



Schools of Promise **Case Study Report**

**Conrad Elementary School
Newark, Ohio**



Conrad Elementary School Newark, Ohio

Conrad Elementary School in Newark, Ohio, was selected for the present research on the basis of its many distinctive characteristics, but primarily because of the high levels of achievement demonstrated by students in reading.

Table 1. School and district characteristics

	Conrad Elementary School, 2004-2005	Newark City School District, 2004-2005
Percent Minority	14.2%	8.8%
Percent Poverty	71%	40.3%
Years as a School of Promise (reading)	1	
District Typology		Urban
Student Enrollment	214	6,411
Attendance—all students	94.0%	94.3%
Attendance —Economically disadvantaged students	93.7%	93.3%
Attendance —Minority students (African American)	92.6%	94.2%
Attendance —Minority students (Multiracial)	95.0%	94.0%
Student mobility: Students in building less than one year	17.9%	16.8%
Number of teachers	14 ¹	493
Average teacher salary	\$44,855	\$46,427

Source: Ohio Department of Education.

School History

Newark City Schools is the largest district in Licking County with nearly 7,000 students. According to the district Website, voters recently approved a \$130 million project to build four new elementary schools, two middle schools and renovate the remaining buildings with help from the Ohio School Facilities Commission. Conrad will be combined in a new building with another elementary school in 2007.

Conrad Elementary School currently serves students in pre-Kindergarten through fifth grade living in the school's east Newark neighborhood. Conrad Elementary School has considered itself the heart of its community for more than 100 years. All students live within walking distance of the school.

¹ The school had 12 teachers during the 2005-2006 academic year.

School Mission Statement

The mission of Conrad Elementary is to ensure that every student commits to and demonstrates academic success, outstanding character, and citizenship. Conrad accomplishes this through the cooperative efforts of a caring and committed school community. Also, faculty and staff have aligned the curriculum to Ohio's Academic Content Standards and use research-based methods of instruction including the Literacy Collaborative and Everyday Mathematics.

Table 2. School and district performance on state indicators

State Indicators 2004-2005 <i>State requirement is 75%</i>		
	Conrad Elementary School	Newark City School District
Third Grade Achievement Test		
Reading	91.7%	82.6%
Mathematics	66.7%	74.3%
Fourth Grade Proficiency Test		
Reading	80.0%	77.7%
Writing	80.0%	88.5%
Mathematics	71.4%	59.5%
Science	60.0%	68.2%
Social Studies	65.7%	79.4%
Attendance (<i>State requirement is 93%</i>)	94.0%	94.3%
Number and percent of state indicators met	4 out of 8	10 out of 23
Rating	Continuous Improvement	Effective

Source: Ohio Department of Education

Teacher characteristics

Teachers provided demographic information on the teacher survey. Almost all teachers at Conrad (90 percent) are female and Caucasian. Forty-three percent have a master's degree. On average, teachers at Conrad have 14 years total teaching experience and 10 years' experience at this school. Ten percent of teachers are certified by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) and 10 percent have an advanced teaching certificate. All teachers are considered Highly Qualified (HQT).

Schools of Promise Case Study Methodology

On Wednesday, January 18th 2006, a four-person research team conducted a one-day site visit to Conrad Elementary School. Activities conducted during the day were as follows:

Classroom observations

Observation of instruction was conducted in six classrooms during the site visit. Each observation lasted 30 minutes. Two mathematics classes were observed (a fourth-grade and a second-grade class) and four reading classes were observed (one class each in first, second, third, and fourth grades). Class sizes ranged from 11 to 17 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. Each observation lasted 30 minutes. 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 75 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. Following each observation, teachers were asked 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 interviews

Individual interviews were conducted with 10 teachers. Interviews lasted between 15-25 minutes, 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.

Administrator interview

An individual interview was conducted with school principal Sara Brlas. The interview lasted approximately one hour. 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= 21) 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 21 surveys were received, representing a response rate of 100 percent.

Student focus groups

To gather feedback from students, three student focus groups were conducted. There were four students in each group. One group consisted of third grade students, one group consisted of fourth grade students, and one group consisted of fifth grade students. 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 23 telephone interviews of parents. Most respondents (74 percent) were female. 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. Conrad Elementary School shows evidence of all these components.

In addition to investigating ODE’s “Five Lessons Learned from Successful Schools” and how Conrad 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. Conrad principal, teachers, students, and parents consider effective teachers to share some common characteristics:

- Teachers must enjoy working with students and have a positive attitude in the classroom; they should build and cultivate personal connections with their students and be able to develop a rapport with students.
- Teachers should possess strong classroom management skills.
- Teachers should differentiate instruction to meet the needs of students with various learning styles.
- Teachers must be empathetic toward the students but hold them to high standards for achievement and accountability.
- Teachers must be knowledgeable in the subject area being taught.
- Teachers must know the Ohio content standards and align instruction to the standards.

These themes are recurrent throughout the following Five Lessons.

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

Alignment of curriculum to the state standards

Alignment to state content standards is the hallmark of education at Conrad School. The teachers and Principal Sara Brlas are devoted to the state guidelines and make the important commitments of time and resources to implement their program. To make sure all teachers understood the standards and measures of achievement, two full days of staff development prior to the start of the school year focused on the state standards. "We did a planning day, and [teachers] gave their time freely because they know that the standards make things better," Brlas said. On the second of the two days, the district curriculum director met with teachers to look at content standards, testing and how to fit the standards to instruction.

