

Schools of Promise Case Study Report

Brickell Elementary School Defiance, Ohio



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Brickell Elementary School in Defiance, Ohio, was selected for the present research on the basis of its many distinctive characteristics, but primarily because of the high levels of achievement in reading and mathematics demonstrated by students. Brickell is one of a small number of Ohio schools that has sustained its *Schools of Promise* designation over two academic years (2003-2004 and 2004-2005).

Table 1. School and district characteristics

	Brickell Elementary School, 2004-2005	Defiance Public School District, 2004-2005
Percent Minority	35.4%	25.9%
Percent Poverty	50.4%	33.1%
Years as a School of Promise (reading and mathematics)	2	
District Typology		Urban
Student Enrollment	209	2,376
Attendance—all students	95.5%	94.8%
Attendance —Economically disadvantaged students	94.6%	93.4%
Attendance —Minority students (Hispanic)	94.2%	93.7%
Attendance —Minority students (Multiracial)	95.3%	94.5%
Student mobility: Students in building less than one year	11.9%	13.8%
<u> </u>	40	454
Number of teachers	12	154
Average teacher salary	\$43,657	\$45,479

Source: Ohio Department of Education.

School History

Brickell Elementary School is one of four elementary buildings in the Defiance City School District. Brickell has served the area population since the mid-1940s, when the building was constructed. The population of the building has ranged anywhere from 300 students to about 200 students over the past 10-15 years. The local community is described by school administrators as "working class."

The school and district have a high proportion of minority students, particularly Hispanic students. In the district, 26 percent of students are identified as a racial or ethnic minority, and 35 percent of Brickell's students are minority students. The school also has a high concentration of economically disadvantaged students; 50 percent receive free or reduced lunch.

The district faces major changes, and the doors of Brickell Elementary will soon be closed. The district passed a bond in 2005 to combine all four of the existing elementary schools and construct one new elementary school for the entire district. The new building will serve children

in grades K-5. This change is anticipated in two years, and planning for the new school has already begun. The district has begun soliciting feedback from parents and teachers on the new building.

Table 2. School and district performance on state indicators

State Indicators 2004-2005 State requirement is 75%				
	Brickell Elementary School	Defiance Public Schools		
Third Grade Achievement Test				
Reading	97.4%	84.2%		
Mathematics	81.8%	73.4%		
Fourth Grade Proficiency Test				
Reading	100.0%	81.7%		
Writing	94.3%	84.3%		
Mathematics	91.4%	73.7%		
Science	97.1%	71.2%		
Social Studies	88.6%	71.2%		
Attendance (State requirement is 93%)	95.5%	94.8%		
Number and percent of state indicators met	8 out of 8	13 out of 23		
Rating	Excellent	Effective		

Teacher characteristics

Brickell Elementary School has nine full time teachers, one for Kindergarten and two for each grade, first through fourth. All teachers are highly qualified (HQT) and none have less than three years' experience. All the teachers are female, and all are Caucasian. According to responses on the teacher survey, 73 percent of teachers have their master's degree. On average, teachers at Brickell have 17 years of experience overall and 11 years teaching at the school. The student: teacher ratio is 22:1.

In addition to the classroom teachers, Brickell has seven part-time or specialized teachers, including two Title I teachers and two special education teachers. Three additional teachers (art, music, and physical education) are shared with the district's other elementary buildings.

Schools of Promise Case Study Methodology

On Monday, December 12, 2005, a four-person research team conducted a one-day site visit to Brickell Elementary School. Activities conducted during the day were as follows:

Classroom observations

Six classes from Brickell were observed, each for 30 minutes: three mathematics classes (two third grade classes and one fourth grade class) and three reading (two second grade classes and one fourth grade class). Class sizes ranged from 17 to 20 students.

Classrooms were randomly selected by SRG from a list of teachers and class times provided by school administrators using a random number generator. After sample selection, SRG consulted with school administrators and teachers to ensure that the observation period was valid, the selected teacher would be teaching at that time, and that observations would not interfere with examinations, quizzes, or other planned activities that day. In the event of a conflict, a different class period was selected by SRG. Two trained researchers conducted observations simultaneously, and their ratings were compared to determine inter-rater reliability for observation protocols. Inter-rater reliability across the six classrooms was determined to be 86 percent.

Observers used a subset of measures from the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS—Pianta, LaParo, and Hamre, 2005) to record qualitative observations and make quantitative ratings on classroom climate (positive and negative), teacher sensitivity, concept development, behavior management, and productivity. Following each observation, teachers were asked several questions via a one-page questionnaire about the particular class that was observed to determine if anything that happened during the observation period was unusual or remarkable; this information was taken into consideration during data analysis.

Teacher focus group

A focus group was conducted with 10 teachers at the end of the school day. The group discussion lasted approximately one hour and followed a pre-determined discussion guide. Topics discussed included curriculum and instruction, professional development, school climate, policy and procedures, and characteristics of effective teachers. Additional interviews were conducted during the school day with two Title I teachers.

Administrator interview

An administrator interview was conducted with Principal Jim Wyse and Assistant Superintendent Ian McGregor, along with district technology coordinator Pam Mumy and counselor Margaret Johnson. The interview lasted approximately one and a half hours. Interview topics included general school history and background, curriculum and instruction, characteristics of effective teachers, professional development, partnerships, school climate, policies and procedures, and teacher recruitment and hiring.

Teacher survey

A teacher survey was distributed to all classroom teachers (n=12) approximately one week before the site visit. The survey was self-administered and asked questions about the teachers' background and training, professional development activities, school climate and culture, as well

as perceived characteristics of effective teachers. A total of 11 surveys were received, representing a response rate of 92 percent.

Student focus groups

To gather feedback from students, three student focus groups were conducted. Each group had six students; one group was conducted with second grade students, one with third grade students, and one with fourth grade students. Each lasted 20-25 minutes. Racial and gender composition of the groups were mixed. Students were recruited by school administrators from classrooms observed during the site visit. Topics discussed included school background, perceived teacher support, learning opportunities, and what students like best about their school and teachers.

Parent interviews

After the site visit, SRG conducted 20 telephone interviews of parents. Interviewees were selected from lists provided by school administrators. Each interview followed a prepared survey instrument and was conducted by phone at a time convenient for the participants. Topics included curriculum and instruction, teacher relationships, and opportunities for student achievement. Interviews lasted between 11-17 minutes.

Results

This report is organized using the "Five Lessons Learned" identified in earlier *Schools of Promise* research. These lessons emphasize the importance of providing rigorous instruction aligned with state standards, instituting strong leadership, designing instruction to ensure student success, engaging parents and the community to support student success, and establishing a school culture that values individual students. Brickell Elementary School shows evidence of all these components.

In addition to investigating ODE's "Five Lessons Learned from Successful Schools" and how Brickell Elementary School demonstrates these characteristics, a particular focus of the current research is on teacher quality and the role of the teacher in high-performing schools. Specifically, the present case study inquired as to how teachers, administrators, students, and parents define teacher quality. What teacher characteristics are perceived as most important by each of these stakeholder groups? With these questions in mind, the present research also examines issues related to teacher quality in these schools and key stakeholders' beliefs and expectations regarding teacher quality.

Several characteristics of effective teachers repeatedly emerge. Brickell's principal, district administrators, teachers, students, and parents consider effective teachers to share some common characteristics:

- Teachers must be knowledgeable in the subject area being taught.
- Teachers must know the Ohio content standards and align instruction to the standards.
- Teachers should differentiate instruction to meet the needs of students with various learning styles.
- Teachers should possess strong classroom management skills.
- Teachers should build and cultivate personal connections with their students and be able to develop a rapport with students.

