

Central Community Elementary School

Reading Community City School District

Reading, Ohio

Superintendent: Scott Inskeep

Principal: Connie Garafalo

<http://www.readingschools.org/central/index.html>

Central Community Elementary, located in Reading, Ohio, is one of two elementary schools in the community of 13,000 residents. Most of the 313 students enrolled in grades K-6 walk to school, usually with parents or family members.

Education is a priority with these families, although few parents have a college degree, and some lack a high school diploma.

This is a suburban school with urban characteristics. Ninety-two percent of the students at Central are white. The mobility rate is twenty-seven percent. Of the 313 students, 149, or 47.5%, are eligible for free or reduced-cost meals. Thirty-six students, or twelve percent, have such disabilities as autism, multiple disabilities, mental retardation, other health impairments, speech and learning disabilities. No student is identified as an English as a Second Language student. The twenty-three full-time and ten part-time staff members include 14 classroom teachers, three full-time resource teachers/specialists, two full-time aides, four part-time resource/specialists, and one part-time aide. The turnover rate of teachers is minimal, and both students and teachers maintain a high attendance record. Kindergarten students attend all-day classes every day.

The mission statement of the school is "to prepare students academically, socially, and emotionally to reach their potential, become responsible citizens, and develop a love of learning that will continue throughout their lives." The vision for the school, "Believe, Achieve, and Succeed," challenges staff to make certain their decisions and actions challenge students to be reflective, creative, and critical thinkers in their daily work.

Central Elementary, nominated as a *No Child Left Behind/Blue Ribbon School*, is rated as "Excellent" by the state of Ohio and has been named as a School of Promise for the 2003-2004 school year, one of 14 elementary schools that received special recognition for improving the performance of students with disabilities.

Contributing to the "Excellent" rating and the designation as a School of Promise are the third, fourth and sixth grade test scores in reading and mathematics. Students exceeded the state standard in these subject areas as indicated by the percent scoring proficient or above in the chart below.

SCHOOL PROFILE	
2003-2004 Building Rating	Excellent
Enrollment	313
Grade Levels	K-6
Economically Disadvantaged Students	47.5%
Students with Disabilities	12.5%
Black Students	5.2%
White Students	90.4%

READING COMMUNITY DISTRICT PROFILE	
2003-2004 District Rating	Excellent
District Enrollment	1,434

Subject	Third	Fourth	Sixth
Reading	93.3%	79.5%	97.7%
Mathematics		76.9%	95.3%

Leadership

Instructional plans for each building in the Reading School District must tie into the district strategic plan. Over a year ago a group of 25 people (13 community, 12 faculty and board members, students, parents, administrators, support staff) wrote the strategies in the strategic plan. Each principal was then put in charge of an action committee that had to come up with action plans describing how the strategies would be carried out. When these committees met for 10 weeks, there were two qualifications: they were not permitted to change any strategy, and they could not hire new staff. Any improvement idea had to make use of available resources in a different way. Each committee presented an action plan to the original 25-member team.

Now, each year at the Reading District administrative retreat, each building team is expected to come up with building goals based on student achievement and survey data. This year, Central Community Elementary used feedback surveys to develop the behavior and parent involvement components of their building plan. The school's Continuous Improvement Plan (CIP) reflects how those goals will be met through appropriate professional development and how they will be updated at staff meetings.

In her fifth year, Central Community's principal, Connie Garafalo, initially saw her role as "continuing and adding to those things my predecessor set in motion." When she came to the district, it was in Continuous Improvement. Ms. Garafalo brought in consultants from the Hamilton County Educational Service Center (ESC) and hired subs for the teachers so the importance of using data to determine instruction could be discussed with the entire staff and next steps could be planned. An item analysis was done with a focus on the teachers. In succeeding meetings, the ESC consultants and the teachers took apart the state content standards. Next, they mapped the curriculum with the standards for each grade level and developed a calendar with a target date for instruction completion as March. They then developed short cycle assessments to monitor student progress with the state standards. All of these activities took a full year to complete.

The practice of taking the latest data (either the short cycle assessments or state proficiency measures), reviewing it, doing an item analysis and reviewing instruction is now all part of the collaborative routine at Central Community. When grade level teachers meet to analyze the data, the principal continues to hire subs so they can focus on the activity.

"Our goal is never to look at a program without considering the research."

Connie Garafalo, principal

While Ms. Garafalo spends as much time as possible in the classrooms to provide support to teachers, she also believes it important to take time to visit the

homes of the students when there are concerns. At the small school, all staff members know every student's name. Teachers report that many of the students bring a lot of emotional baggage with them to school, so they often find themselves in the role of counselors to the children. Without being able to break through those emotional barriers, teachers believe that they would not be as successful in getting students to be the best they can be. Teachers describe Central as a "no excuses" school. This means the principal and the teachers do not make excuses for children not succeeding due to family circumstances.

