

Abraham Lincoln Elementary School

Belleville Public School District 118

School Context

Belleville Public School District #118, located in southwest Illinois about 17 miles east of St. Louis, Missouri, consists of 8 elementary schools, 2 junior high schools and one early childhood facility with a total enrollment of 3,695 students. Abraham Lincoln Elementary serves 416 students. Compared to the state and the district, Abraham Lincoln Elementary serves a large African-American student population (45%). Both the district and Abraham Lincoln Elementary serve a small percentage of Hispanic students compared to the state; as a result the percentage of English Language Learners at the district and school level is low as well (0.2%). The low-income rates for the district (49%) and Abraham Lincoln Elementary (47.4%) are significantly higher than the state average (37.9%). In spite of the high rate of low-income students, the district has some of the highest achievement scores in the state of Illinois. District schools received Golden Spike Awards, State and National Blue Ribbon School Awards, and in 2003 two elementary schools in the district received Illinois Spotlight School Awards for Academic Achievement. The district superintendent was selected as Illinois Superintendent of the Year in 2004.

The district's basic philosophy is to always look at ways to improve. According to the assistant superintendent looking at "what went right, what went wrong, what needs to continue and what needs to be fixed" is embedded in the culture of the district. The district has a long history of administering local benchmark assessments, analyzing data and using the results to improve instruction.

The district feels a moral obligation to do everything they can for their students so they can reach their potential; teachers say the district always asks the question 'what is the best for our kids?' The superintendent runs a tight ship; most of the policies and procedures at Abraham Lincoln Elementary are initiated by the district. Every principal is seen as 'the CEO of his/her building', but the superintendent feels that site-based management is not practical. The district emphasizes and facilitates collaboration across the district to get input from each campus in setting the district policies.

Curriculum and Academic Goals

The district curriculum is based on the Illinois Learning Standards, but alignment to the state standards is primarily a function of state and local assessments. Most of the district's curriculum development is handled through committee work of teachers. Ideas and issues first go to the District Curriculum Committee. If necessary, a separate subcommittee is set up, for example in the case of new textbook adoption. Teachers have a yearly plan to guide their instruction; curriculum maps break the state standards for each state goal down in more specific skills for grades K-8. The Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum however, states that aligning the curriculum to the state standards is easy to do since the standards are so broad. According to him, the most important element of the standards based system is the state assessment, which he calls "very challenging." The district further aligns their curriculum with their local benchmark assessments.

Student Demographics*:

	<i>Abraham Lincoln EI</i>	<i>Belleville PSD</i>	<i>Illinois</i>
% Low Income	47.4	49.0	37.9
% Limited English-Proficient	0.2	0.2	6.3
% Mobility	9.1	19.2	16.4
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution			
% White	51.0	64.4	58.6
% African-American	45.0	32.0	20.7
% Hispanic	2.6	1.7	17.0
% Asian/Pacific Islander	1.2	1.4	3.6
% Native American	0.2	0.5	0.2

Practices throughout the district promote horizontal and vertical curriculum alignment. The District Curriculum Committee includes representatives from every campus and every grade level to promote vertical curriculum alignment. Teachers across the district meet several times a year in a district-wide grade level meeting, chaired by representatives from the Curriculum Committee, to ensure horizontal curriculum alignment across schools. According to the principal, teachers need to have more than just an understanding of their grade level curriculum; the 3rd grade teacher needs to know about the 2nd grade and 4th grade standards as well. Teachers at Abraham Lincoln Elementary use the district wide early release on Wednesdays for curriculum development and alignment. They also review students' exit test scores and talk to teachers from the previous year to better understand the achievement levels of their incoming class.

Student achievement in the areas of both academics and character is the highest priority for all educators in District #118. The assistant superintendent indicates that the district has informally adopted the ISAT as their measure of success. The unspoken rule for all educators in the district is that 'you have to beat the state average'. Besides academic achievement, the district places a strong emphasis on developing good citizens as well. The district implemented an extensive character education program and each building continues a Character Education committee that fosters and encourages character education throughout the curriculum.

The Character Education Committee at Abraham Lincoln Elementary developed a character education binder to focus on character education. The principal says: "My teachers will tell you that we define success through our academics; I personally define our success by 'are we producing good people?' I want to see social growth as well."