- Teachers must be empathetic toward the students but hold them to high standards for achievement and accountability.
- Teachers should collaborate to improve instruction and align instruction to the content standards.

These themes are recurrent throughout the following Five Lessons.

1. The school delivers rigorous instruction aligned to the standards.

Alignment to state standards district-wide

Teachers and administrators use state standards to plan, design and evaluate curriculum and instruction, as well as evaluate student progress.

As teachers at Brickell Elementary have become more comfortable with the Ohio achievement standards, they have aligned their instruction to the standards for better results. By reviewing old tests, participating in curriculum development, gaining experience and adding mechanisms for reflection, the teachers have been able to lead their students to high achievement. In Defiance, curriculum is defined at the district level, following state standards. The district encourages teachers to use their expertise to create innovative supplemental curriculum/lesson plans. Assistant Superintendent Ian McGregor said within each building, teachers may supplement the district's selected materials with additional educational tools, as long as they adhere to the district curriculum. Uniformity throughout the district is important, he said.

Teachers are involved and contribute to the district curriculum; they actively participate in the revision process. Whenever a curriculum is being revised, each elementary school building is represented on the committee. The elementary curriculum in science has been under review in the 2005-2006 school year.

Alignment to standards is seen as an important factor in Brickell's ability to improve student performance. When proficiency testing at the state level began, teachers district-wide at first resisted the idea of standards-based instruction and state oversight, according to administrators. Understanding what the standards are and how they are assessed on the proficiency test was described as a turning point for the school. To promote this understanding, samples of old state tests are included in the district curriculum. The tests are updated about every two years.

When proficiency testing started, scores at Brickell were the lowest in Defiance, with a noticeable gap between Brickell and the other schools. Seeing the old tests helped teachers to understand how to prepare students better. As Assistant Superintendent McGregor said:

As teachers became more aware of what had to be done and what the standards were— and in the early years the proficiency tests did not really reflect any curriculum that was established by the state—and so you were almost guessing as to what was going to be on the test and what kind of things to look for. Once we went to the redeveloped curriculum things have been a little bit stronger, certainly with the older proficiency testing put on the web so that we could take a look at those older proficiency tests. Then we had ideas, gave them to teachers and 'okay, this is what this thing's about'.

Once teachers began to see positive results, more teachers came "on board" and overall support for the adoption of standards has increased, according to teachers and administrators

interviewed. Today, there is strong momentum in favor of alignment in the district, not only at the elementary school but also at the middle and high school level, according to the Assistant Superintendent.

Though alignment to the standards required a new way of thinking across the district, Assistant Superintendent McGregor said resistance to following state standards was higher at the secondary level than at the elementary schools. The change in attitude evolved over several years as teachers throughout the district realized they could go beyond the standards, rather than merely meeting them. District administrators have continued to advocate that all teachers are encouraged to raise expectations for student achievement beyond the state standards, but all teachers must address appropriate grade-level standards in their lesson plans.

For example, in working with the revisions to the science curriculum, Assistant Superintendent McGregor said he is meeting more cooperation than he expected. "In the past, I would have to fight a battle to try to get them to buy into using the state standards," he said. The high level of agreement regarding science will make for a smoother transition. He believes:

Now it's just a matter of picking up all the pieces and putting them together, then putting the extra things that we want at the end of our own curriculum guide, which will be some of the tests that are out there that they can be referring to. Really our curriculum guide will look more like a resource for teachers because they'll have the state curriculum and these other pieces, resources.

Student report cards are also aligned to the standards. At the third-grade level, the Defiance district is pilot testing a program called Pinnacle, which allows teachers to track student performance on each grade level indicator, and at the end of a nine-week period, generate reports on student performance. These results are then shared with parents in the form of a report card.

Teacher's test questions are linked to indicators, academic content standards, and benchmarks. Teachers input information about graded assessments into the Pinnacle software. Depending on individual student performance on linked assessment items, his/her "level" is identified on the grade card by a checkmark that corresponds to Advanced, Accelerated, Proficient, Basic, and Limited. The printed grade card also indicates a letter grade for a specific subject, such as "Reading." However, the student's performance on "power indicators" give parents more specific information on their child's reading strengths and weaknesses. Teachers can also generate reports to give them specific areas of weakness by student, and also by classroom. Next year, Brickell's fourth grade teachers will be trained to use this version of the Pinnacle software program. The school district plans to continue to move up the usage of the program each year with the next grade level, and also down to second grade after next year to get the lower grades on board.

Brickell teachers were highly receptive to piloting the new program and have promoted it within the building and district. According to the Assistant Superintendent, the third-grade teachers who are piloting the software program said the indicators on the report card help them focus on what to teach. The system uses the terms advanced, proficient, basic and limited to show where a student is in mastering a skill. In previous years, elementary students received an "S," indicating "Satisfactory" with a plus or minus, in some cases.

Pam Mumy, the district technology coordinator, said Pinnacle gives students a grade but also lets them know where they are strong and where they are weak in skill development. She said the Pinnacle program also helps teachers because it lists the skills they must address by the

end of the school year. The teachers may not address all the skills every grading period, she said. However, Pinnacle will show if every skill has been measured at least once by year's end.

In interviews, parents were asked whether they were familiar with Ohio's academic content standards. About half of the parents responded that they were either "very familiar" or "somewhat familiar" with the standards. Parents who reported being familiar with the standards said they learned about them from materials that the school had given them or from a teacher, so the school and district's efforts to communicate the standards to parents has been effective. The school introduces the concept of standards at a parent orientation meeting at the start of the school year, but reinforces and explains the standards through newsletters and on the school report card. Perhaps more importantly is communication through notes, phone calls, and e-mails between parents and teachers. As one teacher said, "We try to tell them what we're doing and what concepts we're working on in each of the subjects. And that way they know. And I think that's probably the most important thing, isn't it?"

Another consideration in aligning to standards is student mobility, and mobility tends to be high in the Defiance district. Curriculum alignment across the district is thus an important way to keep students on a consistent educational path even though they may be changing classrooms. The issue is not only naturally occurring mobility; the district also keeps class sizes low by busing students to other elementary schools if necessary. The district doesn't keep statistics on the exact number of students bussed due to "overflow" situations, but tries to balance numbers across grade levels. The Assistant Superintendent said:

We do set limits on our class sizes, 22. And once it goes over 22, we bus those students over to one of the other buildings which doesn't have 22. It's important when students move from one building to the other to have the same basic curriculum that they're going to be using in our K-4 program.

Bussing needs and efforts to balance class sizes will become easier in the 2008-2009 school year when the district transitions to one K-5 facility.

Emphasis on reading and phonics

Reading and phonics are seen as the core of the curriculum and the core of the school day. A strong foundation in phonics and literacy beginning in the primary grades is seen as a key to better performance in the third and fourth grades, according to administrators and teachers. Defiance has adopted Harcourt textbooks in all its elementary schools (grades Kindergarten through fourth). Accelerated Reader and Fluent Reader, both of which are web-based reading programs, supplement the textbook series.

Saxon Phonics is employed beginning with kindergarten. Saxon Phonics is an explicit, systematic phonics program that provides continuous review and incremental development of reading skills. It is designed for Kindergarten through second grade. According to the Florida Center for Reading Research, the program focuses on phonemic awareness, phonics, spelling, alphabetizing, handwriting, and fluency. It was developed based on scientific reading research and uses small, incremental instructional steps, frequent practice and cumulative assessment. According to teachers at Brickell, the Saxon Phonics program is more integrated than their previous phonics program, and teachers like the way lessons build on previously learned concepts. The staff utilizes the Saxon Phonics program almost exclusively for phonics/phonemic

¹ Florida Center for Reading Research, http://www.fcrr.org/FCRRReports/PDF/Saxon_Phonics_Spelling_Report.pdf #search='Saxon%20Phonics'. Also see the publisher's website, http://saxonpublishers.harcourtachieve.com.

instruction. According to one teacher, "it is a more systematic way of teaching phonics for students to help them sound out words and become more fluent readers."

