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Implementation of the Kentucky Nongraded Primary Program

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Abstract

We examine the development of the Kentucky nongraded primary program at the state level, and in six rural elementary schools from 1991 through 1998 (case studies of four of these schools are included in Appendix A). Data collected from our longitudinal qualitative study reveal that teachers changed their classrooms in response to the primary program mandate, and some positive outcomes occurred for students. Implementation was hampered, however, by rapid implementation timelines, failure to clearly articulate the purpose of the program and how it linked with a larger reform effort, and a firmly entrenched "graded" mindset. Currently, progress toward full implementation of a continuous progress model for primary students has stagnated. To revive the program, policymakers need to make program goals clear,

demonstrate how its implementation will facilitate attainment of reform goals, and assist teachers in implementing the program as intended.
(Note 1)

Introduction

The concept of nongraded schooling is not new. Nongraded, multi-age education has moved in and out of favor throughout the educational history of the United States. Yet, even though the notion of nongradedness often conjures up a positive image of children moving at their own rate, of older students helping younger ones, and of younger students learning from older ones, nongraded schools and classrooms have failed to take hold in public schools in any large- scale or long-term way over the past several decades. Graded schools became the norm in urban school districts in the latter half of the 19th century, and in rural schools a short time later (Tyack, 1974), and have persisted to the present day. Tyack & Cuban (1995) suggest that, because the graded school arrived on the scene at a time when elementary education was rapidly expanding, and offered a standardized way to process large numbers of students, the organization of schools by grades became the generally accepted form of American public education. In this sense, gradedness might be thought of as one of the characteristics of the "real school," a concept proposed by Metz (1990) to signify a common script that American schools have come to follow, and that has come to be widely accepted by educators and parents alike. This article examines a recent attempt to stem the tide of gradedness: Kentucky's statewide effort to replace grades K-3 with a nongraded, continuous progress model.

Study Description

This report is based on findings from a longitudinal study of implementation of the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) conducted by researchers from AEL, Inc. The research team studied state-level implementation, as well as implementation in four rural districts. AEL followed implementation in rural settings in Kentucky because most Kentucky school districts are rural, AEL had a rural focus at the time, and comprehensive reform in rural districts has been little reported or documented. The study districts were selected from a list of districts identified by various Kentucky stakeholders and policymakers as representative of "typical" Kentucky school districts: we asked that they identify districts that were neither at the forefront of reform, nor likely to subvert it. From 1991 through 1995, we studied the primary program along with other aspects of KERA implementation in all 15 elementary schools in the four districts. From 1996 through 2000, we narrowed our focus to six schools, and to a specific cohort of students within those schools: the class of 2006—a group whose entire schooling had been under KERA, and who were completing the primary program in 1996-97. This study sample of six schools included two schools in western Kentucky, two in central Kentucky, and two in eastern Kentucky. Four of the schools were located in towns, while two were in outlying communities or rural areas. Five were located in county districts; one was in a small, independent school district. When compared to urban and suburban schools, our study schools were relatively small, ranging in size from 80 students to 500 students. The percentage of students on free/reduced lunch has fluctuated throughout the study period, ranging from about 30-40 percent at the low end to 60-70

percent at the high end.

The study was qualitative in nature: we relied on interviews, observations, and review of documents to provide information. Across the years of the study, we observed over 180 hours in primary classrooms and conducted approximately 400 interviews with administrators, teachers, parents, primary students, and state officials. We also observed professional development sessions on the primary program. Documents analyzed included lesson plans, primary program action plans and annual evaluations, school transformation plans, school council minutes, school board minutes, and local newspapers. At the state level, we interviewed key officials who were instrumental in primary program implementation, regularly attended meetings of the Kentucky Board of Education, observed early professional development institutes on the primary program, and examined primary program implementation documents.

Our analysis has included extensive review and discussion of our field notes and key documents, as well as a discussion of preliminary findings with state officials, and with administrators and teachers in the local districts. This paper addresses the following questions:

1. What was the state and national context for Kentucky's nongraded primary program?
2. How was the program implemented at the state level?
3. What changes occurred in primary classrooms?
4. How did the primary program affect students?

Additionally, we have included in Appendix A short case histories of primary program implementation at four of the schools we have studied intensively.

The Context for Kentucky's Nongraded Primary

Kentucky's nongraded primary program (hereafter referred to as the "primary program") is but one component of a massive restructuring of the state's educational system. The Kentucky Education Reform Act, passed by the Kentucky General Assembly in the spring of 1990, came about as the result of a lawsuit filed by 66 of the state's poorest school districts charging that the state's system of financing public schools placed too much emphasis on local resources (*Rose v. Council for Better Educ.*, 1989, p. 4). The Kentucky Supreme Court ruled in the summer of 1989 that the entire state school system was unconstitutional, and ordered the state legislature to restructure entirely the state's system of public schooling.

The Kentucky legislative leadership organized a task force, composed of legislators and representatives from then-Governor Wallace Wilkinson's office, to design the restructuring package. Subcommittees on curriculum, governance, and finance were created to work out the details of the reform. Each committee hired a national consultant to assist in developing its portion of the restructuring package. The consultant who designed the curriculum package, which contains the primary program, was David Hornbeck, then of Hogan and Hartson in Washington, D. C., but currently superintendent of the Philadelphia schools. Hornbeck, with substantive input from the Task Force and the Governor's office, designed a reform package that shifted the focus from teacher inputs to student results, required schools to ensure high levels of achievement for *all* students, and gave schools autonomy to decide how to help students achieve reform goals, but held them accountable for student performance as measured by

a performance-based assessment instrument. This restructuring package strongly reflected an approach that would soon become known as "systemic reform" (Cohen, 1995; Fuhrman, Elmore, & Massell, 1993; Murphy, 1990; O'Day & Smith, 1993; Schwartz, 1991; Smith & O'Day, 1991).

The groundwork for this brand of restructuring had been laid by Governor Wallace Wilkinson in the two years prior to 1990. Wilkinson, with guidance from Education Secretary Jack Foster, developed an "outcomes-based" restructuring plan that called for school-based management, leadership and staff development, increased resources for instructional improvement, an outcome-based curriculum, performance standards, accountability, and a rewards program (Wilkinson, 1988a, 1988b).

As pointed out by Fuhrman, Elmore, & Massell (1993), the primary program—with its requirement that schools eliminate grades K-3—was a curious addition to a reform package that called for locally-designed instructional inputs. Former Kentucky Education Secretary Jack Foster, who served on the task force that designed KERA, explained inclusion of the primary program:

Although not specifically proposing creation of a primary program, Governor Wilkinson contended in his reform proposal prior to the Supreme Court decision that it was time to alter the structure of the school to enable teachers to work more effectively with children who have different learning styles, aptitudes, or interests. Wilkinson contended that the traditional school leaves the educational needs of many children unmet because it is not flexible enough to meet their different learning needs.... A classroom in which everyone is studying the same thing at the same time is not one that can easily adapt to individual differences in either learning style or ability. With this as background, David Hornbeck, consultant to the curriculum committee of the Task Force on Education Reform, [recommended that grades K-3 be replaced with an ungraded model] (Foster, 1999, p. 70).

In addition to the push from the Governor's office, the decision to include a nongraded primary program as a starting point to a results-based restructuring plan is likely related to the fact that, at the time KERA was developed, nongraded instruction was making a resurgence as a "new" schooling structure (Anderson & Pavan, 1993). The recent movement toward nongraded instruction is a response to research in child development and the learning process, which suggests that nongradedness is an appropriate strategy for curbing ability tracking and grade retention, which have been shown to have harmful effects on children (Massachusetts Board of Education, 1990). Proponents of nongraded primary programs argue that they provide a developmentally appropriate way for teachers to deal with individual differences found among children at an age when they are psychologically vulnerable (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1987; National Association of Elementary School Principals, 1990).

While nongraded programs are seldom cited as a feature of systemic reform, the emphasis in nongraded programs on tailoring instruction to individual needs so that all students can achieve is quite compatible with the systemic reform movement's emphasis on helping *all* children achieve rigorous academic standards. Unfortunately, this sort of link between the primary program component of KERA and the larger reform package was not made clear to Kentucky educators. In Hornbeck's final recommendations to the legislative task force, the primary program appears on page 65 of a 66-page document, is described in three sentences, and is not linked conceptually with the systemic-reform-like recommendations that precede it (Hornbeck, 1990).