School improvement is handled at the campus level. Improvement goals focus mainly on reading and mathematics. A School Improvement Team of teachers on each campus develops a detailed School Improvement Plan that sets out goals and priorities for the next school year based on student achievement data from national, state and local benchmark assessments. The School Improvement Team at Abraham Lincoln Elementary spends two days in the summer analyzing their data. Most of the improvement goals in Abraham Lincoln's School Improvement Plan focus on reading and mathematics and include both school wide and grade level specific goals. Other improvement goals relate to school safety as measured by parent, student and teacher surveys and school wide technology. Teachers also set individual goals for their grade level. Each goal is accompanied by a detailed integrated action plan and the supporting state standards. The School Improvement Team continues to meet throughout the school year to monitor progress towards the goals. In addition, each principal submits a list of campus goals and objectives to the Superintendent every year.

Staff Selection and Capacity Building

Teacher recruitment is not a challenge for the district because of its strong university partnerships and good reputation. Student teachers from seven different universities work in the district. In addition, the district's good name and teacher compensation package ensure a strong candidate pool. The district is dedicated to hiring the very best people. Although the selection process is basic in nature, teachers indicate that it is very challenging to get a teaching position in the district. Candidates conduct a group interview with all the principals from the district; afterwards the hiring principal conducts a second interview. Abraham Lincoln's principal has a set of 20 interview questions; candidates are given 15 questions in advance, because "teaching is 75% preparation and 25% on your feet." The principal makes a recommendation to the superintendent, who conducts a final interview.

Student Achievement*: Percentage of students scores meeting or exceeding the Illinois Learning Standards for the grades and subjects tested on the ISAT.

<i>A. Lincoln El</i>	2001-02	2002-03
Grade 3		
Reading	82.0	74.7
Mathematics	98.3	97.9
Writing	90.0	88.7
Grade 4		
Science	94.4	100.0
Social Science	88.6	88.3
Grade 5		
Reading	85.7	86.3
Mathematics	89.8	92.2
Writing	79.6	72.5

New principals and teachers receive intensive mentoring and training. Most principals in the district are 'home grown'. The superintendent encourages teachers with outstanding teaching and communication skills to go into administration. New principals are hired a year before they start to function as principal and they spend every second of that year with the retiring principal. For new teachers, the district organizes a new teacher workshop at the beginning of the year. A district wide first-year teachers meeting is organized once a month. Mentor teachers are assigned to newly hired teachers. They are expected to meet once a week, but teachers indicate that they see each other every day. In conjunction with a local university, District #118 offers new teachers the opportunity to get four graduate credit hours by attending a support program specifically designed for first year teachers.

The district expects and enables collaboration between all schools; teachers at Abraham Lincoln Elementary rely on collaboration to improve their teaching. Principals meet with district administrators every month in a principals' meeting. District wide vertical collaboration between teachers takes place in the Curriculum Committee and its subcommittees; horizontal collaboration takes place in the district grade level meetings. Teachers are paid stipends for attending at least two meetings. The district calendar provides early release on Wednesdays to facilitate collaboration. Teachers at Abraham Lincoln Elementary use this time to meet with other teachers in their school and they meet with the principal once a month. Abraham Lincoln's school calendar further facilitates collaboration by scheduling Physical Education and Arts at the same time for each grade.

Teachers from different grade levels work together on the School Improvement Plan. They also meet with teachers from previous and following grade levels, especially at the beginning and end of the school year. The principal and the teachers all state that the collaboration between and within schools is what makes the district so successful.

District #118 provides financial incentives and release time for professional development. Most of the activities are selected at the campus level. Most of the district's professional development budget is spent on stipends allowing members of the School Improvement Teams to meet. Teachers receive a salary credit when they take university courses and move up the salary scale after earning a Master's Degree. The district also pays stipends to teachers taking the Research and Development classes that are offered through the union. The first two days in the district calendar are set aside for professional development. Teachers may also take two leave days for professional development each year. Professional development is not mandated by the district, but teachers indicate they are expected to serve on committees and participate in professional development activities. Teachers also say professional development activities do not need to be mandated since they are so helpful and interesting. The conference that was most heavily attended by teachers in the 2003-04 school year focused on 'dealing with parents'. All professional development opportunities have to be tied to the goals that are outlined in the School Improvement Plan.