"We have aligned everything very closely with the State Content Standards. Those are our bibles," Brlas said. The teachers talked about the importance of knowing how achievement will be measured so that students can be prepared to reach the necessary benchmarks. Students recognize the importance of the achievement tests and work during classroom time to prepare. "She [the teacher] gives us a lot of practice tests so we can get ready for the achievement test so we can pass it," one student said.

Through continual assessment of the students, teachers identify children who are having difficulties with the timed tests and work to find tailored approaches to meet the needs of these students, even if this just means pacing themselves through the test. In one case, a student said, "My teacher gives me this timer so I can go a lot faster so when I do my test on the practice test I know to go faster for my real test."

Literacy and Mathematics Programs

A key element of Conrad's alignment efforts has been the commitment of resources to retain a full-time literacy coordinator who works with teachers to implement a Literacy Collaborative program in the classrooms. The Literacy Collaborative is a long-term professional development program designed "to provide a comprehensive, school-wide approach to literacy instruction in the primary and intermediate grades."² The model was developed at The Ohio State University in 1986, but according to the Literacy Collaborative website, formal training in the collaborative began in 1993. According to the district website, the Board of Education has adopted the Literacy Collaborative district-wide. The purpose of the research-based program is to increase children's literacy skills and foster a love of reading by providing training in the most effective literacy practices and individual teacher coaching.

All grades implement the literacy program, consisting of an extended two-and-a half to three hour instruction period focusing on a range of literary skills. It consists of guided reading where the teachers work with needs-based reading groups. While teachers are doing guided reading, other children are doing independent work. The technique is called Managed Independent Learning. The literacy coordinator described the program as "literacy based centers" including shared reading, interactive writing, and a "writer's workshop."

The kids are writing for an hour at a time. Sometimes the topic is given to the kids, but most of the time it's their choice what they get to write. The teachers start each writer's workshop with a mini-lesson that may be the focus for the day, whether it's working on details, or it's working on editing, it is whatever the needs of the group are. Within the writer's workshop there's also guided writing for kids who are

² For more information, see <http://www.lcosu.org/>

showing needs different from the whole group. So basically, we're really trying to differentiate instruction through the Literacy Collaborative, looking at the needs and providing guided groups for whatever the needs are.

Journal writing is an important part of daily teaching and applies to all subjects. For mathematics a journal is used both in the classroom and for homework assignments; this is a prepared product that accompanies the school's mathematics curriculum, Everyday Mathematics (see below). In mathematics, the journal assignments are connected to the topics covered in class. In other subjects, journals are an important component of the school's emphasis on writing across the curriculum, and they are an important component of the school's Literacy Collaborative. Students may fill up several notebooks over the course of the year. Teachers supply students with journal topics or prompts, students may use the journal to write on their own or journal writing may be assigned based on reading. The journal is also a resource for students. It has study links and pages that can be torn out to use for homework assignments. Because of the commitment to the use of the journal, some teachers provide students 20 to 30 minutes a day to write in their journals.

Journals are also a tool used by teachers to determine whether students have completed their homework; parents must sign the journal related to reading done at home for parent-teacher communication on reading assignments. The writing journals also can serve as an opportunity to continue practicing skills during long breaks from school. "If we have a long break like we did for winter break, we usually have to do a report and write more in our journal, like our writing journal," said one student. The principal sees the emphasis on writing to be critical. "If they can't write they aren't going to pass the test or do well in life, which is even more important," Principal Brlas said.

To implement mathematics standards, the district adopted the Everyday Mathematics, a comprehensive pre-kindergarten through 6th grade mathematics curriculum developed by the University of Chicago School Mathematics Project (UCSMP). Sometimes called "Chicago Math," Everyday Mathematics focuses on problem solving, application of mathematical concepts, and use of technology as opposed to memorization and "drill."³ Because the focus is somewhat different than more "traditional" curricula, the program was initially met with some skepticism among teachers at Conrad. The principal said:

Every teacher hates it the first year because they say, '[Students] can't do it,' but by the end of the year, they realize they did not have high enough expectations for their students. They can do it. They can do far more than what we've been expecting them to do before.

Everyday Mathematics and Literacy Collaborative have been implemented district wide. This allows for seamless horizontal alignment of the curriculum and creates a common platform for collaboration between the schools. Teachers at Conrad meet with teachers at another of Newark's elementary schools, Ben Franklin Elementary, several times a year to talk about alignment and share the insights they have gained teaching from the two programs.

Alignment to state standards has been an important reason for Conrad's success. Teachers and administration work closely to make sure the standards are clear and students are making real progress in the classroom. The full-time literacy coordinator is a key resource in preparing teachers and in supporting classroom instruction. By sharing experiences and keeping a strong commitment to the standards, Conrad has been able to have a positive impact in preparing children for sustained academic success.

³ For more information, see <http://everydaymath.uchicago.edu/>.

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

Conrad is led by an effective principal who sees her main role on the Conrad team as the person in charge of motivating teachers and students toward achievement. Principal Sara Brlas works on pointing out the teachers' strengths and building on them. By finding what already is good about the staff and school, the principal has built on existing strengths at Conrad and motivated the faculty to consider and accept change. Brlas has been a strong advocate for her teachers' and students' needs. "The teachers respond and they're more open to change when they feel they are being valued," said the literacy coordinator. "I was here before [she came], and we weren't being valued. We really weren't."