Brickell's emphasis on phonics and reading has become an important element of students' success. "I think one of the keys is the reading program. Without the reading program, you can not have success in any of the other programs," Assistant Superintendent McGregor said.

Teachers agreed that vertical alignment of the reading curriculum has had a positive impact, and can see the benefits in grades three and four of the increased emphasis on reading and phonics in Kindergarten, first, and second grade. "By the time that we get them in the third grade, they can read, and we do not have to teach them the phonetics of it," a teacher said.

Students and parents have recognized the importance of the reading curriculum to success. In focus groups, students talked about a software program called Accelerated Reader. They said it has helped them get ready for the achievement tests. "Mostly that program is for practice for the achievement test, like doing stuff that would be on the achievement test. Now when we do our math tests or our reading tests, the teacher will give us an extra sheet that would have questions that would be on the achievement test," said one student. In interviews, one parent specifically mentioned the Accelerated Reader program and said her son's teacher is working with him so that he has study options online.

The teachers also use Study Island, a web-based computer program which provides individualized instruction aligned specifically to acquaint students with standardized tests. The program offers dynamic content, meaning questions are randomly chosen from a database of thousands of questions, and answers are constantly changing position. According to the software's website, lessons and practice tests are based solely on the Ohio's academic content standards and are specifically designed to prepare students for the Ohio Achievement Test. Study Island² is another tool the Title I teacher and the classroom teachers use collaboratively. The principal receives weekly reports regarding progress for students using Study Island, which addresses all content areas on state tests. Being new to the school system, the principal has not yet received training on using the detailed report features to track individual student performance. However, the grade level data contained in the weekly report is viewed by the principal to stay informed on how often students use the program, and how well each grade level is performing on questions linked to various academic content standards.

2. The school provides leadership that results in continuous improvement of instruction.

At Brickell, the concept of leadership has evolved with the transition in the Principal's office. The previous principal seems to have expressed leadership in a more directive style while the new principal approaches leadership as a way to form and foster collaboration. Both of the leadership styles focused on continuous improvement in instruction, but the new style is more inclusive of teachers as decision-makers and opinion-leaders. The transition to higher levels of collaboration is graining traction as teachers experience success and the administration remains committed.

New leadership

A major change occurred at Brickell at the start of the 2005-2006 school year when the former principal retired after a long tenure at Brickell. The former principal was described as "a very strong and directive leader, although not collaborative." He set high expectations for teachers

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² For more information see www.studyisland.com.

and held teachers and students to high academic standards. On the teacher survey, which asked teachers to describe the school environment under the previous principal, 100 percent of teachers agreed they were held to high professional standards for delivering instruction. Almost all teachers, 91 percent, agreed the principal communicated his or her expectations to faculty and staff. However, there was low agreement that the principal cultivated an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect. Teachers did not feel the principal communicated well with parents and students.

Although the former principal organized teacher committees for various policy and administrative tasks, he did not always choose to follow committee recommendations. Teachers did not feel strongly supported and were not permitted much of a leadership role in school policy formulation, or much autonomy in other areas. On the teacher survey, which asked teachers to describe the school environment under the previous leadership, fewer than 20 percent of teachers agreed that the principal was an effective leader, or that school leadership addressed teacher concerns. Fewer than 10 percent agreed the principal communicated state, local, and national policies effectively. When asked how they were able to be successful in this climate, teachers cite their good working relationships with one another and mutual support, as one teacher said, "We really get along, and we were united. And even if our working conditions were not the greatest, we worked together, and in spite of [the problems with] leadership."

Previously, teachers received very little information in terms of performance evaluation. The principal might visit their classrooms but offered evaluation in a very summative, generalized manner. The teachers said they received very little feedback or guidance, although academic goals were high.

Teachers say much has changed under the current principal, Jim Wyse, and they are much happier under the collaborative leadership of the new principal. Teachers have more autonomy and have begun to receive more detailed feedback on their job performance, such as in-depth reviews of their performance based on classroom observations conducted by principal Wyse. Morale has clearly improved in the current administration, primarily due to the new sense that their hard work is appreciated. As one teacher said, "We are dedicated to what we're doing, and just the acknowledgement that someone realizes that we're going the extra yard is just nice to know."

While teachers may be critical of the former principal, they said the difficult working conditions unified them and were a catalyst for increased teacher collaboration. As they commented in the focus group, they built a network of support and collaboration among themselves. In the teacher survey, 90 percent agreed teachers worked together under the previous administration to improve teaching and learning, a practice which continues today. The school has made a rapid transition to the more collaborative leadership style of the new principal.

Collaboration to improve instruction

Under the current administration, as in previous years, teachers collaborate informally and formally. The previous school administration required formal collaboration time and created time during the day for teachers to collaborate. Substitute teachers, former Brickell teachers who knew the students and curriculum, were brought in once a week to create a 90-minute planning time for teachers. Substitutes would teach at one grade level for an hour and a half while the teachers at that level met to talk about the curriculum, discuss what they were doing and make plans for future activities. The substitutes would progress from one grade level to the next so all teachers had an opportunity to work with their grade-level colleagues. Funding for the substitute teachers originally came through the Ohio Reads program. Planned collaboration time continues in the 2005-2006 school year at each grade level.

Although teachers enjoy collaborating with one another and the process is perceived as valuable for aligning instruction, spending time during the day for collaboration can be a challenge because it takes time away from the teachers' lesson plans. Teachers feel responsible for making the most of their classroom time. Preparing for a substitute is seen by some as a distraction from the plan the classroom teacher has in mind. The guidance counselor said, "How do we manage?" is the biggest question that comes to the teachers' mind when part of the day has to be set aside for intervention or collaboration. So, some teachers prefer to take advantage of other opportunities to collaborate. For example, teachers use time to collaborate when students are meeting with an art teacher or a music teacher.

Currently, collaboration often occurs informally during lunch and after school; it is part of the culture at Brickell. The teachers' lounge is the center of collaborative activity. Teachers share a common lunchtime and the atmosphere is warm and collegial. Lunchtime for each grade level is at the same time. For example, fourth grade teachers take their classes to lunch at 12:00. They release students to the cafeteria and then eat lunch together, typically in the lunchroom. This informal collaboration time, with teachers at that particular grade level, is approximately thirty minutes in duration. Other grade levels join in this informal collaboration on a staggered basis. When the fourth grade teachers are finishing lunch, the last group of students is being seated (second grade teachers). Therefore, all teachers see each other "face to face" during lunchtime while cafeteria and playground aides monitor the students. The principal also uses this time to talk with teachers to see if they have any needs or concerns that should be addressed. Besides lunchtime, teachers also collaborate during recess and special classes (art, music, physical education.).

Teachers also often stay late after school working on lesson plans and take advantage of the time to talk with their peers about how to solve problems or generate new ideas. The small size of the school also helps foster frequent sharing between teachers, as one teacher said in the focus group, "I think one of our strengths is that we are a very small building, and we are right here helping each other. I love that about this building." In response, another teacher commented, "We're always in each others rooms. It's very informal, we just go and talk."

The school counselor, who also spends time at the other elementary schools in the district, views the positive attitude about sharing to be unusual in Defiance. "The willingness to be able to jump in with both feet is very hard for elementary school teachers. You don't see that in all the buildings," she said. She also noted that the teachers talk a lot about what is going on in the classrooms. "They are creative about working together," she said.