Curriculum and Instruction

Teachers consistently cite their strong, systematic efforts to make certain all students are successfully meeting the standards. One teacher said, "We all take ownership for everyone's learning."

Teachers report they are totally data driven. The Intervention Based Services (IBS) process started the use of data, and then the standards-based requirements cemented it. When Central Community began the IBS, staff members from the Southwestern Ohio Special Education Regional Resource Center (SERRC) and from Wright State University were helpful in training them. Now both the teachers and the principal state they can't communicate with another teacher or parents without using the data. This change shifted the paradigm from molding kids around the classroom, to molding the classroom around the students. To accommodate the shift, staff members report working a lot more time, even working well beyond the end of the school day and on some weekends.

"We all take ownership for everyone's learning!" A teacher

Central Community teachers have chosen to be departmentalized in grades three through six. For example, one teacher may instruct a class in math and reading in the morning. The students she teaches then go to another teacher for their afternoon science and social studies classes. Teachers meet regularly to review student progress and develop instructional approaches to meet the needs of the students. All staff members use common language so students have a clear understanding of what they are being taught.

"I love the departmentalization arrangement – I can focus now." A teacher

Students, except for the gifted population, are not grouped for instruction. (The principal cited research that shows the gifted students need to be together to learn from each other in extension lessons.) All other students are grouped heterogeneously.

The foundation for the reading curriculum is research and best practices based on and following recommendations by national area reports such as "Report of the National Reading Panel." Phonemic awareness and phonics are systematically and sequentially provided. Embedded in the literature used are decoding strategies. Vocabulary is developed through discussion, elaboration, and application. Fluency and comprehension are practiced through a variety of independent and group readings. Student progress is measured and analyzed using the Developmental Reading Assessments; Ohio Diagnostic, Achievement and Proficiency tests; observation and rubrics. The principal reports that students and teachers have very strong support for the reading program from the Title I specialist (who is Reading Recovery trained and

has worked in the district for 30 years), who works closely with the special education teachers. Also, a half-time reading specialist works in the kindergarten.

Incorporating technology into lessons is always a goal for the teachers. Each classroom has three or four computers, and there is the capacity of connecting the computers to the television in the room.

Opportunities for All Students to Achieve

The goals on students' Individualized Educational Plans (IEPs) are aligned with the state standards. Intervention specialists and Title I staff members involved in the IBS process work to build lessons around the standards to help those needing to close the achievement gap. Teachers learn the differences in modifying and adapting to meet individual needs and use varied instructional methods to assure each student's learning style is addressed. It helps that the specialized teachers and several regular educators have strong backgrounds in reading and differentiating instruction.

“We have found that our children learn, new, more difficult content when they have a small group to work in, generally ten to twelve students to one teacher.” A teacher

Instruction for special education students is a blend of inclusion and pull out, based on each student's needs. Some learning-disabled and cognitively-disabled students receive support for reading and math in a pull-out program. Teachers generally share instructional roles in the inclusion classrooms. The teachers and the principal all report, “We've gotten away from the idea that these are your kids and these are mine.” Students report they like having their special education teachers in the classroom with them. They also share they do not worry about tests anymore because tests are now “old stuff” that they already know because of the intervention strategies the teachers employ.

Teachers attribute high expectations of all students as being responsible for the success of students with disabilities and those at risk for failure. The teachers find the monthly tests that all students take provide an opportunity to re-instruct so that children with problems in an area, including those with disabilities or who are at risk, do not fall behind. Students use their own data, making them more accountable for their learning.

The focus is clearly on the primary grades. The Title I teacher, the intervention specialists and other support specialists provide intense work with students and staff at the primary level. The Title I teacher works with all primary students at some time during the week. Students are identified for intervention as early as kindergarten.

“We graph data constantly. It is really valuable when kids graph their own data”

A teacher

The strategies in place at Central Community are making a difference. All students with disabilities in grades 3, 4 and 6 are participating in and passing all sections of the state tests. None of the students have taken an alternative assessment. During the 2003-2004 school year 100% of students with disabilities passed the sixth grade reading and mathematics sections of the Ohio Proficiency Test. These scores have progressively increased since the 2001-2002 school year when 28.6% of students

scored proficient or above on reading and 50% on mathematics. (See bar graphs at the end of this report.)

Teachers and students report that they like the behavior card system that is in place for all students. Teachers state that students know and understand the school behavior process to the extent that the students trust teachers to provide a “homey” atmosphere. As one teacher comments, “We set really high expectations at the very beginning, and make it clear that we’re here to help them learn. The kids know what a card flip means, and that it is okay to have a bad day. The kids know that everybody is important. They open up to us and trust us and ultimately want to please us. I’ve found over the years that the more I listen to them about anything that’s going on with them, the more they want to please me.”

The classroom telephones, individual email addresses and teacher web pages have helped tremendously with communication between teachers as well as with parents. The constant communication and follow-through to the next grade level help students to easily make the transition from grade to grade.