Jack Foster acknowledged that the rationale for the primary program, and its link with the larger reform, was never made clear:

We dropped that one in there very late... . We had no protocols, no models, we had no documentation, no references to literature, nothing. It just appeared. So it really left the Department of Education to do whatever they wanted. I was asked a couple of times to come over and interpret to them what we had in mind. Hornbeck was gone by now. I used my own philosophy as to the intent of that... So we got what we deserved on that one. You never want to lay something that significant into a piece of legislation without some sort of supporting documentation that people can use to get at the legislative intent. But there is nothing; there is nothing (personal communication, 9/17/99).

State-Level Implementation of the Primary Program

Radical change is a difficult and often messy process, an observation well-documented in the education change literature (see Fullan, 1996). The implementation of the primary program was no exception. The lack of clearly articulated legislative intent hampered primary program implementation from the outset. State officials involved in early implementation of the primary program, along with the first program description issued by the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE), reported that Department staff had to engage in extensive research to get at the intent of the primary program. The program description, entitled *The Wonder Years* (Kentucky Department of Education, 1991), states that staff examined all statutory provisions regarding the primary program; reviewed the provisions of KERA that impact the primary program; reviewed the curriculum committee recommendations; reviewed direction and clarification provided by David Hornbeck, other Task Force members, and legislative staff; reviewed literature and research on "nongradedness;" reviewed position statements of national organizations for the education of young children; attended conferences and heard national consultants; and visited schools with nongraded programs. From this research, the KDE identified seven critical attributes of the program, which focused around how primary classrooms should look, rather than what primary teachers should teach. The attributes were **developmentally appropriate educational practices, multi-age/multi-ability classrooms, continuous progress, authentic assessment, qualitative reporting methods, professional teamwork, and positive parent involvement**. According to staff at KDE who were instrumental in developing the position statement, the critical attributes were meant to serve as a guide to schools as they developed their primary programs. The 1992 General Assembly, however, adopted the attributes into law.

The critical attributes quickly became the linchpin of the primary program, not only because they were now mandated, but because the attributes were virtually the only guidelines for reform implementation in the early years. The state's assessment contractor was developing the new performance assessment instrument, and the KDE was beginning to develop curriculum frameworks. But the primary program attributes were the first piece of guidance to fall into place, and it was around the attributes that professional development and primary program directives revolved.

Early implementation was further complicated by the implementation timelines.

The original KERA legislation laid out no specific timelines for implementation. The 1991 program description suggested that implementation would occur over a three-year span beginning in 1992-93, but a former KDE official reported to us that KDE had envisioned full implementation occurring by 1996. This recommended gradual approach might have facilitated linkages between the primary program and the larger reform because curriculum supports could have been put in place to help primary teachers plan what they were to teach (KERA goals) before having to follow the state plan for how to teach it (critical attributes). In 1992, however, apparently in an effort to jump-start reform by getting the primary program in place, the legislature mandated beginning implementation in 1992-93, and full implementation by 1993-94.

The unintended effect of the new timeline, coupled with the critical attributes becoming statutory requirements, was that teachers were thrust into the overwhelming demands of multi-age classrooms before the state had provided the curriculum guidance required by KERA. State curriculum frameworks did not appear until 1993 (Kentucky Department of Education, 1993b), and the even more widely used *Core Content for Assessment* was not available until 1996 (Kentucky Department of Education, 1996a). Consequently, primary teachers fashioned a program that demonstrated implementation of the seven critical attributes, but the fundamental issues of what they were to teach and how the curriculum should align with KERA had not been worked out.

Another aspect of primary program implementation that became problematic was the issue of how to determine when students were ready for fourth grade. An interim process for determining successful completion of the primary program was adopted in December 1992 and is still in effect (Kentucky Department of Education, 1993a). There was some initial thinking that the interim regulation would be replaced by the Kentucky Early Learning Profile (KELP), which was developed by the state's assessment contractor. According to the KELP handbook (Kentucky Department of Education, 1994), this primary assessment tool was not intended to mirror the fourth-grade assessment, but was designed to provide students with opportunities that would lay the foundation for the fourth-grade assessment. The KELP was piloted during the 1992-93 school year and field tested in 1993-94. Training in use of the KELP was made available to primary teachers across the state in the summer of 1994: the summer following the year they were required to fully implement the primary program. Because of concerns about the amount of paperwork associated with the KELP, it was never made mandatory, but schools are expected to use a process similar to that spelled out in the "interim" regulation, or a "KELP-like" process for verifying successful completion of the primary program.

The KELP was not widely adopted across the state. Bridge (1995) reported that most teachers found the KELP so burdensome that they would discontinue using it if given the choice. The state Office of Education Accountability (OEA) reported in both its 1996 and 1997 annual reports that about one-third of schools were using the KELP, and that there was no monitoring of schools not using the KELP to determine if they were using an alternative that met the criteria for exiting the primary program. However, the KDE reported to the OEA in 1999 that, based on a survey returned by 94 percent of elementary schools, 75 percent of schools used one or more components of the KELP. Of this number, 44 percent used the KELP Learning Descriptions, which is the component that assesses students' continuous progress (Kentucky Department of Education, 1999).

The failure to link the primary program to the rest of KERA resulted in a perception among teachers that the primary program was out of sync with reform in grades 4-12. In our study schools teachers expressed concern about the adjustment primary students

would face when they reached fourth grade, where behavioral and academic expectations would be more rigid. These teacher perceptions contrasted sharply with what we heard from state officials, who expressed hope that primary program practices would be so successful and well-received that they would work their way up through the grades as teachers, parents and students came to embrace and expect these sorts of practices. A key official at the state department of education commented to us in 1993:

Now how responsive the rest of the system is to that group of children is going to be the next critical question. It has already been asked. Parents are saying, "What happens when my child leaves this wonderful program where they've become independent thinkers and they go into Miss Jones stringent fourth-grade classroom and they're not allowed to continue on?" Our response is, "If I were you, as a parent, I would really be at the door of that school principal or that school council insisting that the [intermediate grade] program change." That's where the dynamic of change can be. I don't think it should be mandated from here. I think it occurs because it's a good program and they want to continue it.

Former Education Secretary Jack Foster made similar comments:

It was our hope that [the primary program] would be so successful that by the time [students] came out of the primary, we could convince other teachers up through the elementary school, and get the whole elementary school ungraded (personal communication, 9/17/99).

While state officials expressed the belief that the primary program would mirror the kinds of practices needed at all grade levels to help students achieve the higher-order skills emphasized in the KERA goals and expectations, the vast majority of training and support documents for the primary program did not link the program with KERA goals and expectations. In the primary, the focus was on eliminating student failure and on building student self-esteem and love of learning. This was to be accomplished through mandates as to how primary classrooms should operate (the critical attributes). In grades 4-12, by contrast, the focus was on preparation for the state assessment, which was the tool for judging whether students were making progress toward KERA goals.

Another major influence on primary program implementation was legislation that was meant to facilitate the primary program. Key members of the legislature believed that the focus on multi-aging had detracted from the broader purpose of the primary program. In 1994, the legislature passed a law that added flexibility for schools to determine, based on individual student needs, that multi-age/multi-ability grouping need not apply to every grouping situation throughout the day; and that permitted entry-level (or kindergarten) students to be grouped in self-contained classrooms if developmentally appropriate. Greater flexibility was added in 1996 legislation. These legislative acts relaxing the multiage, multiability requirement were viewed by some teachers as a signal that they no longer had to implement the one attribute that, to them, had become synonymous with the primary program. McIntyre and Kyle reported in 1997 that after multi-age grouping was made optional, fewer teachers were implementing the multi-age component, and that some teachers abandoned the primary program altogether; a phenomenon we also observed in our study schools.

Changes in Primary Classrooms

In the first two years of primary program implementation (1992–93 and 1993–94), primary teachers at our six study schools—in an attempt to implement the attributes—made changes in their approaches to instruction, assessment, grouping practices, reporting methods, working with other teachers, and working with parents. While virtually all teachers tried new practices in their classrooms, some embraced the changes more enthusiastically than others. This sort of varied implementation was also reported in other studies conducted around the state (Kyle & McIntyre, 1993; Raths & Fanning, 1993; Raths, Katz & Fanning, 1992). Among our study sample, we studied one school where an enthusiastic and persuasive principal and an open-minded faculty combined their energies to make major changes in their approach to instruction and student grouping (see the case study of Orange County Elementary School in Appendix A). At two schools that had previously had high student achievement using traditional approaches, changes were approached with caution by nearly all teachers (see the Newtown Elementary School case study). At two other schools, the issue of how much change to make was divisive (see the case studies of Vanderbilt County Elementary School and Kessinger Elementary School).