Because of the high levels of collaboration among teachers and the frequent informal communication that takes place between teachers and the principal, weekly staff meetings are not as important for collaboration time. Currently, staff meetings are held on an "as needed' basis," said Principal Wyse:

I try to get each grade level collaboration time. And then, as I see a need, for building wide [collaboration].... When I talked with my staff a lot of them thought a weekly, Friday morning was a waste of time because there wasn't anything important to go over. We eat so much at lunch time together. I said I will hold those on an as needed basis, but we are going to collaborate and if I see something that we need to sit down together and talk about, we'll do that.

The collaborative model extends to the district level for school administrators. Administrative Counsel meetings with principals occur once a month to share information, discuss new programs, and engage in professional development for school administrators. Assistant

Superintendent McGregor said the monthly Administrative Council meetings offer principals an opportunity to share information, and a forum to "work out bugs" before adopting new ideas. Administrators discuss the curriculum and share ideas that can be taken back to each building. For example:

Two years ago we established what we call a book club for the principals. We actually study some of the books out there on effective learning. We went through most of the What Works books. I think we've gone through all of them through the last couple years. That allows the principals to read some good literature, discuss it, and then we just talk about other issues that are curriculum related. And that creates some ideas to bring back to their own building and be working on.

Collaboration and effective leadership are closely united in efforts to create a positive environment where teachers are encouraged to take risks on innovative learning techniques.

Teacher leaders

Teacher leaders are also an important part of Brickell's sustained success as a *School of Promise*. Teacher leaders are credited with adopting new technology and new programs, and the school is described as "teacher driven."

The term "teacher leader" has multiple definitions in the research literature, but "teacher leadership" generally means a process by which teachers, individually or collectively, influence their colleagues, principal, and other members of the school community to improve teaching and learning practices with the aim of increased student learning and achievement. Such leadership often includes individual development, collaboration and team development, and organizational development.³

At Brickell, teachers clearly exhibit these characteristics. Assistant Superintendent McGregor said in buildings where students have excelled, the teachers have taken the initiative to find and implement effective programs. This includes instructional programs like Accelerated Reader and Saxon Phonics, as well as support programs for families like the FAST program (see page 20 for more information). He said:

Teachers have gone out and started these programs on their own. Teachers and principals have generated an idea, said this is a good idea, this is a great idea, let's go forward with it, and people have run with them."

Through teacher leadership, the school has adopted and embraced the Accelerated Reader program, which teachers and administrators alike credit as critical to the success of the reading program. This application gives students immediate and customized feedback on their performance. Accelerated Reader and a companion program, Fluent Reader, are computerized reading management software programs that allow teachers to monitor students' guided reading practice. The software generates reports that provide teachers with feedback on students' reading levels and improvement. Students read books and then take a computerized assessment on the book. Students receive immediate feedback on their performance, and see where their current performance falls relative to goals they set with their teacher. Teachers can compile results by student and by class to gauge student performance.⁴

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³ York-Barr, J. & Duke, K (2004). What do we know about teacher leadership? Findings from two decades of scholarship. *Review of Educational Research*, 74, 255-316

⁴ For more information, see http://www.renlearn.com/ar/.

The amount of time spent on reading varies somewhat by grade level and teacher. Teachers infuse reading within other subject areas, such as social studies. However, the language arts block is typically 90 minutes or more. During this time, silent reading is one instructional strategy teachers use to incorporate Accelerated Reader.

Accelerated Reader has been championed by Karen Lawson, a second-grade teacher who also served on the district's reading curriculum committee. Accelerated Reader is integrated fully into the reading program at all grade levels and is used through the fourth grade. Fluent Reader is used in second, third, and fourth grades. These software programs received strong support from the previous principal and continue to be backed by current principal Jim Wyse.

Karen Lawson has received considerable praise in the school and district for her efforts in adopting and promoting Accelerated Reader. Not only does she collaborate with her colleagues at Brickell, but she also leads professional development at the district level on how to use Accelerated Reader effectively. She also participates in the publisher's national conference. Her leadership has been important in obtaining resources like a wider variety of fiction and nonfiction books that have allowed the program to be adopted more widely across the curriculum, even to support science and social studies lessons.

Teacher leadership also drove the school decision to adopt Saxon Phonics, a program that teachers feel has been very important in early literacy among Brickell students. Two Brickell teachers, Karen Lawson and Barbara Welty (the school's Kindergarten teacher) discovered the phonics program while earning their master's degrees. Upon reviewing the curriculum, the pair sought permission from the former principal to use the curriculum as a pilot. On the basis of the initial results, the school adopted the phonics program. "The reason we decided on it was based on the results of that year of doing it. It was phenomenal how well the kids could read," Mrs. Lawson said.

The students at Brickell have followed the leadership of teachers in embracing the reading programs with enthusiasm. Together, they set a standard unmatched by other schools in Defiance. School Counselor Margaret Johnson, who works in multiple buildings in the district, said the interest in the reading programs is noticeable at Brickell.

You'll see kids out there all the time reading books. It's just really a focus that they have. It's not that the other buildings don't have it, but it truly is different in the way that it's approached here. I don't know that I can describe why, you just know that it is. More kids in the hall trading books, reading books. They spend a lot of time on it.

Because the teachers have worked so closely together to develop curriculum programs at Brickell, they have been educating each other and working together to find solutions to daily teaching challenges. They are comfortable sharing ideas as an ongoing form of enhancing their own teaching skills. The collegial, close relationship among the teachers is a key reason for the school's academic success.

One example of collaboration occurred around the middle of November. Grant money was allocated to Brickell to use for intervention with third and fourth grade students who were identified as "below proficient" in reading and mathematics. The principal, third, and fourth grade teachers blocked off approximately two hours to meet and discuss intervention strategies. From this preliminary collaboration on intervention, materials were purchased and an intervention teacher was hired. Based on "what worked" in the previous year, teachers devised a schedule to break the third and fourth grade students into smaller groups by utilizing all teachers (the new

intervention teacher, title instructor, special education teacher, and classroom teachers) to teach specific lessons based on Ohio's Academic Content Standards. Students would receive one mathematics and one reading lesson each day, and would rotate among the various teachers so all students received the same specialized lessons by the end of the week. However, after a period of time, teachers met and indicated that—for whatever reason—the students this year were having a difficult time with transitions. When they would change classrooms, students took too long to refocus on the new task at hand. After another collaboration session, teachers tweaked their lessons and used the new intervention teacher to come into their classroom to assist, or to pull out students who needed work on a particular skill. By restructuring, teachers were better able to meet their classroom's specific needs, and less time was spent on transitional activities.

Professional development

Funding for professional development opportunities is limited, so professional development at Brickell is primarily school-based and built into the day-to-day work of teaching. Teachers participate in well-organized, focused, and curriculum-specific staff development that shows them how to use new materials successfully, enables them to learn effective instructional strategies, and provides them with content knowledge they need.

According to Principal Wyse, Brickell's objectives for professional development are to have all teachers become highly qualified, to provide instructional ideas to facilitate growth in all staff members, and to provide time for grade level collaboration.

Formal professional development takes place at both the district level and the school level. The district coordinates annual day-long in-service programs. The process begins in March of the year before the in-service day will actually occur. The in-service agendas are developed by generating feedback from teachers via a survey. First, a committee generates ideas for topics (e.g., technology, writing, classroom management), and then a survey is sent out to the staff. Speakers who fit well with the district and school professional development objectives are invited. In 2005, for example, when the general theme was technology, speakers included educational and technology consultants, speaking on use of programs like IPhoto, SmartBoards, and website development.

In other years, in-service programs have dealt with frame-based learning, emphasizing writing. A presenter observed children writing in the classrooms and then used her observations to create a lesson that teachers were able to watch. One of the substitute teachers used regularly at Brickell has had training in teaching formula writing and helps in that skill area.