Principal Brlas taught in the Newark school district for 19 [16] years before becoming principal at Conrad, and was formerly in charge of student performance data analysis for the district, a position that gave her good experience for her current role. In the past, teachers at Conrad felt the district administration treated their school differently because of the high proportion of economically disadvantaged students at the school; some felt "shut off" from the rest of the district. A change in administration both at the school and district level created a new atmosphere. One staff member said, "Together they've created a sense of confidence around here for the staff which then in turn, I think, is imparted to the kids."

The principal also supports teachers with a frequent presence in the classroom. "Walk-throughs are a way to evaluate and support," the principal said. "We started here in Newark to do a kind of collaborative walk-through as well. Not only do I walk into the classrooms and note things very quickly but we also have a collaborative of three principals and we go to each other's buildings." When asked about the benefit of the collaborative of principals, Principal Brlas notes the importance of collaboration at the administrative level. "You have three sets of eyes, ears, minds looking in a classroom versus one," she said. "We are able to talk about [what we see]—three administrators, three levels of experience, different experiences." This process, Principal Brlas feels, has helped her help teachers be more effective.

The collaborative was established by the district superintendent to give principals the opportunity to compare the results at one another's school—as well as to note similarities. The principals were initially encouraged to meet once a month, but Principal Brlas' team met weekly for walk-throughs. The collaborative initially consisted of administrators with similar schools (i.e., elementary), but next year principals will be grouped slightly differently, across grade levels—elementary, middle, and high school principals will be part of the same collaborative. "This will give us a different view in the walk throughs, Principal Brlas said. "The truth is, we are in this thing together." An added benefit of the collaborative is that it builds camaraderie, respect, and a sense of being part of the same team among administrators. That's very important," Principal Brlas said. "We have to be a team to be successful for the district, both in the building and at the district level."

Brlas intends her walk-throughs to support and encourage better instruction. She discusses her observations with teachers. "If I see strengths, then I'm going to talk about that to strengthen their base. If I see weaknesses then that's when I'm going to be looking for help to give them." When one new teacher experienced some difficulties, the walk-through helped Principal Brlas diagnose the problem. She set up classroom observations and discussed ways to support and help with the teacher's mentor.

It is clear that teachers appreciate the effective leadership shown by Principal Brlas in creating a work environment with clear expectations and an atmosphere of trust and respect. From responses on the teacher survey, nearly all teachers believe the principal is consistently supportive of them as individuals and as a staff. The feedback they receive has helped improve teaching and learning while keeping them up-to-date on state, local, and national educational policies and initiatives.

Teachers know they are held to high standards for delivering instruction, and all teachers agreed that the faculty and staff have a shared vision.

Principal Brlas takes an active role to improve the learning environment for the students by reviewing the various assessment scores to determine who is not performing well and then matching these students with teachers whose teaching styles fit the students' learning styles. In part, matches are based on how well the student and teacher interacted and thus create better working relationships that contribute to achievement.

Principal Brlas also carefully considered students' learning environment. She worked with teachers to reduce distractions in the classroom, and increased small group instruction. She also thinks it's important to make sure students' testing environments small and supportive. She said, "I [bring] everybody I can that's certified into those classrooms to help.... whether it's tutoring or actually in the testing situation, a teacher [is] right there to keep them going...encourage them."

When she arrived as Principal, Ms. Brlas reviewed all Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) for students with disabilities at Conrad to be sure they were implemented properly for every student. Then she turned to summer school. "We couldn't get our kids to go to summer school because the summer school is on the other side of town at the supposedly 'rich' school," she said. "Our kids, our parents, didn't want to be over there." So, Principal Brlas wrote proposals to offer summer school in three schools in the district so that children could go to their local school instead of traveling across town. For Conrad, this was important because the school is the only one in Newark that does not provide busing. All of the students live within walking distance, so offering local summer school was an important change.

Strong leadership at Conrad has clearly had a positive impact on student achievement. One consequence of the school's leadership structure, though, has been a slightly lower level of agreement amongst teachers about the importance of their involvement in decision making. Of the teachers who participated in the survey, only a little more than half agreed that teachers are centrally involved in decision making about important educational issues, and a similar percent agreed reasoned educational risk-taking is encouraged and supported.

Professional Development

There was high consensus among teachers, however, regarding professional development. According to the principal, the Conrad staff meets together and reflects on issues, questions, suggestions, and accomplishments as a summer activity. Coupled with the school-wide Title I needs assessment data and test results, the staff makes a collaborative plan. The school administrator assesses the plan and develops activities to meet the identified needs.

Due to budget constraints, professional development opportunities at Conrad are primarily internal and focus on specific topics. The students are released from school an hour early once a month so the teachers can conduct and attend the targeted professional development sessions. In addition to the early-release meetings, the principal calls a monthly staff meeting where additional collaboration or professional development may occur. There are also two to three in-service days per year for professional development. Sometimes, professional development centers on understanding the low-income culture of Conrad's community. The teachers have read and discussed books such as Ruby Payne's *Framework of Poverty* to help them understand the lives of their students.

Literacy is an important focus for professional development. Conrad has one full time literacy coordinator who works closely with each teacher in her school; she does not teach students but spends all her time working directly with teachers on literacy. Teachers attend three half-day

sessions of professional development to help each grade level use the literacy program most effectively. The literacy coordinator provides staff development for the primary teachers at her site, including coaching, guided meetings, and support to the other teachers.

