportunity to achieve at high levels. The principal's leadership and an active school counselor have reinforced the focus on the whole child. The school has the feel of a large extended family, with cooks, instructional aides, and students, as well as teachers and administrators, taking responsibility for the student body.

The primary committee, consisting of the principal, counselor, and all K-3 teachers, developed and implemented a plan where children aged 5-9 worked together in multiage home bases for several hours a day. Students worked on academic subjects in somewhat flexible skill groups for the balance of the day. Special education children were fully integrated into these families. The plan resulted in frequent movement in the halls as children moved from room to room to change skill groups. One primary family was able to use a different strategy, however: one large open-space classroom was able to accommodate four teachers and almost 100 children. This arrangement facilitated teacher collaboration and more flexible grouping and regrouping than was possible in the other families.

The primary teachers received a great deal of training in innovative curricula and strategies, especially during the planning year (1991-92) and the first year of program implementation (1992-93). The primary teachers met as a group occasionally, and each family of teachers had common planning time scheduled daily, when they jointly worked on interdisciplinary themes or units—usually taught during multiage, multiability "theme time" in the afternoon, after the academic subjects had been covered.

Although the primary teachers made a concerted effort to implement the critical attributes, they had difficulties during the third and fourth years. Even with common planning time, teachers never had enough time to do all they had to do, and they reported their personal lives suffered. Parental participation, which was high during the first two years of the program, waned, and collaboration among the teachers in each family grew less intense. Teachers began using the common planning time for individual planning.

As primary students began entering fourth grade, the upper elementary teachers compared them with previous classes. They reported that the children were more creative and better at problem solving than previous classes, and less fearful of speaking in public, but that they were less disciplined and were often unwilling to sit quietly and work at their desks.

When the school moved to the new facility, most primary children were grouped in large open rooms, as had proved so successful for one primary family during the first two years of the program at the older building. One family shared two smaller rooms. Also after the move, the district required primary classrooms to use the full Kentucky Early Learning Profile (KELP) for record keeping and reporting to parents.

While some teachers complained bitterly about the amount of time and paperwork required by KELP, they also said it enabled them to know and understand their students' achievements better than they ever had before.

In 1996-97, the primary configuration was changed from K-3 families to two K-2 primary families and one large family combining grades 3 and 4. There were five teachers and approximately 100 children in the classroom housing grades 3 and 4. The rationale for this move was to ease the transition from the primary program to fourth grade in both academics and deportment.

The upper primary teachers responded to the pressure to prepare students for the academic rigors of KIRIS, with a renewed emphasis on skills. They used basal readers and textbooks freely, following them closely in some cases and using them as resources in others. Instruction was less thematic, although science and social studies were still taught as units. Students did participate in a number of hands-on science projects.

The upper primary teachers incorporated continuous progress into basic skill areas. For a number of years, every student in the school has taken a basic skills test each year to make sure that those skills were not being neglected. Beginning in 1996-97, the teachers in the third-fourth grade classroom assessed all students in both grades on math and reading skills and used the results—as well as their observation of student skills—to assign students to flexible skill groups. At the end of each unit or chapter, students were shifted to other groups or new groups were composed, based on student progress. Thus, in a skill group focused on multiplication, some students might be assigned to a group reviewing place value, while others were considered ready to move on to division. Reading groups were shuffled less frequently than math groups.

Status of the Primary Program in the 1996-97 School Year

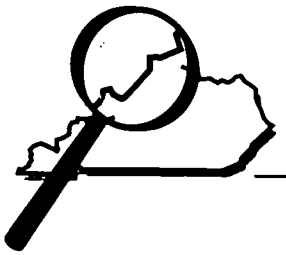
The K-2 classrooms at the school are still organized around the seven critical attributes of the primary program; however, the final year of primary is now focused on preparing students to succeed on KIRIS. The program in upper primary has incorporated continuous progress in the basic subjects, especially mathematics, as part of this strategy.

Summary

Orange County Elementary School illustrates how local factors, including a felt need to improve local education, can lead a faculty to implement the nongraded primary program wholeheartedly and how a faculty's response to state factors (KIRIS preparation) can influence the direction of change. Orange County educators were committed to change because they wanted their students to achieve. Several factors came together in a timely way to persuade teachers that the primary program was a step in the right direction. Subsequently, educators at the school came to believe that the disjunction between the primary program and the intermediate grades must be addressed if the school was to continue to meet its accountability threshold. Their current solution seems to have pointed upper primary teachers toward a more traditional scope and sequence as they attempt to inject KIRIS content into their instruction.

