

# SMALLER LEARNING SETTINGS Help Our Kids

By Cheryl Riggins *From Principal*

**W**HEN Ruby Price became Principal of Highland Elementary School, in Salem, Oregon, she was determined to make student learning the centerpiece of a plan to turn the tide for her 600 pre-K-5 students. Like many urban schools, Highland suffered from poverty, a large minority population, low test scores, a high number of discipline referrals, and many students who weren't learning to read.

In 1997, Price began a four-tier plan to create smaller learning communities within the school to improve instruction. Initially, she listened to and solicited input from parents, teachers, and community members on what needed to be done in specific areas. Based on this feedback and student achievement data, she set reading improvement as her primary focus. The next step was to align the program with school and district goals, fol-

---

*Cheryl Riggins (criggins@naesp.org) is Associate Executive Director for Urban Alliances, National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), 1615 Duke St., Alexandria, VA 22314 (phone: 703-684-3345). Condensed from Principal, 81 (November 2001), 47. Published by NAESP at the address above.*

lowed by reallocation of resources to put the program into action.

The school began by testing every student to assess individual reading levels. Students were then placed in instructional groups of five to 15 students, by reading level. The groups were scheduled for 90 minutes of direct reading instruction daily, with assessments every eight weeks to chart reading improvement and weaknesses that needed additional work.

### Great Results

Since Highland went to small-group instruction, the percentage of third-graders reading at or above grade level has increased from 19 to 81%. The achievement gap between students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds has also been significantly narrowed.

According to Price, greatly decreased discipline referrals have allowed her more time for instructional leadership. Her teachers have expressed higher job satisfaction and work together more closely. "Within the smaller group settings, children can become more successful," says Price. "The principal isn't putting out a lot of fires because students are engaged and their needs are being met."

But she says that to make such programs work, schools need strong district support, appropriate authority for the prin-

cipal, and community buy-in: "There can be little sustainable success without building a community of learners in which teachers are empowered, parents are engaged, and the community at large realizes its role as a major stakeholder."

To encourage more urban schools in the nation to emulate Highland's small-group success, the National Association of Elementary School Principals, with the American Association of School Administrators and the National Association of Secondary School Principals, has a partnership with the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory to launch a national five-year initiative to develop leadership for small learning communities.

The initiative will equip leadership teams, especially in urban districts, with the strategies, techniques, knowledge, and skills needed to create professional learning communities in schools, implement existing school and district improvement strategies, and obtain district and community support. A key component is five annual training institutes focusing on the leadership skills principals need as they work to change the learning environment.

Starting this fall, the regrouping initiative will be piloted in selected school districts in Mississippi. Based on the results, the program, will then be offered nationally.

ed