In Literacy Collaborative, school literacy coordinators initially participate in a year-long training course then every year afterwards attend annual professional development institutes—the principal estimates about 10 or more days per year are dedicated to the coordinator’s ongoing training; in turn, the coordinator provides training and coaching for teachers in her school. She works directly with the principal to develop priorities for teacher development.

The Newark school district has implemented the Literacy Collaborative in cooperation with Ohio State University for many years. Literacy Coordinators are coaches for literacy collaborative, keeping teachers up to date and on track. Conrad has just one coordinator, but all other schools in the district have two: one primary coordinator for Kindergarten through second and an intermediate coordinator for grades three through five. The principal, Literacy Coordinator, and several volunteer teachers work together as a literacy team. The team meets formally once a month but meets informally “all the time” according to the principal. She said, “It’s a way to connect to the teachers and to the Literacy Collaborative.” Frequent meetings are viewed as helpful by Principal Brlas and her team. The group identifies problems and brainstorms ways to address them. They also identify staff development opportunities.

Another important form of professional development at Conrad is collaboration. Teachers collaborate to ensure that they are using the most effective instructional methods. There are two teachers at each grade level, and coordination between the two is ongoing. “I’m in constant contact with my fourth grade teammate,” said a fourth-grade teacher. “She’s always sharing things with me, and I try to do the same for her. Even the third-grade teachers – we talk quite a bit for ideas.” Team meetings are also used to encourage collaboration. Teachers work on lesson plans together. If an instructional activity works they share it with other teachers at the team meetings or in staff meetings. The school also uses an “issue bin” in the office where teachers can post ideas or voice concerns.

On the teacher survey, teachers were asked about the focus of their professional development activities in the previous year. More than half of teachers (60 percent) focused on understanding and applying Ohio content standards. Collaboration and differentiated instruction were also focal points for teachers. Table 3 summarizes the results.

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?⁴	Which areas apply to you?	Which <u>one</u> area was your primary focus?
Understanding and applying Ohio content standards to student instruction	60.0%	20.0%
Collaboration for improving instruction	60.0%	20.0%
Instructional strategies to meet the learning needs of diverse groups of students or students with different learning styles	55.0%	20.0%
In depth study of the academic content of the subjects I teach	35.0%	20.0%
Strategies for creating and maintaining safe and orderly classrooms and schools	20.0%	10.0%
Using assessments to gauge student mastery of Ohio content standards	60.0%	--
Using research results for decision making	40.0%	--
Strategies for engaging parents and families	25.0%	--
Strategies for engaging stakeholders as active members of the school communities	5.0%	--

Teachers' views are confirmed by the school's professional development activities for the 2005-2006 school year. The whole staff participated in an eight-hour program on alignment to standards and analysis of student data. In two other eight-hour sessions, the entire staff worked on curriculum and assessment mapping in both reading and mathematics. The literacy coordinator is a key resource in professional development as she provides coaching to staff members who have been identified as people who would benefit from the extra attention.

Professional development at Conrad is a team activity. All teachers say they work together to improve teaching and learning based on state or national standards. They see one another as professional peers who are interested in sharing important classroom lessons and helping one another deal with challenges they are facing in the classroom. At the center of this collaboration is a school-wide focus on the need for professional development activities to be aimed at understanding and applying state standards.

To remain effective, teachers emphasized the importance of being open to change and recommend borrowing ideas from veteran teachers. One teacher mentioned she would like to see more professional development geared to keeping a positive attitude toward teaching and toward students. Maintaining a positive attitude is the essence of effectiveness to Conrad teachers and emerged as an important characteristic of effective teachers on the teacher survey.

Teacher preparation

Teachers were asked, "How well-prepared were you to teach this population of students when you first started working at this school?" Almost half (47 percent) said they felt prepared when they started teaching at Conrad. Most teachers related their sense of being prepared to their past experience in various classrooms.

When asked what experiences best prepared them to teach in this school, teachers emphasized "hands-on" experience, either student teaching, working as an aide or in a resource room, or

⁴ These response options were adapted from the Maryland Survey of Teacher Participation in High Quality Professional Development, 2003-04, Maryland State Department of Education

working in the field with at-risk kids as a volunteer. One teacher had experience as a reading specialist in Columbus, which helped prepare her for Conrad. Others mentioned student teaching or previous teaching in similar schools. For yet another teacher, coming to Conrad was a way to come home:

I had grown up in this area and Conrad was my elementary school. I was so excited to be back where I had started school. Even though several other districts had called and offered me a job--Conrad was my first choice.

Respondents who felt less prepared gave lack of experience, particularly with an at-risk or economically disadvantaged population, as their reason. "Lower income students have some different needs and issues than the middle to high class students I had been working with in college" said one teacher.

Collaboration with colleagues is seen as essential to teacher preparation. Noting that observations and student teaching did not prepare her for Conrad, one teacher said, "The best experience was, and continues to be, collaboration with colleagues." Respondents are inspired by the ongoing efforts of their fellow staff members. "They are extremely flexible and willing to try with every student here. No child is ever left out of getting the best we can give," a teacher said.