While changes in primary classrooms were substantial and widespread initially, movement toward greater implementation of the primary program has stagnated in our study schools, as well as statewide (McIntyre & Kyle, 1997). Generally, primary teachers seem to have settled into an approach that is comfortable for them, whether it equates to full implementation or not. The reactions to and implementation of the primary program in the AEL rural study districts do not seem to involve distinctly rural issues, as similar findings were reported in reviews of other KERA research that included urban areas in the commonwealth (McIntyre & Kyle, 1997). One possible exception might be that none of these districts had tried a nongraded approach since a brief fling with it (when it was last popular) in the 1950s, whereas some of the more urban and suburban districts in the state had been experimenting with the practice for some time before KERA was passed (Kentucky Education Association/Appalachia Educational Laboratory, 1991).

Below, we describe more fully the changes that occurred—and the ones that persisted—under each of the critical attributes. We also consider the perceived disjunction between the primary program and reform in the intermediate grades.

Developmentally appropriate practices. With the new professional development money from KERA, virtually all primary teachers in the study schools received copious training and experimented with new instructional practices. Professional development was weighted most heavily toward developmentally appropriate instructional practices. Teachers reported being simultaneously overwhelmed and energized by what they were learning and doing. One teacher commented in 1992:

I've attended a lot of workshops, I've attended a lot of seminars, I'm doing some things this summer. I'll be learning more about whole language for two weeks, and I've got a couple of other workshops I'm really interested in. I just finished training to be a math specialist. That was really rewarding. Everything that I have done and every workshop that I've gone to, I've learned a lot and I've tried to apply it in the classroom.

Of all the changes primary teachers attempted, changes in instructional practices

were adopted most readily, and have persisted more than have changes in the areas of the other critical attributes, reportedly because teachers have had success with many of the new approaches. In a review of research on the primary program statewide, McIntyre & Kyle (1997) also reported that teachers found developmentally appropriate practices the easiest attribute to implement, continued to use varied instructional practices, and rated this attribute as the most important one in terms of student learning.

The most common practices we observed in the early years were use of hands-on and calendar activities to teach mathematics; thematic or interdisciplinary instruction; use of authentic literature, whole language, or literature-based instruction; journal or other writing activities; and flexible seating arrangements. Although the degree of implementation varied across schools and teachers, virtually all teachers experimented with these practices in the first two years of primary program implementation. In addition, about half of the teachers employed learning centers; a lesser proportion attempted cooperative learning activities. In general, teachers assigned less textbook work, drill, seat work, and rote memorization than in the past—although these practices were in regular evidence at two of our study schools. Similar findings were reported statewide; Bridge (1995) found that teachers were using a variety of approaches and materials, attempting to integrate the curriculum through theme activities, and arranging the physical environment of their classrooms to facilitate primary program implementation.

As primary teachers tried new approaches, however, they found that developing thematic units, learning centers, and hands-on activities was labor-intensive and time-consuming. In addition, they worried that students would not acquire "basic skills" without the customary drill and practice. These concerns were echoed by intermediate teachers, who began to report almost immediately that primary students were coming to them lacking in basic skills. Thus, after the initial two years of classroom innovation, many primary teachers returned to more traditional practices such as using spelling books to teach spelling, drilling on math facts, and use of workbooks and worksheets to teach phonics. Some of the new instructional practices have persisted in our study classrooms, however, including more flexible seating arrangements, partner or group work, emphasis on process writing, use of authentic literature as part of the primary reading program, and greater use of hands-on activities. Practices that have mostly fallen to the wayside are learning centers (except in entry-level primary classrooms), cooperative learning activities, and broad use of themes or interdisciplinary instruction.

Multi-age/Multi-Ability Classrooms. Probably because the primary program had initially been referred to as the "nongraded primary," and because this was one of the most tangible attributes to be implemented, teachers equated the multi-age, multi-ability attribute most strongly with the primary program. While state officials retrospectively reported to us that this attribute was meant to serve as a tool to enable continuous progress, it was not presented that way in the state guidelines, nor in any professional development we observed. As a result, educators implemented multi-aging as an end in itself, and one that was difficult conceptually and logistically. Two schools initially attempted K-3 classrooms, pulling students into smaller groups (single or dual-age) for skills instruction. Three other schools grouped students into two- and three-age span groups, also breaking them into more homogeneous groups during the day for skills instruction. One school was more cautious, never experimenting with more than a dual-age classroom.

In response to the legislation that relaxed the multi-age requirement, by the 1996-97 school year, three of the six schools studied more intensively since 1996 had returned to single-age classrooms (although one of these has since opted to return to dual-age

classrooms), two continued with dual-age classrooms because low enrollment forced split classes, and one school had a K-2, 3-4 arrangement. McIntyre & Kyle (1997) also reported that many schools statewide returned to single-age classrooms. The KDE reported in 1999 that the most common structure in the primary program was dual-age classrooms, with partial inclusion of five-year-olds; and that 21 percent of schools reported single-age groupings (Kentucky Department of Education, 1999).

At no school did we witness the envisioned elimination of "grade differentials." This finding correlates with other research around the state, where it was reported that multi-age/multi-ability grouping was one of the most controversial and difficult attributes for teachers, fewer teachers implemented the multi-age component over time, and teachers viewed the multi-age/multi-ability attribute as least important to student learning (McIntyre & Kyle, 1997; Raths, Katz, & Fanning, 1992). Similarly, a 1999 survey found that a majority of teachers, parents, and the general public did not believe that the graded structure should be eliminated in the first four years of schooling (Kentucky Institute for Education Research, 1999).

Throughout this time period, inclusion of kindergarten students was problematic at our study schools and across the state. Many educators and parents viewed kindergarten as a preparatory program, and did not believe young children should be mixed with older ones when they first began school. The issue was so divisive at one of our study schools that entry-level students were pulled in and out of the program several times during the 1993-94 school year as teachers struggled to reach consensus on integrating these students into the primary program. A parent of one of these students reflected on the experience:

I felt like that it was a rocky start when he began here. His first year, they started out with multi-age, and some wanted multi-age and others didn't. So they were in that for a couple of weeks and then switched. In the first nine weeks, he had changed three times, teachers, grouping, etc. before they decided how to do it. As a parent, I was not very happy because he was young and immature and having all of that change constantly, not knowing where you are going or who your teacher is... [I have been] generally satisfied other than that beginning year. I just wish that there had been a decision made before school started as to how to do it.

When the 1994 General Assembly enacted legislation that permitted entry-level students to be grouped in self-contained classrooms if such grouping was developmentally appropriate for individual students, five of the six study schools studied intensively took this as a blanket endorsement for placing all entry-level students in self-contained classrooms.

Continuous progress. The state defines continuous progress as follows: "Continuous progress means that students will progress through the primary school program at their own rate without comparison to the rates of others or consideration of the number of years in school. Retention and promotion within the primary school program are not compatible with continuous progress" (Kentucky Department of Education, 1993a, p. 8). While this attribute appears central to the primary program philosophy, primary teachers in our study schools appeared to be more focused on implementing those attributes that had some concrete, visible manifestation: multi-age groups, new report cards, anecdotal records, parent orientation programs, common teacher planning time. Continuous progress was never articulated to us as a major goal of the primary program. Similarly, Bridge (1995) reported that fewer than half of the

teachers she studied showed evidence that they were providing for the continuous progress of students through the primary program.

It appeared that the concept of gradedness was firmly entrenched at all levels of the system. Teachers, as well as parents and students, were never able to abandon the concept of gradedness and to think in terms of each student progressing continuously toward acquisition of KERA goals and expectations. Even within dual-age or multi-age classrooms, teachers often referred to students by grade level; or sometimes referred to the level of the task by grade, such as having "first grade spelling words" and "second-grade spelling words." Many schools attempted a change in terminology, so that kindergarten was referred to as P1, first grade as P2, etc. These new terms, however, served the same function as the grade designations- separating students by age. Principals told us that even the KDE required that enrollment information be provided by grade level.

