

Despite its location—close to a run-down trailer park and vacant-looking houses—the front doors of the Sunrise Elementary School in Amarillo, Texas, are not locked. There are no metal detectors, no resource officers. Inside, the windows are clean, the floors are polished, the walls are brightly painted, and bulletin boards are covered with examples of students' writing, science projects, and math activities. Student restrooms gleam. The only sounds are soft chants from a reading exercise in a bilingual classroom. Single files of quiet children pass down the hallway behind their teachers on their way to music class. The principal, Mrs. Rosemary Schultz, and Ms. Bea (Enevoldsen, the assistant principal), are always on the move and in classrooms, dispensing hugs and praise.

**Sunrise Elementary School
Armarillo, TX**

379 students, K-5

Hispanic	71%
White	24%
African American	3%
Asian	1%
American Indian	1%
Students receiving free/ reduced price lunch	86%
Students receiving SPED services	14%
Limited English Proficient students	17%
Student teacher ratio:	15:1
Student turnover rate	24%
Teacher turnover rate	7%

Sunrise embodies the classic definition of a community school. Parents and family members feel welcome and comfortable in school, talking with school staff as they wait for their children at day's end. As they leave, smiling students spill out into the halls, their work in hand to show other teachers and school staff.



The whole staff takes pride in the building. If something is in need of repair, it doesn't remain that way long. The assistant principal admits (shyly) to being nicknamed the "Tool-Time Girl." When a window needed to be caulked to keep out the cold, she did it. When a room needed to be painted, she painted it. The day before the Blue Ribbon School visit, the cot in the nurse's office broke. Rather than spend \$300 of Title I money to replace it, she went to the hardware store for a dollar's worth of screws and fixed the cot herself.

The "we can do it" attitude extends beyond brick and mortar to a shared responsibility for every child's success. The entire school staff, from professionals to the custodian, has a shared vision of what they want to accomplish, a shared responsibility for all students, and a shared professionalism.

Shared Vision

Sunrise is a neighborhood school in a low-income section of town where 70 percent of the students are Hispanic and 36 percent live in single-parent households or with grandparents. Few students ride a bus to school; most live within a few blocks. A number of students, particularly the older ones, are responsible for their younger siblings after school and on weekends.

Although 86 percent of the students are eligible for free/reduced price meals and eight students have parents currently serving time in the penal system, Sunrise staff never blames the



parents or their students' home environments. But they don't make excuses for students, either. Teachers accept the students as they are and hold high expectations for every one of them. "These are our kids and our problems and we need to solve them," says Principal Schultz. "We know we are poor, but the kids don't know they are poor when they're at school," adds a Sunrise parent.

Sunrise students want to be successful, and work hard to achieve it. When a second grade special education student recently completed his task of writing three complete sentences after a long struggle, his teacher was so proud of him and his high quality work that she sent him to the office to be celebrated by the principal and assistant principal.

Shared Responsibility for All Students

Staff members, from Principal Schultz to the food service workers, know every one of the 379 students: not just their names and faces, but their parents, their siblings, their home lives. When the father of two students shipped out to Iraq while the family was expecting a little brother, everyone in the school stepped forward; now staff members claim the baby boy as one of their own, gathering him up with a squeeze and showering him with kisses when he and his mother stop by the office to say hello.

Sunrise teachers provide after-school tutoring two to four days per week for their students identified as needing assistance beyond the regular lessons. After a quick snack when school ends at 3 p.m., students at all grade levels are tutored in their own classrooms in reading for 45 minutes. Many teachers stay for an additional hour after that to tutor smaller groups of 6-8 students who need more intense instruction in reading or math. "I tutor because this is my job. I choose to do it not for the money but because I can't do it all during the day," says a fifth grade teacher, "It's my

responsibility.” Kindergarten students can opt for an extra 75 minutes of tutoring each day. Adds a fourth grade teacher, “You have to be willing to do whatever it takes for kids to make them successful. It’s not an 8-4 job.” “At Sunrise, it’s a love, not a job,” says another fourth grade teacher

Going the extra mile to address student academic needs extends beyond the traditional classroom teachers, too.



When on-grade-level students begged to stay after school with the tutoring group, even though they didn’t “need” additional tutoring, the school formed an after-school student book club. The school counselor, the principal, the kindergarten teachers and others sponsor student groups to read pleasure books together after the school day ends, working on vocabulary development and comprehension.

Extra student support is available to all students. Any staff member concerned about a student can convene an Intervention Assistance Team at any time. Together, the grade level teacher, the counselor, a special education teacher, the principal, and anyone else involved in the student’s well-being examine the scope of the problem, look for a solution, and work out a plan using full staff resources. Whether the difficulty is academic, behavioral, or involves the student’s home life, the team creates, then implements, a workable solution.

Beyond Special Education

Sunrise has developed processes to encourage speedy solutions to meet special needs and quickly transition students to mainstream classes. “We start where they are and build on their strengths,” explains a second grade teacher. “We believe all children have special needs.” The goal of the Sunrise Special Education teachers is to work themselves out of a job by the time their students reach fourth grade. Services for students with special needs begin with a half-day preschool program for children with disabilities. Pre-K and Kindergarten students who can function in regular classrooms with support spend the other half day in regular classrooms with their grade level. First- through third-grade special education students receive small-group instruction, and those working near grade level get special education services in the regular classroom with modifications. By fourth and fifth grade, all former special education students are in regular classrooms, supported as needed by an inclusion teacher who helps out primarily in writing or science classes, for example.