Thinking about recommendations for preparing new teachers to be effective in schools like theirs, several teachers commented that the first year of teaching is overwhelming at any school. One respondent suggested a yearlong residency:

This is much more overwhelming than the student teaching experience. I feel it would be best for new teachers to spend one full year on a residency type basis with an experienced teacher--especially in challenging schools. Ideally, the resident teacher would receive pay as well.

Additional recommendations for training future teachers include a strong mentoring program, longer student teaching, and training on how to deal with problems in the classroom such as behavioral issues and hard-to-teach children. One teacher wrote:

I would like to see [college programs focus] less time on busy-work projects and more training on dealing with the real world of tough kids, anger, bullying, hard to teach children, etc. Teachers also need ways to effectively prevent problems from escalating and to deal with those that do.

Several teachers commented on how important it is for teachers-in-training to gain experience with a wide variety of schools (e.g. rural and urban, high and low income, etc.), and that experience helps teachers relate to the students. "An hour here and there reading with a student doesn't give [a new teacher] the full picture of working in a school of poverty," a teacher said. It takes real time in similar situations to understand the full picture. Teachers also emphasized the importance of understanding the state standards and collaborating with their peers, as one said:

Listen and apply all the training provided by your school district or elsewhere on the proficiency/achievement tests. Collaborate, work together to provide each student with the skills necessary to succeed.

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

Conrad teachers show a high degree of sensitivity to the individual needs of their students and

offer tutoring and special attention to children who are having difficulties. At the school level, the instructional needs of individual students are addressed by a team approach to intervention and through a Title I reading instruction program.

When asked what teachers at Conrad do to help students learn, parents mentioned that teachers provide additional time and one-on-one instruction for students. Several parents reported that teachers provided tutoring and intervention activities after school and during the school day. Parents also indicated that teachers provided them with information that was useful for them to help their children—either by holding a meeting or by sending home notes or instructions.

The Intervention Assistance team includes educators, parents and sometimes the student who needs assistance. As a group, the team considers what has been tried with the student and then brainstorms to determine if other strategies might be adopted. After six weeks, the team reconvenes to determine if the parents, teachers, and student are keeping up with what they said they will do and if the intervention strategies used in the classroom are effective—it's important to make sure the whole team works together. Adjustments are made as necessary. Assessment is ongoing to target low performers as quickly as possible. A full-time and a half-time intervention specialist work individually with students on an IEP.

For students experiencing difficulties in reading, the school's two Title I specialists develop a personal approach that is maintained over long periods of time. Some students have been working with the same Title I specialist for as long as three years. "I really get to know them and where their needs are," said one Title I teacher. Through Title I and Ohio Reads funding, books are purchased to be sent home with students for the summer. According to Principal Brlas, the grant was written to connect parents and the school community with reading. "Too many kids don't have books at home," the principal said. "Our goal is to get books in their hand, especially during the summer." If students don't read over the summer break, their achievement is hard to sustain over the summer. "We build packets of books for the kids to read over the summer," the principal said. "It's right there for them, even if the parents don't encourage it, the resources are there for them. Students can earn small prizes for reading over the summer and are recognized at an assembly when school resumes in the fall.

At Conrad, the school's Title I specialist is also trained in Reading Recovery,⁵ part of the Literacy Collaborative. Reading Recovery is an early intervention program designed to assist children in first grade who are having difficulty learning to read and write.

Personal tutoring plays a key role in Conrad's approach to helping individual students. When needed, teacher tutoring sessions are offered to students. The teachers are matched with students based on individual needs and personalities. Third and fourth graders receive the highest priority for tutoring, but in March, the focus switches to the primary grades to prepare for state testing. Tutoring can take place during the school day (sometimes over students' lunch periods), in and out of the classroom, and before and after school. Teachers who tutor before and after school are paid for the extra time they invest, but some teachers volunteer their time for students. Big Brothers/Big Sisters also come to Conrad to tutor students at lunch time and during the day. Tutoring is an important part of the school's intervention strategy. "We feel it's important to intervene immediately when [students] first start having problems," the principal said. "It's better to catch problems during the school year rather than wait until summer to catch them up."

Conrad supplements the teacher tutoring with numerous student tutors from Denison University in nearby Granville, Ohio. Denison University provides access to partnerships with fraternities as well as individual students who are considering education as a career, not to mention tutors from

⁵ See www.readingrecovery.org for more information about this program.

America Reads. The career-minded professionals tend to participate in the Ohio Reads tutor program and work directly with assigned students. The fraternity members serve as school volunteers and sometimes as tutors. The school has built strong relationships with Denison as well as neighboring OSU-Newark branch and Mt. Vernon Nazarene University. The principal says the tutors are indispensable, and as many as 5 to 20 students may assist in Conrad classrooms during a semester. The principal says this experience is important for the college students as well as the elementary students:

I get [the college students] in those classrooms and they are helping. So many of them are from their first education class. I have my teachers put them to work. They need to know whether or not they are cut out for teaching, what kind of work they need to do nowadays. It's far different than it used to be. They have to work! It's not a nine-month job. You've always got to be thinking about what you are going to do to engage students.

Tutors are available both during and after school for additional help. "Sometimes on a test, if you are having trouble, he'll walk up to you and he'll say 'What's wrong?' and you'll say, 'I can't figure this out,' and he will explain it," a student said. Students who use after-school tutors are referred by teachers. Parents must return a signed form to school to indicate their agreement to after-school tutoring.