The teachers have not, however, abandoned all the primary program innovations: they continue to employ some flexible grouping and regrouping, the KELP assessment/reporting program, frequent communication with parents, and hands-on and collaborative education as strategies for reaching their academic goals. Frequent testing as the basis for regrouping enables continuous progress in the basic subjects.

The Orange County struggle—how to simultaneously implement a continuous progress primary program and an assessment-driven reform—is shared by other schools in our sample. The Orange County Elementary primary program seems to be evolving in a rational and potentially positive direction. What the teachers need is assurance that it is possible to prepare students to do well on KIRIS while implementiung an ungraded primary program—then they would have the best of both worlds.



"Why Are We Doing This?" Vanderbilt County Elementary School Primary Program

Overview

Vanderbilt County Elementary School illustrates, perhaps more than any school in our study, how the combination of state and local factors can influence primary program implementation. One of the most central factors at the school was the faculty's lack of a shared philosophy about the primary program. The school had previously been traditional in its approach and had done well on standardized tests.

Vanderbilt County Elementary School is located in the county seat of a rural, agricultural community. KERA and a new principal arrived at the school nearly simultaneously, and it seemed that a new day had dawned. Teachers were initially willing to implement new programs and strategies at the principal's urging. Some were enthused about the changes but many were skeptical, perhaps because of their previous success using more traditional methods. When the first round of KIRIS results was released and the school had not met its threshold, the teachers began retreating from primary program implementation. As a result, a school that initially made many changes in its approach to primary instruction returned to a program that closely resembled pre-KERA practices.

History of the Primary Program

The new principal, hired in 1991 by the newly formed School-Based Decision Making (SBDM) council, greatly supported the concepts embedded in KERA and set about to put the school on a new path. Early reports from teachers were mostly complimentary; they appreciated the principal's energy, enthusiasm, and aggressiveness in seeking resources and opportunities for them to get the training they needed to implement KERA.

The central office, too, was relatively proactive in preparing teachers to implement the primary program, and several years of sound fiscal management enabled the district to provide substantial professional development to primary teachers. Vanderbilt County Elementary teachers availed themselves of these opportunities more than teachers at other schools in the district, largely owing to the principal's encouragement, support, and initiative in locating additional time and resources for teacher training. Primary teachers were appreciative of the resources and training available to them, and most of them made many changes during initial implementation of the primary program.

At that time, the focus appeared to be heavily on implementation of the primary program critical attributes. Teachers changed their instructional and assessment approaches substantially, but did not express a strong sense of the overall purpose of the primary program. Many teachers were especially skeptical of the multiage requirement. The school was cautious in implementing a multiage program, never going beyond a dual-age arrangement. During the first year of implementation, half of the primary teachers had dual-age classrooms all day, while the other half had dual-age groups for an hour daily. Kindergarten teachers incorporated their students into the program 90 minutes weekly. Teachers with full-day, dual-age classrooms paired with another teacher for "skills grouping" in math and sometimes reading: the teachers grouped students according to their skill level, with one teacher taking the "high" group and another the lower group. Teachers were required by the principal that year to submit evidence of flexible grouping and regrouping of students. Teachers were provided with planning days and used these to collaborate with colleagues. Collaboration tended to be dual-grade rather than across the primary. Many teachers were systematic about keeping anecdotal records on students.

In 1993-94, primary teachers configured their program with a variety of dual-grade arrangements: K-1, 1-2, and 2-3. In addition, two self-contained kindergarten rooms were in place for parents who preferred that option. Primary teachers generally felt that a wider age span would be too difficult to manage. Some teachers said they would prefer to return to a single-grade approach. Even with dual-age classrooms, primary teachers reported that they did not keep the same students from one year to the next so no teacher would have the same problem students each year. Primary teachers continued to use many of the new instructional approaches.

In 1994-95, all classrooms were configured as either K-1 or 2-3. Teachers worked in teams of two or three within their grade groups to do skills grouping each morning for language arts and math instruction. The skills groups were largely single-grade groups, but some students crossed the grade boundary as needed. That same year, KIRIS results for the first biennium were released. Within the school district, other elementary schools that had not made as many changes scored high enough to earn rewards.