Another difficulty teachers had with the notion of continuous progress had to do with retention. Teachers were told by state officials that the determination of whether students needed to spend a fifth year in the primary program should be made during the fourth year of primary. The rationale for this was that, if schools adopted a truly continuous progress model, then students would work continuously toward acquisition of KERA goals rather than having a determination made at some arbitrary point that they had not made adequate progress and thus, needed to repeat an entire year of instruction. Because the graded model and mentality had not been abandoned, however, the ban on retention created problems. One of our study schools ignored it entirely. Teachers at four schools did make an effort to allow students within their usually-dual-age classrooms to work at an appropriate level, but there was still a need to make a determination as to whether a child was ready to move on to the next dual-age classroom. For instance, where the primary program was configured into K/1st and 2nd/3rd grade classrooms, teachers felt a need to "retain" some students in the K/1st classrooms an extra year rather than send them on to the 2nd/3rd grade room. A principal, who was hired after the school council had voted to return to single-age classrooms in the primary program, described how she saw the single-age configuration at her school impeding continuous progress:

We have single-age all the way through primary, self- contained. We have done a minimal amount of sliding students [from one level to the next to meet individual needs]. We had a child who was not happy and a behavior problem in kindergarten and I suggested moving him to first grade for 45 minutes daily in a skill area he was strong in. Little by little, that child was eased into first grade so he is there all the time. If we had had a multi-age situation, these things could be taken care of in the classroom without all this hullabaloo. It is not a naturally occurring thing that each child's need is met. We are meeting their needs but the curriculum is not set up to do it. We are having to reach out to make it happen.

It should be noted that some teachers had structures for allowing students to progress at their own rate in certain subject areas. At one school, teachers in a dual-age classroom used flexible grouping and regrouping for mathematics instruction, assessing and re-shuffling student groups at the end of each unit. The more common practice, however, was to use grouping practices in which students stayed with the same teacher most of the day and were placed in relatively stable ability groups for reading and math instruction. Even in schools where some teachers had worked out continuous progress

within their own classrooms, the movement from one grade level to the next interrupted the smooth continuum of progress for children.

Authentic assessment. Authentic assessment practices attempted by most teachers in the early years included use of anecdotal records to record student progress and behavior as it occurred naturally, and accumulation of student work into portfolios of some type. At two of the six schools studied intensively, teachers, over time, continued to implement practices (such as engaging students in individual or group projects) that were better assessed with alternative instruments, such as scoring rubrics developed for specific assignments. One of these schools continued to use the KELP, mostly because it was a district requirement. At the remaining schools, use of anecdotal records and other authentic assessment techniques had nearly disappeared by the 1996-97 school year. As with multi-aging, teachers at these schools had implemented authentic assessment because it was required rather than as a tool to monitor students' continuous progress. Some teachers reported that they found it useful to share anecdotal records with parents at conferences but, for the most part, teachers were unclear how to manage or make use of these alternative assessment techniques.

Qualitative reporting. Traditional report cards with number/letter grades were replaced in all study schools with qualitative reporting, such as lists of broad skills or capabilities, accompanied by codes or narrative to indicate whether students were progressing or in need of further assistance. Teachers found these reporting systems cumbersome, however. They also reported that parents did not understand the qualitative progress reports. Many parents corroborated this story, reporting that letter grades gave them a better sense of how their children were progressing. As a result, by 1996-97, three of the six schools had replaced the qualitative progress report with a report card with number/letter grades, or some system for equating symbols on the report card with number/letter grades. And, as was the case with authentic assessment, traditional reporting methods were a comfortable fit with the more traditional practices preferred by teachers at these schools. At the one school that used the KELP, student progress was reported to parents in narrative, and was shared at conferences scheduled at regular intervals during the year. Teachers at this school reported that the KELP was time-consuming, but provided a great deal of information about student progress.

Professional teamwork. Primary teachers at all schools initially attempted some form of teaming, and tried to carve out time for common planning. Teaming often meant exchanging or mixing students for a portion of the day so that, for instance, one teacher taught to an advanced group while another taught lower ability students. At one school, however, primary teachers did teach together in a large, open classroom that facilitated communication and flexible grouping and regrouping of students. This sort of teamwork was still in evidence at that school in 1996-97. Over time, initial structures for common planning and teamwork either disappeared or became under-utilized at five of the six schools, as well as around the state (Bridge, 1995). However, primary teachers continued to communicate with one another and work together more than in the past.

Positive parent involvement. The level of parent involvement has been highly varied among our study schools throughout the research period. Programs to acquaint parents with the primary program were held at all six schools the first year of implementation. Some schools instituted parent volunteer programs, and many primary teachers sent regular newsletters home to keep parents abreast of classroom activities. Initial efforts to get parents involved in the primary program have relaxed at all schools, but parent involvement efforts are generally higher now than they were pre-KERA.

Disjunction between primary program and intermediate grades. As mentioned previously, primary program implementation was hampered by the lack of clear linkages

to the larger reform. This disconnect played out not only at the state level, where support materials and training for primary were developed separately from those for all grade levels, but also within local schools. Primary teachers were focused on the critical attributes, while teachers in the intermediate grades were focused on preparing students for the state assessment. Intermediate-grade teachers were themselves unclear on how to teach in ways that would help all of their students reach the demanding goals of the state assessment, but they did know that they had to help students develop portfolios and answer open-response questions, both key features of the state test. Because most elementary schools extend only up through fifth or sixth grade, and elementary students were administered the state assessment in grades four and five, the entire school was held accountable for these students' performance. The pressure of this accountability program led most intermediate-grade teachers to intensify the more traditional approaches rather than attempt new, untried, and unproven strategies in a high-stakes environment. Ideally, had the two groups of teachers come together with their concerns, primary teachers might have become more focused on KERA goals and expectations, and intermediate teachers might have looked to the primary to identify instructional practices that might help students acquire those goals. Instead, the two programs developed in relative isolation from one another. Primary teachers worked together to fashion programs that addressed the critical attributes, while intermediate teachers worked feverishly to prepare their students for the state assessment. As a result, it appeared that two separate reforms were underway in the study schools.

The split between the two programs was palpable, leading to resentment on both sides. Primary teachers were constantly given the message by intermediate grade teachers that the "cutesy" things they were doing in their classrooms were not preparing students for the rigorous expectations of fourth grade. Over time, rather than the primary program concept working its way up through the elementary school, pressure to prepare students for the state assessment program filtered down into the primary program. Primary teachers in the study schools were unsure how to incorporate rigorous content within the critical attributes of the primary program; and they had been given the message from intermediate teachers that the approaches they were using were NOT preparing students for the assessment. Therefore, instead of using the new approaches they had learned to teach to KERA goals, many primary teachers returned to the tried-and-true, scope-and-sequence curriculum materials to make sure they were covering all the content required to do well on the assessment.

Effects on Students

Studies of nongraded programs in other states and nations have generally shown that such programs do NOT negatively impact achievement, and sometimes have positive effects on non-cognitive measures such as improved student attitudes toward self, peers, and school (Lloyd, 1999; Miller, 1990; Pavan, 1992; Veenman, 1995). Determining achievement effects of Kentucky's primary program is difficult for at least three reasons: (1) the program was not fully implemented either in our study school or in most schools statewide (McIntyre & Kyle, 1997); (2) all Kentucky elementary schools were required to implement the primary program, so no control group of Kentucky students was available with which to compare achievement; and (3) there are no good baseline data with which to compare pre-KERA and post-KERA achievement. Most schools discontinued administering the CTBS for the first few years after KERA was

passed and when they resumed, a different version of the test was in place. With these provisos in mind, we will use the evidence that is available to conjecture about the effects of the changes that were implemented at the primary level.

Anecdotal evidence. As soon as the first group of primary students exited to fourth grade, we began to hear comparisons of them to previous fourth graders. Fourth-grade teachers reported that students coming out of the primary program were lacking basics skills, specifically in the areas of spelling and math facts. Some teachers also complained that students were unaccustomed to working alone because of being allowed to work with partners and help one another in the primary program. Another complaint was that, because primary teachers emphasized positive aspects of student work, students could not discern or did not care if they had done well or poorly on their work; for instance, believing that getting half of the answers correct on a test or exercise was good work.

To balance those complaints, parents and fourth grade teachers also told us that the exiting primary students were "better thinkers," asked more questions, and were better creative writers. Parents of randomly-selected students in the class of 2006 almost universally reported that their children enjoyed school, and had learned much more than the parents expected by the time the students reached fourth grade. Although some parents had initially been confused by the new system for reporting student progress and many still wished for letter grades, we did not see in any of our study districts a general uprising from parents against the primary program. By the time the class of 2006 had reached fourth grade, most of the parents we interviewed expressed satisfaction with the primary experience—although a few reported that some primary teachers had interpreted continuous progress to mean that children should be allowed to do only what they wished to do.