In observations, teachers and volunteers (university students) were sensitive to students' needs and learning styles. Teachers and aides monitored students and moved around the room to provide help. Students seemed comfortable raising their hands to ask questions. "Sometimes we raise our hands and stuff, but now we have our helper with us and she walks around and she helps us," said a student who was part of a focus group. Teachers also were effective at noticing students who were puzzled. "If we have something that we need to tell [the teacher], she'll come around and help us think of what we need to do and make it easier for us," a student said.

Rules are posted in several classrooms. A school wide program that includes clear behavioral expectations, rewards and consequences sets a standard that the students respect. Few behavioral problems were noticed when researchers visited Conrad. Researchers observed that the classes which were most productive also were the ones with the fewest behavior problems.

All classes observed demonstrated moderate to high levels of concept development in various ways. For example, in a reading class, students were taught about the concept of "personification" in poetry. They received a list of 17 nouns and asked to describe as many of them as they could in 10 minutes. Afterwards, students used their descriptions to write a poem about one of the words.

Another example of concept development was noted in a mathematics class. A monetary value was assigned to each letter of the alphabet, and students were asked to determine how much their names were "worth." The class was asked to consider if longer names would be worth more than shorter ones and explain why. Next, the class placed the names in a sequential list based on their "worth" to see if their predictions were correct.

Teachers frequently use visual support, such as working problems on the board or having a lesson on computer, to help students learn. Students in focus groups commented on how teachers try different strategies to get their points across. "Sometimes she works it out on the board so that you can see it and or she'll have videos on the computer," said a student in a focus group.

To summarize, Conrad students who are having difficulties are quickly identified by individual teachers or the Intervention Team. Once they are identified a plan of action is developed and implemented. Sometimes the teacher takes the lead as a tutor and coach and sometimes another

teacher is brought into the situation to work with the child. Other times students from Denison, Mt. Vernon, or OSU-Newark provide the tutoring. When needed, the Title I Reading Specialist works with the child for as long as is needed. The best approach depends on the needs of the child and what is determined to be in the child's best interests.

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

Conrad Elementary School's 214 students live within walking distance of the school and therefore many are picked up by a parent or other family members. At the end of the school day, teachers will go outside to "intercept" parents if they need to talk. "A lot of our parents come and pick up the kids – that's why I like this school," said a second-grade teacher. "If you had a problem that day, you can call them in and have a little chat."

To encourage parent participation, the entryway into the school has been set up as a Parent Resource Center. A computer is set up in that area for parents to use. There is also a television set where family members can view videos on reading and learn how to support school efforts at home. Formal, scheduled Parent/Teacher Conferences take place twice a year, but letters, notes and phone calls go between school and home regularly. Parents are encouraged to visit the school on Field Day near the end of the year, and anytime throughout the year as well.

"Conferences don't just happen just twice a year," Principal Brlas emphasizes. Grade-level parent meetings, at least two to four of them, are held throughout the year. The school's Intervention Assistance Team also meets with parents and students every 4 to 6 weeks. Principal Brlas encourages teachers to constantly reach out to parents and initiate a conference whenever problems arise. In some cases, parents may initiate a conference themselves (although this happens less frequently, Brlas acknowledges). "Teachers know need to conference the minute a parent needs communication," she said. "My expectation is that they all do, and they do it." The only problem Brlas sees, however, is poor attendance among parents at conference opportunities. "Parents rely on us to do what we need to do," she said.

In telephone interviews conducted after the site visit, parents were asked about their level of involvement at the school. Most of the parents were not volunteers at the school, but they were fairly uniform in agreeing that teachers encourage parents to talk about student progress, welcome parents to visit classrooms, and care about the students. Almost all parents interviewed agreed that Conrad Elementary helps parents and families become involved in the school.

Parents said they are encouraged by teachers and administrators to become involved in the school. They mentioned the PTO, as well as bake sales, family dinners, an ice cream social, field trips, and class activities, such as helping with a play or assisting in the classroom. Those who did volunteer assisted with the PTO, field trips, school carnival, or class parties. "The school is community oriented, and they always invite the parents to be involved," said one parent.

Parents did not feel as strongly about contributing to decisions regarding school policy. About half agreed that parents are involved in decisions the school makes. Some decisions in which parents felt involved include construction of a new school, fundraisers, field trips and other classroom activities.

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

Conrad's students come from families that face economic challenges. Every student at Conrad receives a free breakfast every day. Teachers commented that some of the students come from

families in turmoil and may have little structure at home. Thus, some have adopted negative behaviors. Teachers believe these problems can be corrected by high expectations and positive reinforcement. They feel they have an important role to play in providing structure in the classroom that can lead to fulfillment of these high expectations. "You must create a classroom atmosphere where there are high expectations for each and every student," one teacher said. Teachers note that the predictability of the school day, including free breakfast and lunch, gives some Conrad students a needed sense of security.

Teachers work very hard to cultivate strong relationships. "We have a very, very caring staff... the staff really looks at kids as individuals, and they spend a lot of extra time volunteering to help tutor," said a first-grade teacher. "It's a very caring school." Principal Brlas also believes relationship-building is the foundation for quality at her school. A respondent to the teacher survey best summarized teachers' level of involvement:

Yes, Conrad kids can be some of the best and some of the worst, but over the years I have watched staff members fight for their right to an education that works for them. It takes lots of time and effort. I also watch teachers tutor on their own time and mentor at-risk students.

