

Early Learning for Life-Long Success

Monona Grove educators discuss how their early learning program is increasing student achievement

SESSION: 4K and Kindergarten: Critical Foundations for School Success

Presenters: Connie Haessly, principal; Christa Macomber, school psychologist; Jessica Wells, teacher; Emily Foster, teacher, Monona Grove School District

During their presentation at the State Education Convention, educators from the Monona Grove School District didn't debate the importance of early childhood education. Instead, they showed how it was done.

The team of teachers, a school psychologist and an elementary principal shared their success story of how the district's four- and five-year-old kindergarten programs have resulted in improved student achievement that will pay off, not just now, but throughout the stu-

dents' school careers.

"College and career readiness is our long-term outcome," explained Christa Macomber, a school psychologist who works with the kindergarten programs. "We don't start thinking about college and career readiness when kids hit high school."

In order to meet those long-term goals, it's critical to eliminate gaps in academic skills. So another goal of the district's kindergarten programs is to recognize, address and close those gaps so that all children enter



Christa Macomber,
Monona Grove School District

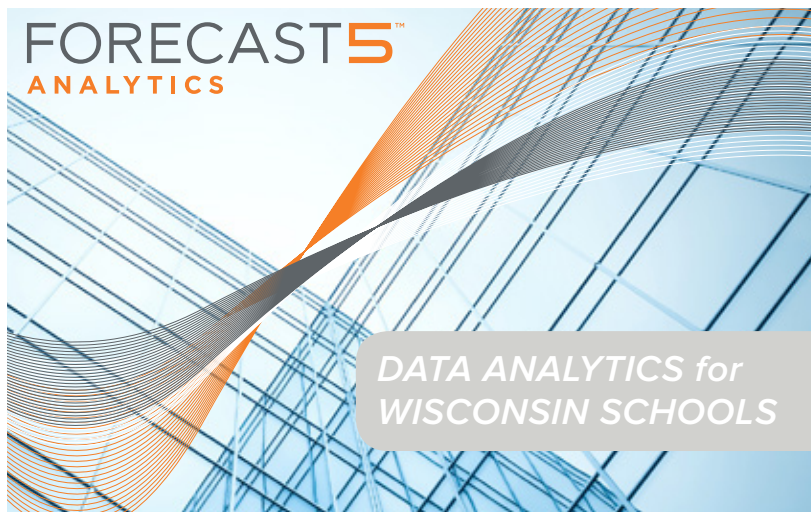
the primary grades on an equal footing despite coming from diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds.

"This is our opportunity to change things," Macomber said. "If we do nothing (about the gap), it increases rather than decreases in elementary school."

Monona Grove's 4K program, Together 4 Kids, takes place at five sites, two of them in district schools, two in child care centers, and one in a parochial school. The staff at all the sites work together to ensure a consistent program.

Ensuring that staff are properly trained and have a common vision is key, said Connie Haessly, the principal of Taylor Prairie School, who oversees Together 4 Kids. The shared vision comes with setting school goals that align with district goals and making sure that goals for individual teachers align with the school goals. Professional development sessions also align with teacher and school goals.

There is a strong emphasis on data collection and analysis so that an individual student's progress can be monitored and teaching strategies can be adjusted when needed. Haessly meets with her Continuous Improvement Team three times a year to look at data and set goals.



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Smaller groups of teachers meet more frequently to go over school and individual student data.

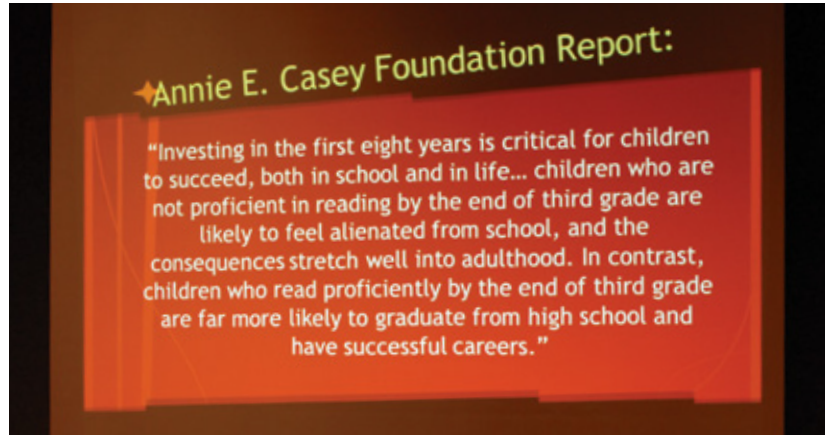
The program also includes instructional coaching to help support teachers. Emily Foster, a 5K teacher, is an instructional coach who is released from her classroom duties every other week to spend time observing other teachers. She meets one-on-one with teachers and develops lesson plans based on her observations.

Foster shared some of the teaching strategies they use in the classroom. Their frequent assessments allow them to identify strengths and weaknesses in reading and math for individual students. They have four basic categories of skills to work on and each is color coded. Students learn what area they are working on and wear different colored bracelets that help teachers

remember who is working on particular skills. Teachers can then adjust their instruction and offer additional practice in areas where students need more assistance.

All the work has paid off. After six years of the 4K program, more students are meeting national benchmarks for reading and math. Last spring, 97 percent of the district's

kindergarten students met their reading goal on the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) assessment. Results for 4K students on tests of early literacy and numeracy skills were equally strong. And what was even more encouraging was the fact that the gap between minority and white 4K students was only one percent. ■



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