At the school level, the principals coordinate professional development during two-hour periods when the opening of school is delayed. Four late starts are usually held throughout the school year. These are used to review state content standards, benchmarks, and Brickell's test results to look for trends and determine areas of instructional need. As a group, the teachers will examine achievement scores, compare them to scores in other districts and discuss certain content areas. The assistant superintendent described the goal of the meeting as follows:

Let's take a look at the academic content standards we are responsible for at third grade and as a team, then discuss how we are going to meet those standards, say in reading, during those two hours.

The building has a very limited budget for professional development activities held outside the district. However, in 2005 the district funded two teachers to attend a Renaissance Learning conference (the developers of Accelerated Reader).

Professional Development follows standards set by the local professional development committee (LPDC) and the state guidelines for Highly Qualified Teacher (HQT) professional development.

In the area of technology, professional development is seen by administrators as "teacher driven." Technology and computers are becoming increasingly integrated into the classroom at Brickell. Teachers are open to suggestions regarding good web sites and ways to use computers in the classroom, but the reading programs remain the preferred technology. The Assistant Superintendent believes educators (in general) underestimate the amount of use of computers by elementary students and cited a recent journal article that reported almost 100 percent of fourth graders are familiar with computers. As a result, he said, educators should change their teaching strategies to better utilize a system that is a normal part of the child's daily experience.

In a survey question to teachers, they were asked about the primary focus of their professional development activities in the previous year. This question asked teachers to select the one area that best described the primary focus of their professional development in the previous year. Teachers were also asked what other (secondary) areas also applied to them; they could select all that applied to them.

Consistent with administrators' and teachers' comments, collaboration was reported as a form of professional development for over 70 percent of teachers. Over 70 percent also participated in professional development related to understanding/applying Ohio content standards.

Over half of teachers reported participating in professional development related to their content areas, and for over a quarter of teachers this was a primary focus. Also, over 60 percent participated in PD regarding differentiated instruction/student learning styles; for over a quarter of teachers this was a primary focus (see Table 3).

Table 3. Focus of teachers' professional development

Thinking about all your professional development activities last year, what was the focus of the activities you selected? ⁵	Which areas apply to you?	Which <u>one</u> area was your primary focus?
In depth study of the academic content of the subject(s) you teach	54.5%	27.3%
Instructional strategies to meet the learning needs of diverse groups of students with different learning styles	63.6%	27.3%
Collaboration for improving instruction	72.7%	18.2%
Strategies parents and families	27.3%	18.2%
Understanding and applying Ohio content standards to student instruction	72.7%	9.1%

⁵ These response options were adapted from the Maryland Survey of Teacher Participation in High Quality Professional Development, 2003-04, Maryland State Department of Education

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Using assessments to gauge student mastery of Ohio content standards	36.4%	-
Strategies for creating and maintaining safe and orderly classrooms and schools	36.4%	
Using research results for decision making	18.2%	1

Recommendations for new teacher preparation

On the teacher survey, teachers were asked whether they felt prepared to teach this population of students when they began working at Brickell. Just over half (55 percent) said they felt prepared, and what best prepared them was direct experience in the classroom in a learning role as a student teacher. Some also cited their level of education or the fact that they grew up in Defiance. Conversely, most teachers who reported feeling less prepared said it was because of either a lack of experience in general or not enough experience with elementary or low income student populations, in particular.

In terms of their recommendations for training effective future teachers, Brickell's teachers recommended getting as much hands-on experience in the classroom as possible. One teacher said her student teaching experience and other hands-on experience during college helped her get ready for the challenges of the classroom. Another said she had been a student teacher at Brickell: "What an eye-opener this was for me. This was my first experience with bilingual parents and children. My cooperating teacher taught me more than what could ever be learned in college."

In terms of additional teacher training, several teachers recommended more training on differentiated instruction so new teachers are prepared to meet the needs of their students. Teachers need to know strategies for reaching everyone, they said.

One teacher suggested that professional development could include time to visit other classrooms and observe effective teachers in action. If observation is impossible, reading about these teachers and their techniques would be beneficial.

Impending organizational changes and challenges

The record of achievement at Brickell is facing a challenge. When construction of a new district-wide elementary building is complete, this small school will close. The reorganization of the four existing elementary schools into one new school means many organizational changes for the staff at Brickell. Through the transition, it will also be important to maintain the staff interactions and relationships that have formed the base of the collaborative environment which has lead to so many positive changes at Brickell. Administrators intend to develop grade-level groups or "pods" of about nine classrooms, allowing grade-level teachers to have easy access to one another and to encourage continued collaboration. It is expected that all of the students at one grade level will have lunch together to help create a feeling of family. However, the teachers grew emotional when they discussed how they will miss the frequent contact with their current colleagues at other grade levels. One teacher said:

I do think that the reality is going to set in that we're going to all be divorced from each other when we get our new building, and I mean it brings tears to my eyes. I'm really happy about the new building. But, I won't see the rest of them.

In anticipation of the move into the larger school, district administrators are planning professional development to address vertical collaboration across grade levels. While consolidation remains a couple of years away, district administrators want to be certain that teachers from the four existing elementary schools are teaching to the same standard before they move into the new building. This way, the administration expects all students to be developing skills at the same pace.

The collaborative atmosphere at Brickell has led to positive curriculum development and increased comfort with integrating technology into instruction. Teachers are enthusiastic about trying new ideas. They also serve as a resource to each other, sharing what they have learned. The same spirit is evident at the district level, where building principals meet monthly and exchange ideas. It is the hope of the Brickell faculty that the family atmosphere will continue when the four elementary schools in Defiance are combined.

3. The school designs instruction to ensure every student's success.

The school's intervention program is fully integrated into every classroom and is seen as an essential part of Brickell's success. Through effective management, the teachers are able to provide individual attention for struggling students, often using customizable computer software programs. The school-wide intervention program relies heavily on assessment, and on Title I teachers and substitute teachers who provide coordinated intervention.

Students are identified through various assessments (i.e., STAR, diagnostic, achievement, practice tests, etc.), and through teacher recommendation. Classroom teachers collaborated with each other when substitute teachers were hired to teach their lessons and free them up for planning. This occurred during the first two years Brickell was identified as a *School of Promise*. However, after listening to teachers this year (2005 – 2006), substitutes actually came into the classroom to assist with instruction or pull out for students who were lacking in particular skills. Teachers made time to collaborate at recess, lunch, before and after school, and during art, music, or physical education classes. In this way they were able to continue teaching their own students and not rely on substitutes for this important task. In 2005-2006, collaboration extended beyond the classroom teacher to include the Title I and Special Education Instructors.

Classroom teachers, along with two substitute teachers who are hired for intervention purposes, design and run the intervention program. The focus is to provide instruction to smaller groups of students, 10 per group, or about half the typical class size at Brickell. Two days per week of small group instruction are provided in language arts and mathematics. Instruction focuses on academic content standards students have difficulty mastering.

The school pays for one substitute and the district funds a second substitute as part of their intervention program. Starting in January, the two substitutes work four days a week for approximately an hour and a half in the mornings with two classrooms at the same grade level. Students are divided into four or five groups and work with one teacher for about 20 minutes. Students then rotate through different subjects with the classroom teachers or substitutes. In this way the school focuses on the learning skills that the students need help developing and proficiency areas that need additional attention. The principal said, "We can prepare those students a little bit better then we could if you had one teacher working with 20, 22 students."

On an ongoing basis, the school's two Title I intervention specialists work with the teachers individually. The Title I teachers have their own classrooms where students attend individual instruction. Title I teachers are also are welcome in the classroom for reading instruction, often using the Accelerated Reader software to help the children who might be slipping below grade

level. "We have a new Title I teacher, and I do think a key point is our teachers include her more within the class," said Wyse.