On a statewide survey conducted in 1999, school board members, principals, teachers, parents, and the general public were asked how well the primary program had worked to improve teaching and learning in local schools. Over 60 percent of school board members, educators, and parents serving on school councils believed the program had worked well. Over half of public school parents and the general public also believed the program had worked well; another 20-30 percent of these two groups reported that they did not know or were undecided. Less than one third of any group reported that the program had worked poorly (Kentucky Institute for Education Research, 1999).

Test scores. State assessment results suggest some positive outcomes of the primary program. Statewide, fourth-grade scores in all subject areas improved between 1993 and 1998, with the highest overall score and the greatest gains occurring in reading. NAEP scores have also improved at the fourth-grade level in reading and math, surpassing the national average in reading by 1998. On the CTBS/5 in 1999, exiting primary student scores had improved very slightly over the previous two years and were at or above the national average in all areas. While these scores alone may not be indicative of the primary program's effectiveness, given that our study and others cited previously indicate that many schools have not fully implemented the program, they suggest that at the very least, no harm has been done by the primary program.

McIntyre & Kyle (1997) reported that a study that compared student achievement on the state assessment to levels of primary implementation found no general pattern that linked the two (Hughes & Craig, 1994, as cited by McIntyre & Kyle). In our sample of six schools, three schools had consistently rising test scores—and relatively high scores—on the state assessment the first two accountability cycles (a period of four years). Of these three, two had maintained fairly traditional practices; the other was the one school that had most fully implemented the primary program. In the third cycle,

however, one of the more traditional schools had declining scores, while the other had experienced a very small increase. Only the school that was most fully implementing the program continued to surpass the improvement goal set by the state. This school, where over 50 percent of the student body were from low-income families, also had the highest scores among our six study schools (see the Orange County Elementary School case study in Appendix A). While our study sample is too small to generalize these findings to the state, we might conjecture that schools implementing traditional practices will reach a plateau on the state assessment, which is designed to measure higher order skills; and that more substantive changes are required if schools are to continue to improve on the state test. Further research is needed in this area.

Discussion

The above discussion illustrates the difficulties Kentucky experienced trying to move schools from a traditional graded approach to a continuous progress model. That schools should find it difficult to make this transition is hardly surprising, given that graded schooling has been a hallmark of formal education in this country for over 100 years. Studies of school reform have shown that graded instruction has been highly resistant to change over the years. Tyack and Tobin (1994) identify graded schools as part of a "grammar of schooling" that has remained remarkably stable over time. Similarly, Elmore (1996), Firestone, Mayrowetz & Fairman (1998), and Tyack and Cuban (1995), identify age and ability grouping as part of a core pattern of schooling that has historically proven highly resistant to change. Tyack and Tobin (1994) attribute the staying power of graded schooling (and other widely-accepted school structures) to the fact that this organizational form got in on the ground floor of organizational development of schools and thus, became institutionalized. They also note that inertia plays a role; and that familiar organizational structures such as graded schooling enable teachers to discharge their duties in predictable fashion: controlling student behavior, instructing heterogeneous populations, and sorting people for future roles in school and life. The historical record alone, then, suggests the monumental task that the Kentucky legislature undertook in attempting to replace grades K-3 with a nongraded structure. Our research, as well as other studies of Kentucky's primary program, adds Kentucky to the long list of places that have tried, somewhat unsuccessfully, to eliminate the graded structure of schooling.

What lessons might be learned from Kentucky's attempt at establishing a nongraded primary program? The first issue that must be considered is whether it is possible to mandate a change of this magnitude. National and international researchers who have studied and advocated for nongraded programs emphasize that nongradedness is a philosophy as much as a practice, and that only teachers with some commitment to the concept are likely to implement it with any success (Anderson, 1993; Goodlad & Anderson, 1987; Lloyd, 1999; Pavan, 1992).

In the face of such evidence, one wonders if states and localities might look at other ways to accomplish the goals of nongradedness. Lloyd (1999), who reviewed recent research on multi-age classes, poses this very question at the conclusion of his review: is the multi-age structure a necessary condition for delivery of developmentally appropriate curriculum, or would it be more fruitful to ensure that teachers of single-grade classrooms adopt the practices of good multi-age teachers, such as a focus on diversity/individual differences and continuous progress, differentiated instruction and

developmentally appropriate curriculum, curriculum which can be engaged at different levels of complexity, flexible grouping, and collaborative learning?

In Kentucky, the vision for the entire reform was to create a system in which *all* students at all grade levels, through varied instructional approaches and continuous assessment of progress, would be helped to achieve challenging standards. While nongradedness seems a very rational means to accomplishing this goal, mandating such a program ran counter to the reform's overall philosophy of allowing schools to determine how to help students achieve KERA goals. In addition, research has demonstrated the intractability of the concept of graded instruction. Given that the desire in Kentucky and many other states and localities is to restructure educational systems so that all students can achieve at high levels without being stigmatized if they fail to do so in prescribed ways and on a prescribed schedule, resources might be better directed toward professional development and technical assistance on teaching challenging content to all students through diverse instructional strategies, rather than on mandating nongradedness for its own sake.

Yet, Lloyd (1999) asserts that the very fact that age-related assumptions about development are resistant to widespread change is a rationale for implementing nongraded programs. The multi-age structure itself is more likely to offer the perceived benefits than are single-grade classrooms. In Kentucky, it was this sort of thinking that led to including the primary program in the reform package in the first place. This was a way to jump-start a reform that was meant to change teacher beliefs about who can learn, what they can learn, and how they can learn it.

While there have clearly been problems mandating this sort of sweeping change, we are unprepared to say that Kentucky's nongraded primary program should not have been attempted, or should be abandoned at this juncture. We have seen that instructional change aimed at meeting students' individual needs has been more widespread in the primary grades than at other levels of the system. Available achievement data shows that achievement for students who have been through the primary program has improved in some areas, while remaining stable in others. In addition, we have anecdotal evidence that the primary program has improved student motivation and attitudes toward schooling, as well as their creativity and thinking skills.

A great deal of time and energy has been expended in Kentucky on implementing both the primary program and the larger reform. Rather than disrupt the reform process and risk sending the message that the goals of the primary have been abandoned, the most prudent approach for Kentucky policymakers at this point is to work toward linking the primary program approach with the overall goals of KERA. The first step in this process would be to send clear, highly visible messages to schools that the primary program is still in place. Second, the overall goals of the primary program must be made clear. Fullan and Stiegelbauer (1991) argue that the crux of change involves the development of meaning in relation to a new program. In Kentucky, a basic problem that plagued implementation of the primary program from the beginning was that its meaning was unclear to teachers. In articulating the program's overall purpose, the link to overall KERA goals must be established. It should be made clear that the purpose of the primary program is to enable *all* students to progress continuously toward acquisition of KERA goals. Linkages need to be made between support systems and implementation documents such as the KELP, which helps establish whether primary students are ready to move on to the fourth grade, and the *Core Content for Assessment* (Kentucky Department of Education, 1996a), which defines the content on which fourth-graders will be tested.

Finally, Kentucky policymakers should accept (as they have been doing all along)

variations on the primary program concept. The graded structure may never be entirely eliminated, but if implementation of the primary program leads teachers to move closer to a continuous progress model that enables all students to achieve the reform goals in ways that are appropriate to them, then the program will have been a success.

Note

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Appendix A

Case Studies of the Primary Program

Overview

These case studies illustrate the ways in which local factors influenced the implementation of the primary program, whether towards greater or lesser conformity with the mandate. The descriptions of these schools also portray the wide range of practices that are taking place under the "primary" umbrella in Kentucky. The schools profiled here are normal schools—neither the worst nor the best that Kentucky has to offer. Their responses to the primary program mandate ranged from grudging implementation of the least they thought they could get by with to enthusiastic acceptance and nearly full implementation.

Newtown Elementary School — "Tradition, Tradition!"

Overview. The local factor that most heavily influenced the development of the primary program at Newtown Elementary School (NES) was a longstanding tradition of excellence in education, as evidenced by some of the highest standardized test scores in the state and a college attendance rate of over 90 percent. This tradition reinforced teachers' deeply felt belief in the value of the rigorous traditional program the school provided. In addition, strong parental involvement and teachers' feelings of empowerment created a very positive school climate. When the school earned rewards after the first biennium of KIRIS testing, these factors were reinforced and there was even less incentive for change than there had been originally.

