

## **Stamford Advocate**

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### **School districts find ways to improve student achievement**

By Ryan Jockers

BRIDGEPORT -- There is no bus service at Beardsley Elementary School. With few exceptions, every student walks. It is a neighborhood school, and a reflection of the people living here.

More than 95 percent of the 565 children enrolled at Beardsley -- a 103-year-old, brick elementary school near the Old Mill Green -- are either black or Hispanic, and eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. The neighborhood's median household income is \$34,715.

Like most schools in Bridgeport's urban district, Beardsley has been cited repeatedly for not meeting state goals on the Connecticut Mastery Test, the standardized exam given in elementary schools. In 2004, 13.7 percent of sixth-grade students met the state goal in reading, writing and mathematics; statewide, it was 45.3 percent.

But across the district, Bridgeport is progressing in a dedicated effort to raise test scores and bridge the gap in student achievement among its racial and ethnic groups.

As a result, the district is a finalist for a \$1 million prize offered by The Broad Foundation, a Los Angeles-based nonprofit organization that annually awards urban districts that make the greatest improvement in student achievement. The finalists include Boston Public Schools, Jersey City School District, Miami-Dade County Public Schools and the New York City Department of Education. The winner will be announced Sept. 19.

Bridgeport outperformed most of the 100 largest urban school districts in the country, said Erica Lepping, spokeswoman for The Broad Foundation.

"We saw in Bridgeport a significant reduction in ethnic achievement gaps," Lepping said.

Progress in closing the gap at Beardsley Elementary School is illustrative of improvements occurring districtwide, officials said.

Through the introduction of classroom strategies aimed at improving math proficiency and literacy, as well as hard work from teachers, students and administrators, Beardsley has exceeded the federal goal for math proficiency -- 80 percent of students were proficient; the No Child Left Behind goal is 65 percent -- and, in the 2004 test, the school missed the NCLB reading goal by a percentage point.

Principal Amy Marshall said she's eager to see the results from last year's test, which students took in March. "We've put great focus on literacy and numeracy," Marshall said.

In one of the kindergarten classes last week, Michele Coppotelli, who has taught at Beardsley five years, was reading "Franklin Fibs," a children's book, to 30 children who were seated on the floor close to her.

"Then Hank bragged," she said, pausing her reading. "What does it mean 'to brag?' " she asked. Hands shot up. Minutes later, Coppotelli paused again after reading aloud the word "gnawed." "That's right, like biting," she said, in response to a student's answer.

In a corner of the room, her co-teacher, Colleen Furtak, reviewed with a student an assessment of her ability to identify the letters of the alphabet, numbers, colors and shapes. In Bridgeport, kindergartners are tested on that material three times a school year, and must show progress or face summer school or retention.

On a more typical day, Coppotelli and Furtak divide the class, instructing groups of 15 students, sometimes less, because a paraprofessional, Patty Alicea, often is helping students in the class who have special needs.

For at least the past five years, several of Beardsley's kindergarten classrooms have had co-teachers, a staffing addition that has been funded through grants. Teachers said it's helpful, particularly in a district where 27 of 33 elementary schools have had overcrowding in at least half of their classrooms. More than 18 students in a kindergarten class is considered overcrowded.

"Small-group instruction is really good for the kids," said Furtak, a first-year teacher. "With whole-class instruction, kids get off-task and are not forced to participate . . . Making sure 15 kids are looking at you is easier than making sure that 30 kids are."

Beardsley teachers devote an hour a day to instructing students on math concepts and skills that are tested on the CMT. Every school day, teachers devote 90 minutes to improving literacy, through guided reading -- "What does 'gnawing' mean?" -- and small group lessons, where students may respond in writing to something read in class, or work with an older student through a school-wide "buddy system."

For math instruction, students participate in an opening lesson and then break into smaller groups to work on specific skills that need improvement.

Lepping, of The Broad Foundation, said Bridgeport, unlike many other urban districts, has aligned its curriculum to state standards to teach students the skills and concepts that the state says students should know. "There's also a lot of professional development going on," Lepping said, "which is necessary."

Teachers at Beardsley also have initiated weekly meetings to discuss ways to improve a child's experience at the school, such as instituting a field day, an ice cream social for the most active readers and a trip up the road to Connecticut's Beardsley Zoo.

Much of the school's staff changed when Marshall was hired three years ago as principal, and teachers said she has implored them to work hard and together, or work at a different school. The faculty parking lot is usually full by 7 a.m., and tutoring is offered before school starts.

"There's been a lot of hard work and a lot of pulling together as a team," Copotelli said. "We've worked really hard. You have to, in a district like this."

Marshall decided to group fifth-grade students by proficiency level -- low, middle and high -- during the math and writing instructional units. Staff members said the initiative has made students more comfortable to ask questions, and Marshall plans to spread the concept to fourth and sixth grades next year.

"It's been wonderful," said fifth-grade teacher Meghan Carbone, who had the low-level reading group and middle-level math group this year. "The kids don't feel so much pressure and they ask questions that they wouldn't ask because they don't feel they're holding the class back."

Beardsley educators also have urged students to read 25 books a year -- even first-graders -- and have offered an ice cream party for those meeting the goal. Marshall said the school's made strides in engaging parents by holding workshops and encouraging communication with teachers. The local library branch has worked with the school to enlist parents as library members.

Kori Li Bennet, a fifth-grade student, said she spends a lot of time at the Old Mill Green Library, where she owes late fees because she takes her time reading books to understand them.

The school's daily assignment to read for 30 minutes at home has helped her become a better reader, and she plans to tackle the goal of reading 100 books this summer. She said she read 50 books last summer.

"I think I take it from my mom," Bennet said. "My mom loves reading."