Vanderbilt County Elementary scores improved but the school did not meet its goal. Many teachers at the school and throughout the district interpreted this as a sign that Vanderbilt County Elementary had gone too far in throwing out tried-and-true methods. Teachers who had tried to follow the course the principal had set for the school began to question this course. The principal began to give teachers more freedom to find other approaches.

The dual-age approach continued in 1995-96, but more and more teachers reported dissatisfaction with this arrangement; they expressed a desire to return to single-grade classrooms. Teachers began to incorporate some of the more traditional approaches back into their classrooms, such as using basal readers and teaching spelling and phonics as separate subjects. Teachers reported they felt less pressure now to use only the newer methods, perhaps because the assessment results had given more credence to the argument that the new approaches were not effective. Teachers also began to back away from authentic assessment techniques. One of the changes teachers made—collaboration with special teachers—increased in response to KIRIS results, as the school began to use Title I teachers as math and science specialists to help teachers plan hands-on activities in their classrooms.

Status of the Primary Program in the 1996-97 School Year

The principal, who initially made a strong effort to get the primary program moving in a consistent direction, changed strategy after the first round of test scores was released. In 1996-97, when the primary teachers expressed a strong desire to return to a single-grade configuration, the principal insisted they clear this through the state department of education. When officials at the state department assured them they could have single-grade homerooms with the understanding that students would be moved around during the day according to individual needs, the teachers moved to a single-grade arrangement without overt opposition from the principal. For the most part, primary teachers appeared to have opted for a more traditional approach, placing students in single-grade classrooms and grouping them mostly by ability in relatively stable groups.

With the principal now giving the teachers more freedom in choosing instructional strategies, primary teachers began implementing the program as they saw fit, resulting in approaches that varied from one classroom to the next. The majority of primary teachers expressed support for the single-grade approach, and several professed a belief that they had thrown out too much initially and needed to return more to "the basics." Veteran primary teachers appeared to have reinstated the more traditional approaches. Younger teachers used more variety in their approaches, continuing to use whole language, cooperative learning, hands-on activities, and learning centers.

Summary

The Vanderbilt County Elementary School case illustrates how an educational innovation can go awry when teachers do not see promising results after being obliged to make a change they do not agree with and whose purpose they may not understand. Teachers were given ample professional development aimed at helping them implement the critical attributes, but they seemed to view the attributes as ends in themselves, rather than as means to an end. The principal, who seemed to grasp the purpose of the primary program and felt implementation of the critical attributes was essential to achieving the goals of the program, hoped that the extensive professional development the teachers received would bring them on board in implementing the program. Whether this happened or not, however, the principal felt responsible for making sure the state-mandated primary program was implemented. This was accomplished by a strong focus on process over content. As time went on and test results came in, however, the principal gave teachers more freedom in the classroom in the hope that, once they were comfortable they were covering the necessary content, they would begin to incorporate strategies that enabled students with different learning styles to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills. It is too soon to tell what will become of the school's primary program. In one sense, it might appear that KIRIS scores interrupted the reform process. However, if the principal and teachers can continue working toward an approach that successfully combines the teachers' expertise on helping students acquire basic skills with the principal's understanding of instructional strategies that enable success, then KIRIS results may have been the impetus the school needed to get everyone moving in a common direction.

critical attributes. Rather than using the critical attributes as tools to help students progress at their own rate in preparation for fourth grade, many teachers in the study schools became preoccupied with the multiaging component of the program; they found it difficult to manage logistically. In addition, they did not appear to link multiage grouping to a broader purpose. They did not view it as a tool to achieve continuous progress, but as an end in itself—and one they did not necessarily agree with or know how to manage. Without a clear understanding of the purpose of multiage/multiability grouping, many primary teachers lacked the motivation and skills to work through the organizational and management problems inherent in this approach.

As a result, although all six schools initially made a good-faith effort to implement multiage/multiability grouping, we saw a quick movement to reduce the age span within classrooms. Three of the six tried K-3 classrooms in the first year of primary implementation (1992-93), while the others configured their programs with dual-grade arrangements or a three-grade span in their classrooms. By 1993-94, only one school continued with the full K-3 span the entire school year. By the 1996-97 school year, three of the schools had returned to single-grade classrooms (see the Kessinger, Newtown, and Vanderbilt County case histories), two continued with dual-grade classrooms because low enrollment forced "split" classes, and one school had a K-2, 3-4 arrangement (see Orange County Elementary School case history). At no school did we witness the envisioned elimination of "grade differentials."