Parents recognize the importance of the connections between teachers and the children and said the relationships make the school special or unique compared to other schools. Parents describe Conrad as a "personable" school that is part of the community. Conrad, they said, is their neighborhood school. "Their staff is wonderful. Anytime you need anything, they are there for you and the kids," said a parent.

Compassion and kindness are not the only characteristics that go into creating a positive culture. Praise is continuous. A primary teacher said:

Everything from when they first learn to tie their shoes, to crossing the street the right way, you just praise them non-stop. It's very important to encourage them in every way because praising them is how they are going to feel confident about themselves and be able to succeed in the future.

In focus groups, students mentioned positive reinforcement used by teachers. One student mentioned the class will sometimes be rewarded with a break from their work to "do something fun like a game." The student said the same teacher will let class members read a book or do something on their own if they finish an assignment while others are still working.

One student was particularly happy at Conrad, and showed a strong positive emotional connection to the school:

I've been here all my life since kindergarten and I just like this school because there's a new challenge every day. They're not too strict—if you're doing something bad, you're obviously going to get in trouble—but they're not cracking down everywhere where you don't have a minute to breathe. I just love the teachers here and they're all so nice to you! This school is just a great school.

The teachers are open to the culture and backgrounds of their students. They avoid being judgmental. "It's important not to judge [students] because of their background. They can't control their background," said a second-grade teacher. The teachers and administrators cultivate a climate of mutual respect between teachers and students. As mentioned early rules for good behavior are posted in many classrooms and teachers reinforce them. This respect helps students interact with authority figures and treat their peers nicely. "There is mutual respect between

students and staff, and that is one thing we certainly insist upon. I insist upon it,” said the principal.

The principal provided a lesson in mutual respect to the parents shortly after she arrived. She was warned that the parents would talk throughout a student program, would not remove their hats and would cut in front of others if they arrived late. Brlas addressed the parents before the program began. “I was not condescending to them. I told them about what a great group of kids they had, they needed to respect them, and this is how they can show their kids their respect. They responded beautifully,” she said.

This respect leads to character-building, which is part of the curriculum. A third grade teacher serves as character coordinator. Character education is built on six characteristics, including being trustworthy, responsible and caring. Positive behavior is rewarded. Teachers say they see the results of classroom instruction regarding character on the playground and throughout the school.

In interviews, parents mentioned how their children respond well to positive reinforcement and the character education program. The character education program includes a group called the Conrad Cub Club, which gives points for learning and exhibiting good character traits. Parents believe the club reward system is helpful. “They have different clubs for the kids and [my daughter] loves it,” said one parent. Students also are fond of the “Cub Club.” One student said, “It’s a good thing and kids will learn that if they’re good that they could be in the Conrad Cub Club.

The school staff collaboratively created the “Cub Club” one year during the school’s pre-school staff development during their discussions on how to address the school’s needs that year. The school holds an assembly every nine weeks. Every month, a particular trait is emphasized—for example, one month respect may be emphasized. Each classroom chooses one student who they think best demonstrates respect. At the assembly, the students are recognized, and parents are invited to attend. “Everyone has the opportunity to be in the Club depending on academics, behavior, or attendance,” the principal said. Although students receive “trinkets” as awards, the prizes are not the most important aspect of the Club. “It’s about celebration much more so than reward,” Brlas said.

In interviews, teachers explained how they use behavior modification techniques as a way to manage the classroom environment. One teacher explained a card system in which a green card signals good behavior, a yellow card serves as a warning, a blue card signals a loss of recess time and a red card means a visit with the principal. Most teachers used a variation of this method to encourage appropriate behavior.

Parents described their children’s teachers as “loving,” “caring,” and “wonderful.” They said the teachers commonly “go above and beyond to work with anything you need.” Some parents cited examples of how teachers had worked individually with their children when additional help or support was needed.

Attentiveness, patience, sensitivity and understanding were the characteristics parents gave when they were asked about the qualities of effective teachers. Positive student-teacher relationships were seen as most important. “The teachers are personal with the students. They get to know [my son] as a person and not just a student,” a parent said.

Commenting that good teachers must care about their students, parents said teachers at Conrad “understand what each child needs.” The quality of understanding was applied to understanding the children’s educational needs, for example, when the student needs extra help in mastering a skill or concept, as well as to understanding social needs, when the student might need extra emotional support or understanding. “The teachers are unreal. They went out of their way to help [my son] while me and my husband were going through a divorce,” a mother said.

In making every student feel valued, compassion and caring are key, according to Conrad's administrators and teachers. "You don't teach for the money," said one teacher. "You become a teacher because you love to work with students and help them to have a better life."

Summary

Conrad is a school where students come together to grow and learn under the caring eye of the faculty and administrative leadership. Principal Sara Brlas and the teachers at Conrad are faithful to the state standards and have focused their school on passing Ohio's achievement tests. Teachers check lesson plans each week to make sure the lessons are in line with the standards. Principal Brlas and her staff also are conscious of the testing environment and have reduced the size of groups taking the tests in order to minimize distractions and provide close monitoring. In preparing the students for the tests, teachers also assist the students in understanding the time limitations on each section.