Teachers code lesson plans to align instruction to the standards. Students who participated in a focus group viewed intervention as a routine part of schooling. They said that for mathematics and reading, students are sent to "another teacher's room" if they are having some trouble, meaning they visit the intervention specialist. Parents also recognize the school's emphasis on intervention. In a parent interview, one respondent said, "There is no child left behind, they do not exclude anyone no matter what level they are at."

In terms of district intervention, summer school is provided by the district for three weeks after the regular school year ends. This form of intervention is held at the district's middle school and is offered to students in third and fourth grades who did not pass the spring achievement tests. Three staff members from the district provide reading, mathematics, and writing intervention to those students who choose to attend. In the primary grades, intervention concentrates on reading, and at the higher levels, the emphasis is on improved performance on the achievement tests.

Interactive reading programs provide immediate, detailed feedback

The Accelerated Reading program is seen as central to Brickell's reading success. Other programs are also used to monitor student progress and identify areas to be targeted with intervention, including Fluent Reader, Study Island, and STAR early literacy tests. Intervention teachers use STAR early literacy tests and reports generated from Accelerated Reader software to analyze student performance and to identify students' strengths and weaknesses. School Counselor Margaret Johnson said Brickell's teachers carefully follow the prescribed Accelerated Reader program by setting goals with the students and awarding Accelerated Reader certificates when the students reach specific skill levels. She noted that Brickell is the only the school in the district which fully incorporates Accelerated Reader into the curriculum. She said:

I think that if you are truly integrating Accelerated Reader into your curriculum, you use it correctly. The teachers here have embraced the use of it as the important key to good reading.

The importance of individualized instruction was apparent to researchers who observed several classes. In all of the reading classes, students were given opportunities to work individually and at their own pace. Examples of this included students working by themselves on the computer or writing and revising their own short stories. In the second grade classes, students were observed using the Accelerated Reader and Fluent Reader programs. During this time students selected books themselves, read them, and then used computers in the classrooms to complete a quiz on the book. When the quiz ended, the students received immediate feedback in the form of a bar graph. The graph showed the students how many questions they answered correctly, and whether they met their goals (which had been determined with their teacher).

As part of the Fluent Reader program, other students in the same class used specialized headsets and read a passage that appeared on the computer screen out loud into the program's voice recognition software. Students using this program had to read the passage correctly in a set amount of time, otherwise they had to repeat the task. The teacher assigned students to work on the Accelerated Reader or Fluent Reader program depending on the students' needs. While students were working at their own pace on the computer programs, the teacher worked with a different small group of students as they read out loud. Despite the small amount of direct

teacher supervision, the students knew what they needed to be doing and seemed to accomplish what was expected of them.

Observers noted across all classrooms observed that teachers consistently and carefully monitored students' behavior. Few behavioral problems occurred, and levels of behavioral/classroom management were generally high. Teachers engaged students who seemed to be getting off task by calling on them directly and asking them questions or otherwise involving them in the classroom activity, which seemed to be effective at preventing students from becoming distracted. Likewise, teachers demonstrated a fairly high degree of sensitivity to student needs, by noticing when students experienced difficulty and responding in a supportive and understanding manner. Students appeared comfortable approaching their teachers for support or guidance; teachers were clearly a reliable resource. For example, students seemed comfortable and were productive working independently in small groups but seemed to know if a problem arose they could go to the teacher for assistance.

In focus groups, the students said their teachers were important and the first place they turn for help if something is confusing or doesn't make sense. "If we're at school we can ask the teacher or just any teacher around," one student said. Students also seemed aware of teachers' sensitivity to their needs, and mentioned how teachers make sure all students understand the material or get the help they need. According to the students, the teachers will take extra time to go over difficult concepts, will stop class to explain concepts if the material is getting difficult for everyone, or vary instructional techniques to get the information across. For example, teachers may let students work mathematics problems on the board for everyone to see or incorporate concepts into a game so learning is less like work. "My teacher lets us go up to the board and we do multiplication and other fun things in math to help us understand," one student said.

4. The school engages parents and the community to support student success.

Brickell's parent involvement is characterized as fairly low by teachers and administrators, although the school has goals to increase contact and communication with parents, and to engage them in student instruction. According to Principal Wyse:

We're working on a comfort level for people because we always thought it was kind of funny, it's hard to get them sometimes for conferences or if you do a parent program you can't get them in, but you do a Halloween parade and everybody comes to see their own kids dressed up and marching in the parade.

Likewise, Assistant Superintendent McGregor said he has noticed low attendance at meetings regarding school levies and at a yearly Title I meeting, but he said parents will attend plays and social events. The district had just begun outreach to parents about the new school building, and hoped to increase parental involvement in discussions about the new elementary school.

All of the parents who were interviewed said they had volunteered at the school in some capacity during the past school year. They said volunteers are welcome in the classroom, and some parents have come to school to discuss their careers. However, almost all the parents said their volunteering is in the form of working on PTO activities, such as Brickell Fun Night, the school carnival.

Still, just about half of the parents interviewed agreed that parents were involved in the decisions that the school makes. Parents cited examples such as helping to plan field trips, special events, or new programs for the school, such as a "healthy snack" program. One

mentioned that parents were asked for suggestions on what they would like to see in the new school.

One complication in increasing parent involvement is due to the high levels of poverty in the local community. High poverty levels are consistently linked to high percentages of single parent households and two income-households, which makes it hard for guardians to find time away from work and household chores to attend meetings or provide hands-on assistance with homework. Teachers at Brickell report this to be the case for the children in their classrooms.

In addition to the parent's lack of time, low levels of literacy and English as a second language in the home seem to be barriers. "We've had parents who couldn't help because they don't know how to read," a teacher said. The school has a high percentage of minority students—over 35 percent with a correspondingly high concentration of students who are Hispanic, and live in households where their parents may not speak English well. These factors complicate routine parent-teacher communication and make parent-teacher conferences difficult to implement.

Strategies to increase parent engagement

Brickell faculty and administration are taking steps to involve parents further in the educational process. A change to standard-based report cards is a major initiative that will help parents understand the achievement objectives and assessment of skills. The Pinnacle report card system, which is a pilot project for the district's third grade, gives parents a letter grade in content knowledge and ranks skill level on a scale of one to five. This scale helps parents see how a letter grade can be affected by a skill level so that parents have a better understanding of why their children receive particular grades, and how grading relates to proficiency in the content standards. This is one way the district hopes to increase parent awareness of state standards.

A second step to engage parents in their children's education involved changing the timing and structure of parent-teacher conferences. Defiance City Schools' Administrative Counsel set the goal to have 100 percent participation at parent-teacher conferences. Principal Wyse brought that goal back to his staff, and to make the process more convenient for families and encourage participation, conferences were scheduled at more flexible times over a seven day period as opposed to the usual period of two days. While Principal Wyse noted the schedule was a bit of an inconvenience for teachers, he said the parent participation level made up for concerns about the schedule.

In interviews, parents mentioned additional outreach activities conducted by Brickell. The school sends weekly fliers that containing school news and activities. Most parents feel that their child's teachers encourage parents to talk about student progress, and they said teachers welcome parents to visit classrooms. All of the parents interviewed agreed that the teachers at Brickell care about the students. Additionally, almost all parents interviewed agreed that Brickell Elementary helps parents and families become involved in the school.

Local partners

Along with reaching out to all parents, Brickell makes a special effort to involve Hispanic families. The school supports a Hispanic Awareness Day, held in conjunction with the community's local Hispanic organization. The connection with the Hispanic community continues throughout the year, and often members of the community will put together a traditional Spanish meal for some of the classes to taste. Involvement with the elementary schools is preparation for a two-and-a-half hour workshop on the Hispanic culture conducted annually for Defiance middle school students.