The shift back to single- or dual-grade classrooms does not, by itself, mean that continuous progress was not happening. Some teachers (but by no means the majority) had structures for allowing students to progress at their own rate in certain subject areas. The more common practice, however, was to return to more traditional grouping practices in which students stayed with the same teacher most of the day and were placed in relatively stable ability groups for reading and math instruction. Even in schools where some teachers had worked out continuous progress within their own classrooms, the movement from one grade level to the next interrupted the smooth continuum of progress for children.

Legislative adjustments. At the same time that primary teachers were struggling to figure out how to implement the primary program—and why they should do so—legislative changes influenced program implementation. In our study schools, the unintended effect of the new time line adopted in 1992—coupled with the critical attributes becoming statutory requirements—was that teachers were thrust into the overwhelming demands of multiage classrooms before the state provided the curriculum guidance required by KERA. They had received ample training in new instructional approaches, but had little time to reflect on them and figure out how to weave challenging content into multiage settings in ways to help students acquire KERA goals and capabilities. The result was that primary teachers worked feverishly to fashion a program that demonstrated implementation of the seven critical attributes, but, under the surface, many fundamental issues—such as the program's philosophy and how the curriculum should align with KERA—had not been worked out.

The teachers we studied were experiencing difficulty by the 1993-94 school year, their second year of primary program implementation. Teachers were doubting the new methods they were using. They feared students might not be learning the basics now that many primary teachers no longer relied on textbooks as the main curriculum, and no clear curriculum had emerged to replace them. At the same time, primary teachers were under pressure from some parents who did not understand the new ways of reporting, and from intermediate teachers who reported that students were coming to them unable to work independently and without mastery of important basic skills. Primary teachers were also struggling to manage a wide range of abilities and age levels in their classrooms, often without knowing how or appreciating the purpose of doing so. Thus, primary teachers had reached a point by the end of the 1993-94 school year when they strongly needed a boost of some sort if they were to push forward toward greater primary implementation.

In the schools we studied, however, the 1994 legislation relaxing the multiage, multiability requirement was viewed as an indication that primary teachers could do less in that area. Thus, at a time when teachers in our study schools badly needed reinforcement in understanding what they were to do and why, they received what they interpreted to be a signal that they no longer had to implement the one attribute that, to them, had become synonymous with the primary program.

Fit between the primary program and results-based reform. From the inception of the reform, teachers in our study schools expressed the view that the primary program is out of synch with what happens in grades 4-12. We see this confusion as a result of the different orientations of the reform at the primary level and in grades 4-12, and of the lack of understanding as to how the two approaches to reform are meant to work in harmony. In the primary, the

focus has been on eliminating student failure and on building student self-esteem and love of learning. This is accomplished through mandates as to how primary classrooms should operate (the critical attributes). In grades 4-12, the focus is on student acquisition of KERA goals and expectations. Classroom practices are not mandated, but students demonstrate their learning on KIRIS. So primary classrooms focused on process, while grades 4-12 were more focused on content. Both sets of teachers experienced frustration over the orientation of the reforms. Primary teachers agonized about what students should learn before progressing to the fourth grade, while upper-grades teachers wondered how to teach to KERA goals and expectations.

At the primary level, the shuffle to implement new instructional approaches and to form multiage classrooms led many primary teachers in the study schools, at least for a time, to lose sight of what they were to teach the children. The result was a plethora of new and interesting approaches that were often not connected specifically to KERA goals and expectations. Like their colleagues in the upper grades, primary teachers awaited more specific guidelines from the state as to what should be taught. Curriculum frameworks and the KELP learning descriptors appeared after initial implementation of the primary program, and many teachers viewed the frameworks as too cumbersome to be of use. In addition, use of the KELP was not made mandatory, and teachers in five of our six schools did not use the KELP in any significant way.

Currently, pressure to prepare students for the state assessment program has helped primary teachers focus more strongly on content, which seems a natural and positive development in the primary program. However, many primary teachers in the study schools have not been sure how to incorporate rigorous content within the critical attributes of the primary program. Therefore, instead of incorporating KIRIS content into the new approaches, many primary teachers have returned to more traditional, scope-and-sequence curriculum materials.