Scaffolding English Instruction

Because many students enter Sunrise with no English, Pre-K and grades 1-3 are taught bilingually. Through Kindergarten, instruction is primarily in Spanish; English is introduced as an oral language through shared reading, big books, and nursery rhymes. Students entering first grade are expected to be reading at grade level in their native language and have a basic understanding of English. Instruction continues primarily in Spanish in first grade, but by second grade students are gradually transitioned to full English. Interactive writing, for example, is in Spanish with oral elaboration in English. Third grade instruction for bilingual students is entirely in English with minimal Spanish support so all students are ready to be mainstreamed into regular fourth grade classrooms. This level of proficiency may work against the school's overall AYP goal, since these students are no longer considered bilingual and are tested alongside students who have been speaking English all of their lives. But staff members say transitioning by third grade works best for the students.

Meeting Every Student's Needs

Perhaps because the faculty has been a team for so long, teachers are not shy about working together for the benefit of students. If a student is not performing well in an area, teachers confer on a strategy, perhaps deciding to co-teach the student until he or she is up to speed. Teachers believe that all the students, not just those in their own classrooms at present, are their responsibilities. For example, a second grade student (perhaps bilingual) reading at a kindergarten level might spend the morning in a kindergarten class, returning to the second grade in the afternoon, then receive additional tutoring in the after-school program. Other students, reading ahead of their peers, participate in a higher grade for a portion of the day to encourage their academic achievement.



These are not isolated events and teachers are genuinely open to receiving additional students for portions of the day when it best meets that student's learning needs.

This shared responsibility extends to students' families as well. Recently, a group of Hispanic mothers asked the principal for help learning English so that they could help their children with their homework. Although ESL classes were already being offered by the local Regional Service Center and other potential resources, the mothers felt more comfortable coming to "their" school, where they always feel welcome. So the Sunrise administration developed a curriculum that will be taught by a fourth-grade English-only teacher and supplemented computer software, which

parents can access on the schools' computer lab computers any weekday afternoon. "They have a true sincere caring for these children, their parents, and grandparents," observed a Sunrise grandparent.

Teachers involve parents in helping students learn. Fifth grade students are encouraged to read aloud to their parents for 20 minutes every day "even on weekends, even on holidays, even when we are on vacation!" according to the students. Parents sign that students have done their reading and students are rewarded at the end of each semester.

Because staff members know that summer learning loss is real, they have organized to create a summer school opportunity at Sunrise independent of the district's summer school. Funded through Title I and open to a targeted group of Sunrise students, the program comprises three 2-3 week sessions. ELL students are required to attend and instruction is focused on reading and English language development. The half-day classes allow teachers to become familiar with and work with the students they will have in September while still allowing families lots of opportunities for time together.

Shared Professionalism

The work ethic at Sunrise is strong. Book clubs are popular for both students and teachers, and teachers are unafraid to admit something is not working. The Sunrise faculty knows it needs to refresh its own learning also, so faculty members meet as an adult learning community once or twice over the summer and monthly



during the school year. Using a book club format, faculty members read and discuss professional books; anyone can suggest a title. Recent books have included *Classrooms that Work*, *What Really Matters for Struggling Readers*, *The Energy to Teach*, *Beyond Leveled Books*, and *Good Questions for Math Teaching*. Explains a fifth grade teacher, Principal Schultz "instills in us the power to know what to teach. I teach harder concepts at the beginning (of the year) to be able to spend more time on that."

Shared discussion of the books' main concepts and their implications for Sunrise and their own instruction provide opportunities for teachers to explore and understand their own and others' underlying beliefs about quality teaching and responsiveness to student needs. When teachers participate in conferences or workshops, they are expected to present what they learned at staff meetings so all can take advantage of the learning.

The Drive to Excel

The school doesn't wait until formal test scores confirm a need before developing an action plan. Although students' overall math scores were "not bad," many teachers thought their math curriculum was not meeting the needs of the students. "Children have an untapped potential in math," Principal Schultz says, "but we have to work and work and work too hard at it." Sunrise is now in its first year of a staggered implementation of a new math curriculum. The



primary teachers initiated the project and one grade level each year is added each year, though teachers still look for materials to supplement what they perceive as weak spots in the new curriculum. When implementing the new curriculum, a couple of teachers were struggling to make the changes effectively for their students, admitting that to the rest of faculty and asking for help. Colleagues who had already made the change came to their aid and mentored the teachers through some difficult areas until they were all "on the same page."

Sunrise Elementary School may be unique in its shared vision, shared responsibility for all students, shared professionalism, and in working together to do what's right for the children regardless of what it takes: teachers who accept other students into their class for part of the day because it makes educational sense, teachers who stay after school on a regular basis to work with kids who need more time and individual instruction, teachers who still enjoy the invigorating fun of learning as adults.

Does this make the school special? The teachers don't think so: they're just doing what's right for their kids.

Sunrise Elementary School TAKS Results				TEXAS STATE AVERAGE
Grade 5	2003	2004	2005	2005
Reading	93%	100%	100%	75%
Math	100%	100%	100%	79%

Scale: % meeting or exceeding standards
Source: TX Education Agency, 2004-2005