Conrad students spend about three hours each day working on literacy skills. Through the school's Literacy Collaborative the students experience independent learning activities along with closely monitored group lessons. Both Title I teachers work with each class for 30 minutes a day, dividing the class into thirds, with the third group working with the classroom teacher. Even though a large portion of the day is devoted to literacy, conceptual thinking is not overlooked because it becomes part of the literacy instruction.

Conrad, which serves students in Kindergarten through fifth grade, also uses the Everyday Mathematics curriculum. While the program was met with skepticism when it was first adopted, teachers are now enthusiastic about it. This curriculum provides many opportunities to teach conceptual thinking and daily application of mathematics education. Writing occurs across the curriculum, and students are also encouraged to write as part of their mathematics instruction.

Character education certainly is emphasized at Conrad. High expectations for behavior are in place throughout the building, not just in the classrooms. Age-appropriate reward systems acknowledge strides in learning respect for fellow students, teachers and the principal. The Conrad Cub Club functions as part of the character education program and provides a system of offering rewards to students who exhibit good behavior and positive character traits. Principal Brlas also has the view that parents need to respect the efforts of their children by showing appreciation for their accomplishments.

Principal Brlas is a strong advocate for her staff and students and is not afraid to push for change when it is needed. For example, she spearheaded a move to hold summer school sessions at Conrad when students were unlikely or unable to attend summer school across town at a different school in the district. Her efforts have contributed to a more supportive atmosphere of trust and respect in the school.

Along with a strong emphasis on academic and behavior standards, Conrad is recognized by the parents as providing a caring atmosphere. When discussing the characteristics of the school, parents readily point out that the teachers are aware of personal or family changes and described the teachers as personable and helpful. The school is an important part of the local community.

The students recognize that school is serious business. They are aware of the extra time and effort teachers put into their jobs. The children also seem to recognize that special assistance, such as setting a timer for a student on a practice test, is meant to help them learn strategies for success. Students know it is important to do well at Conrad because they do not want to let their teachers,

parents or themselves down.

In summary, the success that has been measured at Conrad starts with a committed leader who provides compassion, direction, and targeted resources. It takes teachers who are empathetic to the children in their classrooms and willing to set high expectations and standards for behavior. And finally, it takes a strong commitment to the alignment of curriculum to standards and appropriate intervention to address situations as they develop.

“Lessons Learned” at Conrad Elementary School

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

- Alignment to standards is a critical focus for staff at Conrad. The school invests three full days in staff development (two paid one volunteer) at the start of the school year to address standards and to identify priorities for student achievement.
- State standards are well understood by teachers and clearly explained to students; assessment data are continuously analyzed to improve instruction and measure preparation for testing. The principal formerly coordinated the district’s student performance data analysis efforts and uses that experience in her current role as principal.
- The school, like other Newark City Schools, has a full-time literacy coordinator on staff as part of the Literacy Collaborative. Students receive extended instruction in reading and literacy and engage in writing across the curriculum. The literacy coordinator works solely with teachers, providing training and coaching.
- Everyday Mathematics is used to implement standards-based instruction at Conrad and across the Newark district.

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

- The principal provides support, encouragement, and direction to teachers. She has served as an advocate in her district for the school, students, and staff, and has fostered a positive atmosphere in the school.
- The principal communicates expectations to staff and students clearly and emphasizes the importance of mutual respect.
- Teachers attend three half-day sessions of professional development to help each grade level use the literacy program most effectively. The literacy coordinator works full time to provide staff development for the primary teachers at her site, including coaching, guided meetings, and support to the other teachers.
- Collaboration is an important form of development for teachers; they share responsibilities and coordinate lessons.
- Professional development supports the instructional process and emphasizes understanding and application of state standards, analyzing student data, and differentiating instruction to meet student needs.

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

- Teachers show a high degree of sensitivity to the individual needs of students and offer tutoring or special attention to children who are struggling. Teachers are sensitive to student needs but hold them to high academic standards.

- The Intervention Assistance team plays a key role in identifying at risk students and formulating a coordinated approach to addressing the issues at school and home. The team includes teachers, parents, and the struggling students to identify problems and solutions.
- The two Title I reading specialists play an important role in facilitating intervention and developing sustained, personalized relationships with the children with the greatest needs. The principal emphasizes the importance of the whole team in the intervention process—the principal, Title I specialist, Literacy Coordinator and school psychologist all work together as a team.
- To supplement the faculty efforts, local university students volunteer in the classroom and provide additional tutoring assistance. Students from Denison University, Mt. Vernon Nazarene, and OSU-Newark also benefit from the hands-on experience they receive in Conrad classrooms.

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

- School-to-home communications are encouraged, and since parents pick up their children at the end of the day teachers often meet with parents face-to-face when they need to talk.
- Teachers work hard to cultivate strong relationships with the students and their parents, and parents respect their efforts.
- The Principal has worked to establish a value in the school of mutual respect to encourage a positive parent-teacher relationship.
- The school provides a Parent Resource Center in the entryway, where parents can use a computer, access the Internet, view educational videos, and learn more about what students are doing in the classroom to support student learning at home.

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

- Teachers hold high expectations for students in a supportive environment, but recognize that many come from families facing economic challenges. They work hard to cultivate strong relationships to support their students, and say it is important to avoid being judgmental.
- Teachers respect one another and work collaboratively to improve student performance, a sentiment expressed by the principal as well; the principal expects the same standards of behavior from staff, students, and parents.
- A culture of respect exists between students and teachers, and teachers utilize positive reinforcement to encourage good behavior.