Teachers also report that they are communicating more with middle school staff to ensure a smooth transition for students. They note that there is a need to “extend what’s working upward.” IBS is used in middle school, and now the push is to get it into the high school.

Professional Development

Reading District puts a lot of value on professional development, allowing teachers to go to workshops or conferences of their choice that relate to classroom and school needs. At Central Community, professional development is based on annual surveys of teachers, students, and parents as well as school goals, test results and district initiatives. After returning from workshops or conferences, teachers share new ideas with other teachers at staff meetings.

“We’re always learning something new. None of us in this building is set in our ways!” A teacher

At times speakers are brought in to increase teacher skills. Teachers are also encouraged and expected to read research and share ideas gleaned from their readings. All teachers have participated in the SIRI training.

The staff spent an entire year studying Ruby Payne’s book, *Understanding Poverty*, including working with Cathy Hamilton through the Hamilton County ECS. As a follow-up next year, staff members will all read the new book put out by the Payne foundation.

Central Community staff members have also facilitated trainings and presented at workshops and meetings. Some teachers conducted workshops at the SERRC. Both the Title I and intervention specialists presented at the State Title I conference last year. The focus of that presentation was on how to provide services through the IBS for at-risk students from the Title I perspective. Ms. Garafalo was nominated to serve on the principals’ standards writing team to help write the standards for the draft of “What Principals Need To Be Able To Do.” A parent accompanied representatives of the staff to Washington, D.C., for the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) Leadership Conference to make a presentation.

Central Community served as the host site for a Schools of Promise Forum with the Hamilton County ESC providing the logistics. This forum allowed for a rare but profitable sharing time for all participants.

Partnerships with Parents, Families, and Community

Central Community is closely-knit. Families realize that the school is there not only for their kids, but also for them. Families and students know that all information they share will be kept confidential and used only to help students with their learning-related needs.

However, there are distinct problems within the community. Teachers report that Central Community has many single-parent households and children being raised by grandparents. They share that child abuse is a real concern. Twelve year olds have had pregnancy tests. Others have faced criminal charges.

The school has an open door policy in an effort to make the parents feel comfortable. However, although they trust the staff, many parents in the community do not want to go into the school. Thus, parent and school communication is more informal than formal. Typically, teachers and parents converse using the phone or meeting in front of the school. Parents do call the teachers or communicate via email when a student is having difficulty with a homework assignment or has another problem. A number of parents do come to school for Family Fun Night or for Family Lunches that occur once a month. Family Fun Night usually brings in about 400 people, of whom 150 to 200 are students.

The principal hired a parent resource librarian, paid as an aide, to work with parents and Head Start and preschool personnel to share materials and provide parents with training and materials. A Martha Holden Jennings grant provided for the purchase of several kits, including Learning Leap Frog Pads. While parents meet with the librarian, children are introduced to the materials in the kits. Parents are taught how to use the materials with their children during the summer.

Parents of students with disabilities speak highly of the Central Community programs and how the new level of instruction has made a difference for their children. Parents report that their children are now independent learners and are more self-assured than they had been previously. One parent expressed great appreciation for the efforts teachers made to reduce her son's test anxiety.

Another parent shared that her son was in a downward spiral before coming to Central Community. At previous schools, teachers had not identified his problems, so they did not try to address them. When he came to Central Community, teachers addressed the parent's concerns about her child and worked with her husband and herself, the grandparents and the student. Those combined efforts have paid large dividends for the student. He is now articulate and successful with a great sense of humor, and he has an awareness and appreciation of all that has been done for him.

Parents that were interviewed were pleased with the testing accommodations teachers made for their students. They reported that their concerns are taken seriously and addressed promptly. This was evidenced when one of the students appeared to be having a hearing problem. Staff recommended the family take him to a specialist where he was identified as having a thirty percent hearing loss due to nerve damage.

Accommodations were made at school before and after the official diagnosis and treatment.

Community businesses are supportive of field trips for the students at Central Community. Students also support the community by visiting and performing for senior residents and at nursing homes.

Culture

Parents and teachers report that Central Community School is all about the kids: very student-centered, positive, more proactive than reactive. Everybody in the building (students, support staff, teachers) works really hard and shares the attitude of “we’ve got to always just do it.” The shift in culture to data-based decision-making started through the literacy teams, which included all staff, and teams made the decisions, providing the foothold for everybody to take ownership. Teachers report that they had a hunger for more success than just the pockets of achievement they had early on, and they are pleased that a change in administration helped move the success factors to all classes. They also say that when students come from other districts, they can see the difference in student progress, and they are proud of how far they have come at Central Community.

One special education student summed up his philosophy: “I like the school because there’s a lot of nice people that you can really communicate with. This school is fine and dandy, but summer is the ultimate recess!”

What does the data say?