Families and Schools Together, or FAST, also supports and engages parents of at-risk students. According to www.fastnational.org, FAST is designed to "build protective factors for children and empower parents to be the primary prevention agents for their children." The program's goals are to enhance family functioning, prevent children from experiencing school failure, prevent substance abuse by the child and other family members, and reduce the stress that parents and children experience from daily life situations. Brickell pioneered the FAST program, in its second year during 2005-2006.

At Brickell, FAST involves about a dozen families for an eight-week program, with the goal being to increase their comfort level with the school. "It's kind of a mentoring program bringing whole families into the building and showing them how to work with their children," said Principal Wyse. Families are recruited based on social and economic need. Some families who participated in FAST last year stayed on as mentors to new families. Previous FAST participants have formed their own support group and still meet occasionally.

A number of community organizations offer regular support to the schools in Defiance. A resource book compiled by service organizations in northwest Ohio provides contact information for community resources when administrators see families in need. "I just feel like there's somebody I can call whatever the need is for a family and I think we do a pretty nice job in this community of wraparound services for families," school counselor Johnson said. In particular, the Salvation Army provides school supplies and clothing for families at the beginning of the school year, and is available for support all year long, for just about anything. "If somebody needs a haircut, you can call the Salvation Army and they'll make sure it's done," school counselor Johnson said.

5. The school creates a culture where each individual feels valued.

While the entire staff at Brickell contributes to the sense of caring, it is the teachers who are on the frontlines. They build strong relationships with students that continue for several years, along with setting high achievement goals. The family feeling of the school is seen as a key to the students' success, as one teacher observed:

I tell my kids that I see them more than I see my own kids. And that we're more of a family than just a class or group of people working together. You know that probably sounds hokey but I think that's really true. I think that the kids really feel safe here. I think it's a very safe learning environment.

Even the support staff takes the interest of the children to heart. "Everybody is responsible. Everybody works together -- cafeteria, custodial staff. We are all here to do the same job," said school counselor Johnson. Students' physical and emotional needs are as important to teachers as their instructional needs. The school's breakfast program provides an important foundation for the school day so teachers can be sure the students get the nutrition they need to be ready to learn. Anywhere from 40 – 65 students eat breakfast on a daily basis.

Parents were asked what makes this school special or unique in comparison to other schools. The most common responses mentioned either the school having good teachers, a good principal, or a good staff in general. Several noted that the staff truly care about the students, another said that the principal "makes you feel like family." They said Brickell fosters growth and learning. "The focus is not on how much they get done. It's on what they are learning," a parent said.

Staff at Brickell is described as cohesive; the school culture is collaborative, supportive, and open in communication. Principal Wyse said the entire staff has come together to form the right group for the school. "It's the right team that likes to work together with the same goals and attitudes. I think they can take whatever you throw at them and basically make it work," he said. A school counselor said the teachers have been together long enough to know each other well and to build programs based on the faculty's strengths.

High expectations in a supportive environment

Teachers have high expectations for students in terms of behavior and achievement. Teachers want to motivate kids to succeed and believe their commitment to high standards is one way to advance this objective. They feel discipline and structure are important, and work from kindergarten to set expectations of mutual respect and a norm of achievement. Their comments are consistent with classroom behavior observed by researchers. "This is a diverse group of students. At the beginning, they are not very respectful. Discipline sets the stage for learning. The expectation is that everyone's class will be disciplined," said one teacher.

The school's emphasis on discipline is intended to teach the students how to be responsible citizens. The teachers believe they must teach social skills so the students know how to behave within the community. "I think they're learning pride, they're proud to be here," one teacher said. Teaching respect, among other forms of ethical behavior, begins in kindergarten and continues through all grade levels.

In focus groups, students talked about the high expectations at Brickell, and said what they are learning is challenging. "We learn new things in English every day," one student said. It's not like it's going to be a piece of cake." Students felt challenged, but also said they were encouraged by teachers to work hard.

A mentoring program called Adopt-a-Student is another means of support and a way to connect students with role models. Teachers and even the principal meet with students individually to talk with them and offer support. The program helps students set goals and build self-esteem. Principal Wyse said the program is one of the tools he uses to show that there is no reason to be afraid of the principal. "This principal is a real good guy and will be a buddy if you give him the opportunity," he said.

Adopt-a-Student can be helpful for children who do not have enough positive adult role models in their lives. The program may offer the only opportunity for some students to talk to an adult about goals. Wyse said Adopt-a-Student can allow an adult to provide small incentives for a student to be productive. This may help students to become more confident and more willing to take educational risks.

A strong positive climate was observed in all classrooms. Teachers demonstrated warm, caring relationships with their students. They consistently gave the children encouragement and positive feedback, and were careful not to embarrass children who seemed to be struggling or who completed a task incorrectly. The teachers seemed genuinely concerned about the students. One teacher, for example, talked with the class about the well being of a student who was out having surgery.

Teachers acknowledge expertise in their subject areas and the ability to manage the classroom as important characteristics of effective teachers. However, teachers also emphasized the importance of respect and compassion for students. "Be open and try to give everyone a chance to talk. They need those things to succeed. They want to succeed for you," said one

teacher. Another teacher stressed the importance of little things that demonstrate caring for students, like greeting the children in the morning and wishing them well at the end of the day. The same teacher suggested high amounts of praise between the morning greeting and the afternoon good-bye.

Administrators also emphasized the importance of a teacher's positive attitude toward students, particularly in an environment where many students come from economically disadvantaged homes. As the principal said,

They're almost like a mother for the children, taking them in, hugging them, making sure that they have the best, concerned about them. At the same time they have to be top notch teachers in order to get across the academic side of things.

The children in the focus groups spoke positively about their teachers and the way teachers care about them. They genuinely liked their teachers' efforts to make learning fun for them, particularly reading. One child particularly enjoyed lessons when the teacher had students perform a little role-playing related to the reading. The student used a skit about George Washington as an example. Another enjoyed his teacher's sense of humor. "My teacher can be really funny sometimes, like when she jumps out of stuff. I like how she does the little voices when we're reading books," he said.

In interviews, parents were clearly attuned to the family atmosphere at Brickell. Parents said that the teachers work well together and also work well with the principal. The teachers were described as motivated and "good with the kids." Parents also mentioned the teachers were effective with their special needs children, and during the school day their kids were "happy to be there."

One parent said, "Teachers need to care for the kids, have an understanding about their family life. To be a friend to the child, that will make the child comfortable with the teacher." Parents frequently mentioned compassion and acceptance of each child as an individual as something distinctive about Brickell. Another parent said the school's best teachers demonstrate "empathy, compassion and making school challenging but letting [kids] know they can do better at everything they do."

Key Findings: Themes and Trends

As Brickell teachers have become comfortable with state standards for achievement, they have incorporated this understanding into effective curricula and worked to find ways to challenge their students in ways that exceed the state standards. The encouragement by district administrators has fostered a willingness to work cooperatively to improve the curriculum, its delivery, and the classroom experience for both teachers and students.

One of four elementary schools in the Defiance public school district, Brickell will be folded into a large elementary school when construction on the new building is completed The projected move will take place during the 2008 – 2009 school year (mid-year). Although the staff is excited about the new and improved facilities, they anticipate challenges in moving from a close-knit group into a larger school.

Brickell has experienced a change in principals between 2004-2005 when it was named a *School of Promise* and the 2005-2006 school year. Under new principal Jim Wyse, Brickell has continued the practices that resulted in its selection as a *School of Promise*, but a more open and collegial environment offers even more support for teachers and, in turn, students. The teachers are happy with the change in leadership. The new principal has fostered more autonomy among teachers than the previous administrator and encourages teacher leadership in the school. The school day is structured to allow for increased collaboration among teachers, and the process is teacher-driven.