Teacher Demographics*:

	<i>A. Lincoln EI</i>	<i>Belleville PSD</i>	<i>Illinois</i>
Average Teaching Experience	--	14.2	13.9
% of Teachers with Bachelors Degrees	--	65.6	53.9
% of Teachers with Master's Degrees	--	34.4	46.0
% of Teachers with Emergency or Provisional Credentials	0.0	0.0	2.5
% of Classes Not Taught by Highly Qualified Teachers	0.0	0.0	2.1

Instructional Programs, Practices and Arrangements

District wide teacher committees select all instructional materials. When the district is considering the adoption of a new instructional program, a committee of teachers will be assigned in such a way that there is representation from each grade level and each campus. This committee reviews several textbooks and invites company representatives from the top three choices to come in for a meeting. The committee sets up guidelines that determine what will be discussed with regard to standards. The final choice is made by consensus, the committee does not vote. If consensus cannot be reached, the district administration gets involved. The textbook committees are thorough in their review. According to the assistant superintendent, studying science programs takes a year and studying programs for English language arts is a two year process. After a new textbook adoption the committee continues to meet for another full year to study the series and identify key chapters. The district also always supports new textbook adoptions with mandatory teacher in-service.

Teachers are free to choose instructional practices and additional resources for their classrooms. Effective methods and materials are shared district wide. All materials are supplied by the district, but teachers are able 'to put their own spin on things'; the primary issue is that students learn the skills. The district does mandate open-ended problem solving, using the character word of the month throughout the curriculum and teaching the violence prevention program. But teachers can choose the instructional practices they want to use in their classroom. For English language arts, some teachers use a whole language approach, some use phonics, and others use

both. Teachers have the freedom to use additional resources as well. At Abraham Lincoln Elementary School, teachers use the teacher-developed Math Masterminds program to supplement the district curriculum. When teachers find materials that work, they share them in the district grade level meetings.

Teachers at Abraham Lincoln Elementary divide core subject responsibilities according to their content specialty. Teachers within the same grade level in grades 4-6 rely on team teaching to share responsibilities for certain subjects. For example, in fifth grade, one teacher teaches mathematics and science to both the fifth grade classes and the other teacher teaches social science and reading. They each teach spelling, writing and grammar to their own classes. The teachers interviewed were positive about this instructional arrangement; teaching the same lesson twice a day allows them to see which approach works best.

Reading and mathematics are the primary focus at Abraham Lincoln Elementary. The principal explains that the district has always been concerned with test scores, but that the main focus these days is on reading and mathematics, since those subjects are included in the state accountability system. Last year all students at Abraham Lincoln Elementary met or exceeded the state standards for science, but there will not be such a strong focus on social science and science any more. The emphasis on reading and mathematics also affects the school's character education program. Teachers introduce character concepts in class, but most of the program is supported through experiential learning on the playground and at lunch.

Instructional Information*:

	<i>A. Lincoln EI</i>	<i>Belleville PSD</i>	<i>Illinois</i>
Pupil/Teacher Ratio	—	22.9	18.4
Average class size			
- Grade K	25.5	23.4	20.6
- Grade 1	22.3	21.6	21.3
- Grade 3	24.3	23.6	22.5
- Grade 6	30.0	24.6	23.6
Time devoted to teaching core subjects (minutes/day in grade 3):			
- Mathematics	65	65	56
- Science	29	29	30
- English/ Language Arts	155	155	146
- Social Science	30	30	31

Instructional time for different subject areas is determined at the district level. The District Curriculum Committee installed a Minutes Committee to recommend the amount of instructional time based on content area and state standards. Teachers get an outline of how many minutes per week they need to focus their instruction in each subject area and incorporate these recommendations in their classroom schedules. Teachers are encouraged to teach reading and mathematics in the morning during optimum learning time.

Student grouping in the district is heterogeneous. Special education students are mainstreamed as much as possible and special education teachers use the same programs and materials as regular teachers. Teachers give multi-level assignments to students and always combine students of different ability levels and ethnic backgrounds. All students with Individual Education Plans will be sent back to their home schools in the 2004-05 school year in an effort to make the Adequate Yearly Progress requirement. Each classroom will have skill groups in reading and mathematics, based on students' scores on the district exit tests.

Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis and Use of Data

District #118 has a history of monitoring student achievement through the analysis of national, state and local assessment data. To monitor the effectiveness of its instructional programs and the academic progress of students, the district implemented their Instructional Monitoring System (IMS) in the early 1970's. This system provided the instructional staff with an opportunity to analyze data relevant to the school improvement planning process. With the advent of state goals, academic standards and heightened accountability, this process was refined and brought into compliance with state mandates. District assessments monitor student progress towards the Illinois Learning Standards. Locally developed exit tests are administered each year in various subject areas and both district and school staff analyze those data in the summer. All educators interviewed mention the exit tests as a wonderful resource, especially because it is possible to analyze students' responses to individual test questions. This allows teachers to really 'pinpoint' their instruction to those skill areas where student performance can be improved.

The district also administers the Iowa Test of Basic Skills in each grade at the beginning of the year to see how their students compare nationally. In grades 2 and 5 the Cognitive Abilities Test is administered to determine which students qualify for placement in gifted programs. Abraham Lincoln Elementary also administers the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test at the beginning and the end of the school year in all grades. All teachers at Abraham Lincoln Elementary receive a School Improvement Data Analysis Book, containing all the results from the district exit tests, the ISAT, ITBS, CogAT and Gates-MacGinitie Reading test as well as the results from the yearly teacher, parent and student surveys. Abraham Lincoln's School Improvement Team uses the achievement data from all these assessments to identify the most significant curricular deficiencies in the summer.

The performance of all staff is closely monitored in District #118. The principal formally monitors tenured teachers once every two years. Non-tenured teachers receive a formal evaluation two times every year. The principal at Abraham Lincoln Elementary observes a lesson from his non-tenured teachers for four straight days twice a year, lessons from tenured teachers are observed for three days in a row. The principal takes about 150 pages of notes and makes charts to facilitate communication with his teachers. The principal sees the dialogue between him and the teacher as the most important aspect of the evaluation and uses the evaluations to seek out professional development to help his teachers improve. Formally, the principal does not tie the evaluations to student achievement data, but informally he uses 'the rule of three': "If the scores on your district exit tests are low once, that can happen. If they are low twice, we start to think, and if they are low three times, it is probably you." The superintendent indicates that non-tenured teachers will be dismissed if they do not improve their scores. The district administrative team establishes mutually agreed upon common goals at the beginning of the school year. Principals submit documentation toward the attainment of those goals to the superintendent at the end of the school year. The superintendent and the assistant-superintendent also each schedule informal on-site visits with principals to discuss issues related to the successful operation of each school. A formal principal evaluation takes place at the end of the school year. Finally, not only principals and teachers are monitored: all support and resource staff receive performance evaluations as well.

Recognition, Intervention and Adjustments

Student recognition programs are implemented at the campus level. Recognition programs focus on both academic and non-academic achievement.

Student achievement is recognized by honor rolls, high academic achievement awards and 'Rising Star' awards for students who have made good academic or behavioral progress. The awards are given at a quarterly assembly to which parents are invited. Each grade level has a digital camera. When students achieve certain academic goals, they get to post their picture on 'the mountain of reading.' The principal adds that posting pictures of honor students in the hallways helps ensure that students of different ethnic/racial backgrounds are represented on the honor rolls. The school gives a bicycle to the student with the highest score in the Reading Counts program at the end of the year. Abraham Lincoln Elementary organizes an 'All Star Day' on Fridays for students who did not receive any behavior checks or miss any assignments. Teachers say this has really paid off because students strive to make it. Staff and students are also recognized in a newsletter.

Intervention programs are tailored to every student's individual needs. The school depends on volunteers for tutoring. The priority team at Abraham Lincoln Elementary meets four times per year to determine which students are performing below the state standards. Individual Student Improvement Plans are set up and reviewed quarterly for these students. Teachers find these plans very helpful because they help to engage parents in the learning process and make them jointly responsible for the child's learning. The plans also provide parents with options that can enhance their child's learning outside the regular school day. Reading Recovery is used in first grade for students struggling with reading. The program's success is regularly monitored by a teacher committee. Volunteers from Americorps and Big Brother Big Sisters provide tutoring and some teachers stay voluntarily to tutor students as well. The gifted program in the district is not very elaborate. At Abraham Lincoln Elementary a gifted teacher works with small groups of gifted students in 90 minute sessions for one day per week. A social worker works with students struggling in non-academic areas. The district also wrote a grant to buy vans so staff can drive students to the dentist and doctor's appointments.