Efficacy and teacher belief systems. Why would teachers return to more traditional instructional approaches to prepare students for a test that is designed to measure higher-order skills? Two factors seem to bear on this issue. First is the question of efficacy: to make a change of this magnitude, teachers need some evidence that the program will produce results that are significantly better than those produced by more traditional methods. Statewide assessment results suggest that the primary program produces higher KIRIS results, given that "elementary schools that include the primary program continue to set the pace for school improvement" (Kentucky Department of Education, 1996). Yet, there is no clear evidence that high KIRIS scores are linked to full implementation of the primary program. Moreover, non-academic benefits of ungraded programs—such as improved student attitudes toward self, peers, and school (Miller, 1990; Pavan, 1992; Veenman, 1995)—may not be immediately apparent in assessments (although they may be reflected in the future on measures of achievement or non-cognitive factors, such as reduced dropout rate and improved school attendance). Thus, teachers currently lack solid evidence that faithful implementation of the primary program will produce better results for students.

Even if it could be clearly demonstrated that full primary program implementation improves KIRIS scores, teacher belief systems may interfere with implementation. The Orange County Elementary School case history illustrates that even where primary program implementation apparently produced positive KIRIS results, teachers still felt some need to return to more traditional approaches. Our conversations with teachers at all study schools about this phenomenon have provided insight into how teacher belief systems influence reform. Teachers who favor the more traditional approaches expressed the belief that students must be provided with a basic foundation of knowledge before they will be ready to tackle the higher-order tasks required in fourth grade. In addition, teachers have grown accustomed to a lockstep, compartmentalized approach to curriculum—sequenced for them by "experts"—and are unsure how to integrate content from several areas into a single unit. With the department's release of the Core Content for Assessment, teachers feel—as they did pre-KERA—that they have a great deal of content to cover in a short amount of time. They doubt they have time to explore the subject matter in great depth, something they think would be required in using a problem-solving approach to help develop students' higher-order skills. Teachers fear that instruction where students pursue in-depth projects, work in groups, spend time at learning centers—some of the features of the primary program—may come at the expense of content needed to do well on KIRIS. In addition, some teachers have struggled with behavior management when students were given greater independence in the classroom.

Local Factors

The preceding sections share some of the findings we observed across study schools. It should be noted, however, that the primary program

evolved differently in each of the schools we studied. In some schools, the faculty eagerly took advantage of new resources provided through KERA to make many changes intended to produce a multiage, multiability, continuous progress primary program. In other schools, the faculty members were wary about abandoning practices that had been successful for them, and the changes they made were cautious and exploratory. In all the study schools, educators have arrived at a comfortable mix of innovative and traditional practices, although the mix is different from school to school. The enclosed four, short case histories illustrate some of those differences. Four factors were influential in development of the primary program at the local level: principal leadership, teacher beliefs, school climate, and the school's performance on the state assessment program. At some schools, these factors facilitated innovation in the primary program; at others, the factors operated in ways that hindered implementation. We offer a brief overview of the four factors, and reference the case histories that most strongly illustrate the influence of the factors.

Principal leadership. The principal's ability to foster a common vision among the faculty and to build a supportive environment was a key factor in how primary programs were implemented (see Orange County Elementary case history). Stability was also important, with frequent changes in principals undermining school improvement, even when individual principals were strong (see Kessinger Elementary case history).

Teacher beliefs. Whether or not teachers shared common beliefs about primary education—and what those beliefs were—strongly influenced the development of a school's primary program. Where teachers were united in their approach to the primary program and in having high expectations for students, the program generally appeared successful, whether the school was implementing the letter of the law or not (see Newtown Elementary and Orange County Elementary case histories). If teachers held widely varying beliefs, they had difficulty developing a common commitment to a primary program that might contribute to overall school improvement (see Kessinger and Vanderbilt County Elementaries).

School climate. School climate refers to the general atmosphere of and mood at the school, including relations between teachers and administrators, camaraderie among staff and faculty, expectations for students, and attitude toward parents. In the study schools, we observed a variety of situations producing positive school climates. These included a tradition of academic excellence (Newtown Elementary); strong principal leadership willingly accepted by teachers, students, and parents (Orange County Elementary); "laissez-faire" principal oversight combined with strong teacher leadership (Newtown Elementary); and active parent support or passive acceptance by parents of what the school was doing (Newtown Elementary and Orange County Elementary). Schools with less positive school climates exhibited characteristics such as poor relations between the principal and teachers and lack of camaraderie among teachers. In such schools, it was difficult for the faculty to maintain coordinated, consistent efforts to improve education (see Kessinger and Vanderbilt County Elementaries).