Teachers are comfortable using technology in the classroom, and have become strong supporters of Accelerated Reader and Fluent Reader, two computer programs designed to increase student confidence and skill levels. Brickell children enjoy reading, often sharing books among themselves.

The school's strong intervention program is also a cornerstone of its success. The school's two Title I teachers are well integrated into the classroom in addition to their independent work with students, and Title I teachers work collaboratively with other staff. School administration also utilizes substitute teachers in classrooms beginning at the start of the calendar year in January to allow for small-group instruction in specific content areas to help students prepare for the proficiency tests the following March.

A key to Brickell's success is the caring, family-like atmosphere of the school. Parents believe the teachers connect with the students as individuals. They are praised for addressing each child's needs and for being available to talk to parents. The school also has programs, such as Adopt A Student, in place for at-risk students.

A strong positive asset to this school is community support, particularly from the Salvation Army. The organization provides clothing and school supplies to children at the beginning of the year, along with answering special requests during the school year. Even though parental involvement in the school has been limited, the school is making efforts to increase involvement through more flexible scheduling for parent-teacher conferences, and more frequent and detailed communication about student progress.

Another important part of Brickell's success is holding its students to high standards. Like other *Schools of Promise*, Brickell has high expectations for achievement. Teachers are comfortable using technology to assist their students in mastering necessary grade-level skills. They also want to foster a love of learning that will continue throughout the child's entire life.

"Lessons Learned" at Brickell Elementary School

1. The school delivers rigorous instruction aligned to the standards.

- Under strong and directive leadership from previous principal, and continuing under current principal Jim Wyse, all instruction at Brickell is aligned to the state standards.
- Administrators believe it was important for teachers to gain increased experience and
 understanding of the state standards, and by providing opportunities for teachers to
 contribute to the development of the district curriculum, giving them the opportunity to
 review old state tests, and by creating opportunities for teachers to collaborate and
 share information and ideas, they were able to increase teachers' confidence and
 understanding of the state standards.

- Teachers collaborate vertically and horizontally to align instruction to the standards; teachers collaborate in common planning time built into the school day and on their own time outside of the school day.
 - Administrators utilize substitute teachers (former Brickell teachers) to create collaboration time for teachers. Substitutes teach at one grade level once a week to create a 90-minute planning time for teachers. The substitutes progress from one grade level to the next so all teachers had an opportunity to work with their grade-level colleagues.
 - Teachers use the time to talk about the curriculum, discuss what they are currently doing, and make plans for future activities.
- The school district is piloting a new standards-based grade card system to communicate standards more clearly, and to help teachers keep track of what standards they are covering and when. Through the Pinnacle program, students will receive a more detailed report on their progress in meeting state standards.
- The core of the curriculum is a strong emphasis on reading and phonics.
 - Teachers and administrators believe Accelerated Reader, Fluent Reader, and Saxon Phonics are integral to their students' success in reading. The phonics program provides a strong foundation in literacy and self-paced computer programs provide detailed feedback to students on progress toward goals and can be customized to meet students' individual needs.

2. The school provides leadership that results in continuous improvement of instruction.

- In 2005-2006, a new principal joined the staff at Brickell. The previous administrator, although clear in his demand for high academic standards, did not cultivate an environment of trust and mutual respect.
 - To improve morale and empower teachers, the current administration solicits teachers' feedback regularly, often through informal interaction in the lunchroom and hallways, and has increased teachers' role in decision-making in the school. He provides teachers more regular and detailed feedback and has begun to conduct classroom observations.
- Teachers began to collaborate out of necessity because of a lack of feedback from the
 previous principal. Over time they formed a cohesive group. Collaboration has evolved
 into a key form of teachers' professional development at Brickell.
- Professional development is generally driven by the district and emphasizes collaboration, classroom management/discipline, content area knowledge, and understanding and application of state content standards.
 - In 2005, professional development focused on technology and speakers included educational and technology consultants, speaking on use of programs like IPhoto. SmartBoards. and website development.
 - At the school level, the principals coordinate professional development during two-hour delays (at least four per year). These are used to review state content standards, benchmarks, and Brickell's test results to look for trends and determine areas of instructional need. As a group, teachers examine achievement scores, compare them to scores in other districts and discuss certain content areas.
- Teacher leaders are important in the professional development of their peers at Brickell.
 - Teachers have been instrumental in finding and piloting interactive reading programs and the school's phonics program.
 - The school embraces technology and teachers collaborate with one another and the district technology coordinator to implement new technology in their classrooms.

 In the next two years the district will be consolidating the four existing elementary schools into one new school, and teachers are excited but concerned about losing their close-knit group. The district has begun the process of consolidating by involving teachers in the decision-making process and soliciting their feedback about the new facility.

3. The school designs instruction to ensure every student's success.

- The school has a comprehensive intervention program that is seen as an integral part of its success.
 - Students are identified through various assessments (i.e., STAR, diagnostic, achievement, practice tests, etc.), and through teacher recommendation. In the 2004-2005 school year, instruction was provided in the five subjects tested on the proficiency tests (reading, mathematics, writing, citizenship, and science). In 2005-2006, the third and fourth grade teachers concentrated on preparing students for the three achievement tests (reading, mathematics, and writing). Intervention was also provided to grades K, 1, & 2 in reading, mathematics, and writing.
 - Two Title I teachers work with students one-on-one and in small groups to provide individualized support, and they work closely with classroom teachers to coordinate instruction, using the same computer programs (e.g., Accelerated Reader).
 - Substitute teachers are utilized once a week between January and March to provide additional support to students preparing for proficiency tests, and instruction is delivered to small groups of 10 students who rotate through topics in 20-minute sessions to prepare for proficiency testing.
- Interactive reading programs are used in all grades; teachers use them to closely monitor student progress. The programs are fully integrated into the curriculum at Brickell and receive staunch support from teachers and administrators alike.
 - Accelerated Reader and Fluent Reader allow students to read fiction and nonfiction books at their own pace and take online tests with immediate feedback on their progress in meeting reading goals.

4. The school engages parents and the community to support student success.

- Parent involvement at Brickell was not characterized as high by teachers and administrators. The school has a high proportion of economically disadvantaged students (50 percent receive free and reduced lunch), and some parents have a reduced comfort level being in a school environment.
 - Barriers to increased parent communication and involvement can, at times, be low levels of English proficiency among Hispanic parents and low levels of literacy among economically disadvantaged families.
- Local partnerships have been cultivated to increase parent engagement and to support families.
 - The school supports Hispanic Awareness Day in partnership with the local Hispanic community organization.
 - The school piloted the Families and Students Together (FAST) program to support whole families, enhance family functioning, and prevent at-risk students from academic failure.

 The Salvation Army is an important partner for various student and family needs, and the school counselor coordinates efforts with this partner.

5. The school creates a culture where every individual feels valued.

- Brickell has created a culture of respect based on a foundation of discipline and structure; discipline sets the stage for learning.
- Teachers at Brickell employ positive reinforcement to recognize student achievement.
 Students receive frequent praise and small treats from teachers, and they also receive achievement certificates for reaching goals in Accelerated Reader.
- The administration and teachers are united in their belief that it is critical to provide both emotional and instructional support to all students.
 - Students, teachers, parents, and administrators agree that the culture is very much a "family" atmosphere, and teachers serve a "motherly" role for students. A strong, positive climate was observed in all classrooms, and students mentioned the warm, caring relationships they have with teachers in focus groups.
 - All school staff takes the interest of the children to heart and makes their wellbeing an important priority.
 - An "Adopt-a-Student" mentoring program pairs teachers and the principal with student "buddies" to offer additional support and resources for students.