NES is located in a small town, which has had its own independent school district since the early years of the century. Newtown prides itself on raising enough local tax revenue to support a highly successful school system, whose students have outperformed those in any of the nearby rural county districts. Parents have traditionally been highly invested in their children's education, and middle class families from a number of nearby districts have paid tuition to send their children to the independent district.

History of the primary program. The principal who was at the school when the program was being developed encouraged teachers and parents to take leadership and gave them unstinted support. Planning for the primary program was accomplished mostly through the efforts of one or two enthusiastic teachers, who were interested in receiving additional training to implement the new program. Most of the faculty remained skeptical of the mandated changes.

The initial NES primary program plan specified three-year, multi-age classrooms, with a separate kindergarten program. Primary teachers had access to a broad spectrum of training opportunities, but not all availed themselves of the full range. Teachers and students were divided into multi-year primary families, with groups of teachers sharing students. Students studied reading and math in skill groups (largely single age) but were

taught "themes" (usually science and social studies) in the multi-age setting. Teachers reported that it was difficult to keep the attention of and involve students across such a wide age range.

The first year of implementation, some teachers continued to use mostly traditional methods, but supplemented them with some new approaches, including centers, sustained silent reading, journal writing, and some hands-on math and science projects. Nearly all teachers rearranged their classrooms so that desks were in clusters or students seated around tables rather than in straight rows facing front. Many engaged in joint planning with one another. Some teachers shelved their textbooks and taught thematically.

Teachers struggled with anecdotal records, but many began ensuring that primary students kept portfolios of work. (The content of the portfolios and the number of pieces of work varied from teacher to teacher.) Student progress was reported on a skills checklist with a narrative section rather than a traditional report card. Parents lamented the elimination of letter grades and reported that neither they nor their children could tell from the progress reports just how the students were doing.

The multi- year families at Newtown Elementary changed quickly to dual- age self-contained classrooms, and later they changed again to essentially single-age units. The dual-age rooms, in some cases, were taught as split classes with little mixing of the two age groups for instructional purposes. Joint planning decreased to cooperation among grade-level teachers with the exception of planning for periodic schoolwide themes.

Instruction remained largely traditional with a skills emphasis. Even so, teachers at higher grade levels reported that some primary students were advancing to the upper grades without the necessary proficiencies. Soon, even teachers who had enthusiastically embraced new methods returned to stressing skills either on their own or as a result of encouragement from others. Textbooks, worksheets, phonics workbooks, and spelling books were very much in evidence. Some teachers, especially at the third grade level, opted to give number or letter grades on student work.

These traditional approaches were reinforced when the KIRIS results began coming in: the school earned rewards in the first two accountability cycles. The success of the "tried and true" methods convinced school personnel that they were on the right track and should persevere. Most parents were very pleased with the school's approach; they had been uncomfortable with the year or two of cautious experimentation that followed the initial primary implementation.

Status of the primary program at the end of the 1996-97 school year. Newtown Elementary had retained some of the new strategies encouraged by the primary program. Teachers reported that primary students were writing more than in the past. Students worked in groups more than they did before KERA, according to the principal. Hands-on math and science have proven helpful and interesting for most teachers and students, although the extent to which these approaches were used varied by teacher. Teachers were conscious of the individual skill levels of students and tried to take them into account. Some teachers grouped students by skill level for reading or math instruction. Others gave whole class instruction in the basic subject areas but required less of students who had lower skill levels.

The school personnel seemed comfortable with their approach in the primary program, and there was no sense of movement toward more or less implementation. Throughout the school's implementation of KERA, the faculty was confident that NES students would be successful on the statewide assessment and that the school will continue to be recognized as one of the most academically rigorous and successful

schools in the area.

Summary. NES was proud of its primary program before KERA was passed. The faculty has used the training made available as the KERA primary program was implemented to increase their repertoire of techniques and materials, and they have made some lasting changes, such as increasing the amount of writing done by primary students. But, for the most part, they have approached change with great caution. Their KIRIS scores—like their previous scores on standardized tests— have been high enough to convince them that their approach was correct and that their traditionally high academic standards will be maintained.

Kessinger Elementary School—"The Need for Leadership"

Overview. The factors that appeared to most strongly influence the evolution of the primary program at Kessinger Elementary were local ones: leadership, teacher beliefs, and school climate. Interestingly, many primary teachers at Kessinger appeared to grasp the intent of the primary program and to agree with the overall philosophy of allowing students to progress at their own rate through an instructional program geared to the needs of young learners. The primary program might have been implemented in a consistent direction at Kessinger had the faculty been able to pull together toward a common vision. But the opportunity to do so was impeded by frequent changes in principals, as well as a longstanding lack of cohesiveness among the teachers. Differing philosophies among teachers that had been largely dormant pre-KERA—when teachers had the freedom to teach as they saw fit within their own classrooms—were brought to the forefront when the faculty was called upon to create a coherent primary program.

History of the primary program. Kessinger Elementary is located in a small, rural county where the economy is based largely on agriculture. In spite of an increase in the local tax rate and more state funding after KERA was passed, the district continues to struggle financially because of lack of industry and tourism in the county. There is a great deal of turnover in school and district leadership, in part because the district pays lower administrator salaries than surrounding districts. Kessinger has had five principals in the eight years since the passage of KERA.

When KERA passed, Kessinger teachers exhibited varying degrees of enthusiasm for the nongraded primary program. Generally, primary teachers were willing to give the program a try and planned to implement it as specified by state guidelines. Some teachers, however, found that the primary philosophy fit their own belief systems very well and were eager to begin implementation, while others were skeptical and wanted to proceed more slowly. These different viewpoints exacerbated existing tensions among the faculty. The principal was uncomfortable with the conflict that arose from trying to arrive at a common vision for the program. When differences of opinion surfaced at the first meeting to plan the primary program, the principal delayed the planning process to provide a cooling-off period. Instead, the controversy heated up.

By 1992–93, Kessinger teachers had been unable to agree on a primary configuration, so they implemented two different approaches. One team of teachers implemented a K–3 arrangement at one end of the hall, while another team implemented a dual-age arrangement (K–1, 1–2, and 2–3) at the other end. Neither team had common planning time with their colleagues, and teachers on both teams reported at mid-year that they were exhausted and frustrated from trying to implement new instructional programs without support or time to interact with their peers. Teachers on both teams tried different strategies for student grouping but were unable to settle on a strategy satisfactory to all. By the end of the year, teachers on the K-3 team began to differ

among themselves, with some supporting the K–3 arrangement, others favoring a dual–age configuration, and others coming to believe that single–grading was desirable. There did not seem to be a strategy for teachers to meet and try to reach consensus on a unified approach.

In 1993–94, the frustration and confusion regarding the Kessinger primary program reached a peak. Teachers still had not agreed on the appropriate configuration, and a new source of conflict arose when some teachers began to push to exclude kindergarten students from the program. Teachers moved kindergarten in and out of the program during the school year, shifting students among teachers. A parent complained that her child changed classes four times during the year as the teachers wavered on kindergarten inclusion. Another parent described the primary program as "a mess," and reported that the two factions of primary teachers were constantly bickering. The teachers themselves contemplated having a "negotiator" from the state department come talk to them.

After the 1993-94 school year, the Kessinger principal opted to return to the classroom. The SBDM council hired a principal from outside the district who initiated and supported a move to dual–age classrooms with some ability grouping for skills. The primary configuration at Kessinger in 1994–95 was K–1, 1–2, and 2–3. Teachers kept their students in dual–age groups for a period of time each day, but students spent the bulk of the day in ability groups, mostly by grade. The disagreement over kindergarten inclusion in the primary program continued.

This second (since our study began) principal resigned for a better offer in another district at the end of 1994–95. The SBDM council, on a split vote with no principal yet on board, voted to switch to a single–grade configuration the following year. The move was supported by intermediate- grade teachers, as well as some parents. The council subsequently hired a new principal, who set out to support the program that was already in place. She divided Kessinger teachers into single–grade teams and, for the first time, teams were given common planning time. Although teachers appeared to get along better, there were signs that factionalism continued. The principal reported that they were still "fighting the battle" in the school and with the community about what was expected of multi–age classrooms. A veteran faculty member reported that KERA had divided the school into "for" and "against" factions, and that teachers wasted a lot of time pulling in different directions and trying to win support for their views.