Local response to the state assessment program. We saw no evidence in our study schools that the level of primary program implementation influenced KIRIS scores. But this did not hold true in the reverse. KIRIS scores—and anticipated problems in continuing to improve the school's KIRIS scores—had a marked effect on primary program implementation in each school. Educators at schools that consistently met their KIRIS thresholds believed that they were taking the correct approach to the primary, whether they were fully implementing the attributes or not (see Newtown Elementary case history). Educators in other schools struggled to determine just what sort of primary program would produce the desired results on the fourth-grade KIRIS assessment (see Vanderbilt County Elementary case history). And at one school, fears that the school would not be able to maintain its stellar performance on KIRIS led to a dilution of primary program initiatives (see Orange County Elementary case history).

Future Directions

Our description of the evolution of the primary program in the study schools might leave the reader wondering if the glass is half-empty or half-full. Initial implementation of the program was rushed, confused, and uncoordinated, both at the state and the local level, and these problems have had a lasting effect on the primary program. Even so, primary teachers in nearly all the schools we studied have established (or, in some cases, strengthened) classrooms where students have opportunities to move around, interact, write creatively, read authentic literature, engage in hands-on activities, and work with peers. Many teachers are more mindful of allowing students to progress at their own rate and have worked out methods to allow that to happen. Teachers are talking and sharing with one another more than in the past.

At the same time, movement toward implementing a primary program like the one envisioned by

Hornbeck and others has slowed. Primary teachers are feeling the need to focus more strongly on preparing students for the KIRIS assessment, but are unsure about how to teach the content that will be tested while continuing to implement the critical attributes. The goal of establishing a primary program in which teachers, over a period of years, help students meet high learning standards at their own rate and in their own way without the stigma of failure has not been wholly achieved in the study schools. Moreover, the study schools do not appear to be moving closer to that goal. The experience of these schools suggests that attaining the goals of the primary program may require renewed effort in two key areas.

1. **Reinforce the intent of the primary program.**

The primary program does and will continue to look different everywhere, depending on such factors as local leadership, parent expectations, teacher beliefs, and school climate. Different methods of implementing the program are natural and desirable. However, there should be relatively little difference across schools and districts in the overall goals of the program. It is important to communicate the goals to teachers and to help them understand how to attain them. The vision of a block of years in which young students are helped to acquire challenging skills and capabilities at their own pace and in their own ways—with assistance as needed from preschools, family resource centers, and extended school services—needs to be shared with teachers. SBDM councils need to be made aware that constructing a program with these goals is part of their task. Many primary teachers in our study focused on the multiage aspect of the primary program. If SBDM councils can devise a way to let students progress through the primary years at their own pace without multiage classrooms (for instance, having one teacher stay with an age cohort of students throughout the primary years), they currently have the freedom to do so. Renewed emphasis on the continuous progress aspect of the primary program, along with training and technical assistance on how to implement it, is needed if the program is to be implemented as originally intended.

2. **Articulate how primary teachers can infuse challenging content into the primary program in ways that prepare students to meet state academic expectations.**

We have no evidence that primary program implementation was detrimental to KIRIS scores, yet teachers are unsure how to implement the program while ensuring that students achieve the skills and capabilities measured on the state assessment. There is a need to combine what teachers have already learned about instructional methods with specific content appropriate to the primary grades and aligned to the state academic expectations. More recent data gathered at the fourth grade level in 1997-98 suggests that intermediate-grade teachers also need assistance in identifying and becoming proficient at instructional techniques that incorporate the core content for assessment and higher-order skills into the classroom.

Conclusion

Even if the above two issues are addressed, there is no guarantee that all schools will implement a continuous progress primary program. Our case studies illustrate that bringing all teachers on board with the philosophy underlying the primary program has been no small task. In some of our study schools, educators and parents alike support a traditional approach, have had success with it, and are unlikely to change that approach. In other schools, local conflicts and leadership issues have hindered the development of consistency in instructional approaches.

Some of the national researchers involved with previous nongraded primary programs have addressed the philosophical issue that we see at work in our study schools. Pavan (1992), Anderson (1993), and Goodlad and Anderson (1987) all mention that nongradedness is more a philosophy than a practice. Thus, teachers' beliefs must be aligned with the nongraded philosophy to have a successful primary program. Anderson goes so far as to say "If too many teachers are uncomfortable with the philosophy and practices associated with nongradedness, there is little point in taking the plunge" (p.12). Tyack and Cuban (1995) suggest that structures such as graded schools have been in place so long that they are viewed as emblematic of a "real school." They also note that the support of parents, school boards, and the public must be enlisted to change something so deeply entrenched as the graded system of education.