Factors Influencing District and School Practices

Resource Allocation

Finances are mentioned as a primary challenge for the district. By having high test scores, the district is ineligible for some funds including summer reading programs and gifted programs. The superintendent feels that the district is being punished financially for doing a good job. Despite the lack of funding, the superintendent refuses to cut any programs: "I will run this district to the edge of financial ruin before cutting any programs."

Resource Allocation*:

	<i>Belleville PSD</i>	<i>Illinois</i>
Instructional Expenditure per Pupil	\$4,358	\$4,842
Operating Expenditure per Pupil	\$7,543	\$8,181
% Expenditure per Function		
Instruction	37.3	45.5
General Administration	2.1	2.5
Supporting Services	26.8	31.0
Other Expenditures	33.8	21.0

*Financial Indicators 2001-02

Local Influences, Relationships and Communication

The District enjoys positive relationships with both the Board and the Teachers' Union. The superintendent describes the relationship with the Board as "wonderful". He considers the Board members highly skilled and often bounces ideas off of them. The Board has let the administration make all the hiring decisions. The superintendent meets monthly with an advisory group consisting of teachers and union leaders. He perceives the role of the union as strong and positive and says: "They are not an adversarial barrier, yet they are a group to be reckoned with." All teachers in the district are members of the union. The superintendent and the Union President make a joint appearance at the district's new teacher orientation to encourage new teachers to become members of the union. The superintendent feels that a great deal of divisiveness within the staff is prevented by having all the teachers be in agreement about unionism.

The district has a large community outreach program. Schools work closely with their school community councils. The Abraham Lincoln Neighborhood Association has an office in the school. The ALNA runs a summer camp for the school and pays the tuition for all the free and reduced lunch students. The district organizes activities such as senior citizens luncheons and Veteran's Day. District and school administrators actively use the local media to showcase their successes.

Educators recognize the role of parents in the learning process and try to engage them in their child's education. Every Wednesday throughout District #118's elementary schools, a 'white envelope' containing information from the school and district office is sent home to parents. The first report card is not sent home, parents have to come to the parent teacher conference to pick it up. In this meeting, teachers let parents know how important they are in their child's education and what the school expects of them. The principal makes home visits to those parents who do not come to the parent teacher conferences. The principal also holds monthly meetings with parents to talk about the academic progress of the school. Teachers try to involve parents in the learning process; they developed a mathematics class to teach parents how to help their child with their homework. All the teachers at Abraham Lincoln Elementary are members of the PTA. The PTA raised money to buy the computer lab and also paid to have phones put in every classroom so parents and teachers can communicate better. Parents have the opportunity to fill out a survey each year and evaluate the facilities, teachers and the principal. The results of this survey are used to inform the School Improvement Plan.

Communication among levels of the system is a priority in Belleville School District #118. Principals meet with district administrators in monthly all day administrative meetings. The District Curriculum Committee and its subcommittees all report back to their schools and solicit input at the campus level. All staff members have access to the superintendent. Teachers fill out a yearly survey and evaluate their principal, school and students. Abraham Lincoln's principal wants to change the school from being very heavy handed academically to a school that is still high achieving but warmer and friendlier. Teachers say that the school climate is a little more relaxed and that there is more of a team spirit and less top-down decision making.

Core Beliefs about Teaching and Learning

Belleville School District is committed to developing every bit of potential in every student. The district is supportive of the accountability movement, but generally feels that the AYP requirement of the NCLB legislation is unreasonable. All respondents at the district, school and classroom level agree with the statement "all children can learn", but the superintendent adds that "not all children can learn at the same pace"; the assistant superintendent says that "it is unrealistic to think that 100 percent of the students will be able to meet the ISAT standards" and the school principal does not believe that all children can reach the same level. All educators at Abraham Lincoln Elementary have high expectations for student achievement. The principal said: "When our ISAT scores start with a 7 (*70% of students meeting or exceeding the state standards*), our teachers are not happy. A score of 80% is o.k.; only a score of 90% is good. On an individual student level, we pushed our grading scale up. Our A-range starts at 94% instead of 90% and parents are not happy unless their child has an A. This has made a huge impact on our test scores." A fifth grade teacher states: "I always let my students know that they *can* do it. I expect the best of them, and they know that I am always there to help them."