Status of the primary program at the end of the 1996-97 school year. At the end of 1995–96, the third principal resigned to return to her home county. A new principal was hired and set about to bring the primary program "into compliance" with state requirements in 1996-97. This fourth principal, however, came on too strong for some teachers and was unable to intervene successfully. She attributed the problems in the primary to the lack of continuity in leadership. She said she had tried to help with this, but conceded that "there are times when my vision impedes the process." At the end of the school year, she resigned because she did not feel she had sufficient support to be an effective leader.

The ongoing turmoil at Kessinger had considerably less detrimental effect on the primary program in particular and instruction in general than one might expect. In fact, Kessinger earned rewards in the second accountability cycle (1994-95 and 1995-96). By 1996-97, Kessinger primary teachers, as a group, did not seem to have been defeated by the conflict that had become a way of life at the school. Classroom observations at Kessinger revealed that very little instructional time was wasted, and that teachers were generally focused on helping students succeed. The majority of Kessinger primary teachers continued to implement many practices consistent with the primary philosophy. Many struggled within the single–grade structure to manage a continuous progress

model in their classrooms or exchanged students with other teachers. For instance, at least two teachers within their own classrooms established individualized reading programs for students. Two teachers of different grade levels combined their classes three times a week to teach science, planning units together after school and on weekends.

Teachers who supported fuller implementation of the primary program were not vocal in their support, but seemed to have decided that the best way to manage the situation was to try to do what they thought best for students within their own classrooms or in conjunction with another, like-minded teacher. Teachers who opposed the primary program were more vocal. Generally, the KES teachers we interviewed and observed, whether they supported the primary concept or not, seemed to be conscientious and devoted to helping students learn. The two factions of teachers had simply been unable to arrive at a meeting of the minds with regard to the primary program. Those who opposed the program, including some parents, were more vocal and influential than supporters. The latter group continued to support the primary program and implement it to the best of their ability within a structure that was not conducive to the primary concept.

Summary. The Kessinger case illustrates how inconsistencies in leadership can seriously impede a school's progress, particularly in a school where a faculty that lacks cohesiveness is called on to make major programmatic and instructional changes. In the early stages of primary program implementation, teachers were mostly left on their own to work out their differences. At that time, most of the teachers were willing to at least give the program a try, although there were varying levels of enthusiasm. When things did not go well at first, teachers had only their own belief systems and past experience to fall back on in knowing what to do next. Those who had been skeptical about the program returned to practices with which they had been successful previously. Those who supported the philosophy forged on, thus widening the chasm between the two camps of teachers. By the time a principal was hired who understood and supported the primary program philosophy, the factions were well-entrenched and difficult to bring together. The constant change in leadership since that time has made the problem worse. By the time each new principal had begun to grasp the nature of the problem, the year was nearly over and then the principal moved on to another job. The situation will not be easily resolved under any circumstances, but there is a desperate need for continuity in leadership in order to get the primary program and the school on track.

The future of the primary program at Kessinger is uncertain. At the time of this writing, the Kessinger SBDM council had hired a new principal, this time someone from within the district. The primary program has switched to a K, 1-2, 3 configuration in an attempt to bring the program into "compliance." It remains to be seen what role the fifth principal will play in shaping the direction of the primary program. Because she has several years of experience in the school district, she may have greater insight into the problems going in than have previous principals. Whether her familiarity with Kessinger and its teachers will be an asset or a liability depends not only on her ability to bring the faculty together, but on the teachers' own willingness to trust one another enough to ignore past differences and make another attempt at developing a common vision for students.

Vanderbilt County Elementary School—"Why Are We Doing This?"

Overview. Vanderbilt County Elementary School (VCES) illustrates, perhaps more than any school in our study, how the combination of state and local factors can

influence primary program implementation. One of the most central factors at VCES was the lack of a shared philosophy among the faculty with regard to the primary program. The school had previously been traditional in its approach and had done well on standardized tests using this approach. KERA and a new principal arrived at the school nearly simultaneously, however, and it seemed that a new day had dawned at VCES. VCES teachers were initially willing to suspend disbelief and implement new programs and strategies at the principal's urging. Some primary teachers were enthused about the changes but many were skeptical, perhaps because of their previous success using more traditional methods. When the first round of KIRIS results was released and VCES had not met its threshold, the teachers began retreating from primary program implementation. As a result, a school that initially made many changes in its approach to primary instruction returned to a program that closely resembled pre-KERA practices.

History of the primary program. VCES is located in the county seat of a rural, agricultural community. The new principal, hired in 1991 by the newly-formed SBDM council, greatly supported the concepts embedded in KERA and set about to put the school on a new path. Early reports from teachers were mostly complimentary; they appreciated the principal's energy, enthusiasm, and aggressiveness in seeking resources and opportunities for them to get the training they needed to implement KERA.

The central office, too, was relatively pro-active in preparing teachers to implement the primary program, and several years of sound fiscal management enabled the district to provide substantial professional development to primary teachers. VCES teachers availed themselves of these opportunities more than teachers at other schools in the district, largely owing to the principal's encouragement, support, and initiative in locating additional time and resources for teacher training. Primary teachers were appreciative of the resources and training available to them, and most of them made many changes during initial implementation of the primary program.

At that time, the focus appeared to be heavily on implementation of the primary program critical attributes. VCES primary teachers changed their instructional and assessment approaches substantially, but did not express a strong sense of the overall purpose of the primary program. Many VCES teachers were especially skeptical of the multi-age requirement. The school was cautious in implementing a multi-age program, never going beyond a dual-age arrangement. During the first year of implementation, half of the primary teachers had dual-age classrooms all day, while the other half had dual-age groups for an hour daily. Kindergarten teachers incorporated their students into the program 90 minutes weekly. Teachers with full-day dual-age classrooms paired with another teacher for "skills grouping" in math and sometimes reading: the teachers grouped students according to their skill level, with one teacher taking the "high" group and another the lower group. Teachers were required by the principal that year to submit evidence of flexible grouping and regrouping of students. Teachers were provided with planning days and used these to collaborate with colleagues. Collaboration tended to be dual-grade rather than across the primary. Many teachers were systematic about keeping anecdotal records on students.

In 1993-94, VCES primary teachers configured their program with a variety of dual-grade arrangements: K-1, 1-2, and 2-3. In addition, two self-contained kindergarten rooms were in place for parents who preferred that option. Primary teachers generally felt that a wider age span would be too difficult to manage. Some teachers said they would prefer to return to a single-grade approach. Even with dual-age classrooms, VCES primary teachers reported that they did not keep the same students from one year to the next so that no teacher would have the same problem students each year. Primary teachers continued to use many of the new instructional approaches they had learned

about.

In 1994–95, all VCES classrooms were configured as either K/1 or 2/3. Teachers worked in teams of two or three within their grade groups (teams were either K/1 or 2/3, but there was not a mix) to do skills grouping each morning for language arts and math instruction. The skills groups were largely single-grade groups, but some students crossed the grade boundary as needed. That same year, KIRIS results for the first biennium were released. Within the school district, other elementary schools that had not made as many changes as VCES scored high enough to earn rewards. VCES scores improved but the school did not meet its goal. Many teachers at VCES and throughout the district interpreted this as a sign that VCES had gone too far in throwing out tried-and-true methods. Teachers who had tried to follow the course the principal had set for the school began to question this course. The principal began to give teachers more freedom to find approaches with which they were comfortable.

The dual-age approach continued in 1995-96, but more and more teachers reported dissatisfaction with this arrangement; they expressed a desire to return to single-grade classrooms. Teachers began to incorporate some of the more traditional approaches back into their classrooms, such as using basal readers and teaching spelling and phonics as separate subjects. Teachers reported that they felt less pressure now to use only the newer methods, perhaps because the assessment results had given more credence to the argument that the new approaches were not effective. Teachers also began to back away from authentic assessment techniques. One of the changes teachers had made—collaboration with special teachers—increased in response to KIRIS results, as the school began to use Title I teachers as math and science specialists to help teachers plan hands-on activities in their classrooms.

Status of the primary program at the end of the 1996-97 school year. The VCES principal, who initially made a strong effort to get the primary program moving in a consistent direction, changed strategy after the first round of test scores were released. In 1996-97 when the primary teachers expressed a strong desire to return to a single-grade configuration, the principal insisted they clear this through the state department of education. When officials at the state department assured them that they could have single-grade homerooms with the understanding that students would be moved around during the day according to individual needs, the teachers moved to a single-grade arrangement without overt opposition from the principal. For the most part, VCES primary teachers appeared to have opted for a more traditional approach, placing students in single-grade classrooms and grouping them mostly by ability in relatively stable groups.