In spite of these obstacles, the Kentucky reform effort has perhaps had greater effects than most reform efforts because it does address the entire system. Unlike the reforms discussed by Tyack and Cuban, all public school primary classrooms within the state were asked to change in a common direction. As they point out, even when reform efforts fail, teachers often embrace ideas and practices they see as useful and interesting—and we have certainly seen this happen in our study schools. The teachers in our study have demonstrated they are capable of and willing to implement change if they see a need and are helped, over time, to do so. Addressing some of the key problems facing the primary program at this juncture could help build on the change that has already happened, and keep

Brief Description of State Assessment and Accountability Programs*

KERA removed all previous curriculum mandates and adopted instead a list of goals that schools are expected to achieve:

a. Schools shall expect a high level of achievement of all students.

b. Schools shall develop their students' ability to

1. use basic communication and mathematics skills for purposes and situations they will encounter throughout their lives;
2. apply core concepts and principles from mathematics, the sciences, the arts, the humanities, social studies, and practical-living studies to situations they will encounter throughout their lives;
3. become self-sufficient individuals;
4. become responsible members of a family, work group, or community, including demonstrating effectiveness in community service;
5. think and solve problems in school situations and in a variety of situations they will encounter in life; and
6. connect and integrate experiences and new knowledge from all subject-matter fields with what they have previously learned, and to build on past learning experiences to acquire new information through various media sources.

c. Schools shall increase their students' rate of school attendance.

d. Schools shall reduce their students' dropout and retention rates.

e. Schools shall reduce physical and mental health barriers to learning.

f. Schools shall be measured on the proportion of students who make a successful transition to work, post-secondary education, and the military (Kentucky Department of Education, 1994, p. 274).

The Kentucky General Assembly mandated development of a performance-based assessment program to ensure school accountability for student achievement of goals set forth in KERA—although goals 3 and 4 were later removed from the accountability system. From 1991-92 to 1997-98, the instrument developed and administered was the Kentucky Instructional Results Information System (KIRIS). KIRIS was first administered during the 1991-92 school year, and those results, along with measurement of noncognitive goals (such as reduction in dropout and retention rate and increase in attendance rate), were used to establish a baseline "accountability index" for each individual school in the state. The baseline was used to set an incrementally increased "threshold" or goal score the school was required to meet by the 1993-94 school year to obtain rewards or avoid sanctions. This measurement is ongoing; i.e., a school accountability index is determined biennially and schools are expected to show improvement over their new baseline scores. Scores from both years in each biennium, along with measurement of noncognitive factors, are averaged to determine if a school reached its threshold. Currently, the test consists of open-response questions, multiple-choice questions, and writing portfolios. Student performance is reported in terms of four performance standards: novice, apprentice, proficient, and distinguished.

Schools that score at least one percent above their thresholds and move at least 10 percent of students scoring "novice" to a higher performance level receive financial rewards, which are divided according to the wishes of the majority of educators at the school. Schools not achieving their thresholds receive varying levels of assistance and/or sanctions, depending upon how close they come. When the proportion of successful students declines by five percent or more, the school is declared to be a "school in crisis." Not only must the school develop a school improvement plan and not only is the school eligible to receive funds for school improvement, but a "Distinguished Educator" (selected and trained by the Kentucky Department of Education) is assigned to the school to assist in implementing the school improvement plan, all certified staff are placed on probation, parents are permitted to transfer students to the nearest successful school, and, after six months, the Distinguished Educator determines which of the certified staff should be retained, dismissed, or transferred. Recognizing that schools had not had sufficient time to implement all aspects of KERA, the 1994 Kentucky General Assembly delayed imposition of Level 3—the most severe sanctions—until the end of the 1994-96 biennium. Like the entirety of the assessment and accountability systems, the Distinguished Educator program and related sanctions are currently undergoing changes mandated by the 1998 legislature.

*The 1998 General Assembly called for a revamping of the assessment and accountability programs. The Commonwealth Accountability Testing System (CATS) was under development at the time of this writing.

schools moving in the direction of creating a coherent system that expects and assists all students to attain high levels of knowledge and thought.

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