With the principal now giving the teachers more freedom in choosing instructional strategies, each primary teacher began implementing the program as she saw fit, resulting in approaches that varied from one classroom to the next. The majority of primary teachers expressed support for the single-grade approach, and several professed a belief that VCES teachers had thrown out too much initially and needed to return more to "the basics." Veteran primary teachers appeared to have reinstated the more traditional approaches. Younger teachers used more variety in their approaches, continuing to do some whole language, cooperative learning, hands-on activities, and centers.

Summary. The VCES case illustrates how an educational innovation can go awry when teachers do not see promising results after being obliged to make a change with which they do not agree and whose purpose they may not understand. VCES teachers were given ample professional development aimed at helping them implement the critical attributes, but they seemed to view the attributes as ends in themselves, rather than as means to an end. The principal, who seemed to grasp the purpose of the primary

program and felt implementation of the critical attributes was essential to achieving the goals of the program, hoped that the extensive professional development VCES teachers received would bring them on board in implementing the program. Whether this happened or not, however, the principal felt responsible for making sure the state-mandated primary program was implemented, and this was accomplished by a strong focus on process over content. As time went on and test results came in, however, the principal gave teachers more freedom in the classroom in the hope that, once they were comfortable that they were covering the necessary content, they would begin to incorporate strategies that enabled students with different learning styles to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills. It is too soon to tell what will become of the VCES primary program. In one sense, it might appear that KIRIS scores interrupted the reform process at VCES. However, if the principal and teachers can continue working toward an approach that successfully combines the teachers' expertise on what it takes to help students acquire basic skills with the principal's understanding of instructional strategies that enable all students to have success, then KIRIS results may have been just the impetus the school needed to get everyone moving in a common direction.

Orange County Elementary School—"Change and Change Again"

Overview. At Orange County Elementary School (OCES), local factors facilitated the development of the most fully fleshed out primary program implementation we observed. There was a strong principal, teachers who trusted the principal and accepted her leadership, and a district ethic of openness to educational improvements. During primary program implementation, the school moved into a new building designed to encourage flexible grouping and regrouping of students and professional teamwork among the faculty. School climate is positive, and the faculty is developing a common, child-centered vision. When the first KIRIS results were reported, the school had the largest gains of any elementary school in the district, and OCES earned rewards after the second biennium also. The faculty prided itself on what the school had been able to accomplish.

In spite of success on KIRIS while implementing a relatively innovative primary program, OCES educators became fearful that they could not continue improving without increasing the fit between the primary program and the KIRIS-driven upper elementary grades. Their solution was to combine third and fourth grades in a large open-space classroom. This combination resulted in a return to more traditional forms of instruction at the upper primary level, although continuous progress and other aspects of the primary program were still emphasized.

History of the primary program. OCES is located in a large, rural, eastern Kentucky county school district. A new principal, who provided vigorous leadership, came to the school shortly before KERA went into effect. Some of the faculty were initially leery of the new principal's strong advocacy of the nongraded primary program and research-based curriculum innovations, but the principal won their support by demonstrating respect for their professional opinions and decisions. From the beginning, teachers have been child-oriented; they are determined to make sure their students, mostly from non-advantaged backgrounds, have the opportunity to achieve at high levels. Leadership from the principal and an active school counselor have reinforced the focus on the whole child. The school has the feel of a large extended family, with cooks, instructional aides, and students, as well as teachers and administrators, taking responsibility for the student body.

The OCES primary committee, consisting of the principal, counselor, and all K-3 teachers, developed and implemented a plan in which children aged 5-9 worked together in multi-age home bases for several hours a day. Students worked on academic subjects

in somewhat flexible skill groups for the balance of the day. Special education children were fully integrated into these families. The plan resulted in frequent movement in the halls as children moved from room to room in order to change skill groups. One primary family was able to use a different strategy, however. There was one large, open-space classroom that was able to accommodate four teachers and almost 100 children. This arrangement facilitated teacher collaboration and more flexible grouping and regrouping than was possible in the other families.

The primary teachers received a great deal of training in innovative curricula and strategies, especially during the planning year (1991-92) and the first year of program implementation (1992-93). The primary teachers met as a group occasionally, and each family of teachers had common planning time scheduled daily, when they jointly planned interdisciplinary themes or units—usually taught during multi-age, multi-ability "theme time" in the afternoon, after the academic subjects had been covered.

Although the OCES primary teachers made a concerted effort to implement the critical attributes, they had difficulties that brought about an "implementation slump" during the third and fourth years of implementation. Even with common planning time, teachers never had enough time to do all they had to do, and they reported their personal life suffered. Parental participation, which was high during the first two years of the program, waned, and collaboration among the teachers in each family grew less intense. Teachers began using the common planning time for individual planning.

As primary students began entering fourth grade, the upper elementary teachers compared them with previous classes. They reported that the children were more creative and better at problem solving than previous classes, and less fearful of speaking in public, but that they were less disciplined and were often unwilling to sit quietly and work at their desks.

When the school moved to the new facility, most primary children were housed in large open rooms, as had proved so successful for one primary family during the first two years of the program. One family shared two smaller rooms. Another change for the primary was a district requirement that they use the full Kentucky Early Learning Profile (KELP) for recordkeeping and reporting to parents. While some teachers complained bitterly about the amount of time and paperwork required by KELP, they also said that it enabled them to know their students and understand their achievement better than they ever had before.

In 1996-97, the primary configuration was changed from K-3 families to two K-2 primary families and one large family combining Grades 3 and 4. There were five teachers and approximately 100 children in the classroom housing Grades 3 and 4. The rationale for this move was to ease the transition from the primary program to fourth grade in both academics and deportment.

The upper primary teachers responded to the pressure to prepare students for the academic rigors of KIRIS with a renewed emphasis on skills. They used basal readers and textbooks freely, following them closely in some cases and using them as resources in others. Instruction was less thematic, although science and social studies were still taught as units. Students did participate in a number of hands-on science projects.

The upper primary teachers incorporated continuous progress into basic skill areas. For a number of years every student in the school has taken a basic skills test each year to make sure that those skills were not being neglected. Beginning in 1996-97, the teachers in the third-fourth grade classroom assessed all students in both grades on math and reading skills and used the results—as well as their observation of student skills—to assign students to flexible skill groups. At the end of each unit or chapter, students were shifted to other groups or new groups were composed, based on student progress. Thus,

in a skill group focused on multiplication, some students might be assigned to a group reviewing place value, while others were considered ready to move on to division. Reading groups were shuffled less frequently than math groups.

Status of the primary program at the end of the 1996-97 school year. The K-2 classrooms at OCES were still organized around the seven critical attributes of the primary program; however, the final year of primary was focused on preparing students to succeed on KIRIS. The program in upper primary incorporated continuous progress in the basic tool subjects, especially mathematics, as part of this strategy. It is likely that the OCES primary program will continue to change in response to local pressures, including those of KIRIS preparation, perhaps by holding the younger primary students to increased academic expectations.

Summary. OCES illustrates how local factors, including a felt need to improve local education, can lead a faculty to implement the nongraded primary program wholeheartedly and how their response to state factors (KIRIS preparation) can influence the direction of change. Orange County educators were committed to change because they wanted their students to achieve. Several factors came together in a timely way to persuade teachers that the primary program was a step in the right direction. Subsequently, educators at the school came to believe that the disjunction between the primary program and the intermediate grades must be addressed if the school was to continue meeting its accountability goal. Their current solution to this problem seems to have pointed upper primary teachers toward a more traditional scope and sequence as they attempt to inject KIRIS content into their instruction.

The teachers have not, however, abandoned all the primary program innovations: they continue to employ some flexible grouping and regrouping, the KERP assessment/reporting program, frequent communication with parents, and hands-on and collaborative education as strategies for reaching their academic goals. Frequent testing as the basis for regrouping enables continuous progress in the basic tool subjects.

The OCES dilemma—how to teach rigorous, challenging content while using developmentally appropriate practices—is shared by other Kentucky schools struggling with simultaneous implementation of a continuous progress primary program and assessment-driven reform. The OCES primary program seems to be evolving in a rational and potentially positive direction. What the teachers need is assurance that it is possible to integrate a KIRIS content focus into the developmentally appropriate practices of the primary program, coupled with specific guidance in how to do that—then they would have the best of both worlds.

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