

At 7:30 each morning, Principal Cindy Goodman and Vice-Principal Billy Hardy take up their appointed hallway posts, greeting students by name with smiles and enthusiasm. Laurel Hill students stride purposefully, to breakfast or to their classrooms, down corridors alive with piped-in classical music. Parents often troop in with their kids, eager to catch teachers during the 7:30 to 8:00 classroom “no appointment necessary” time.

With a 75-year history in Scott County, North Carolina, Laurel Hill Elementary has been a bedrock for generations of families in this once prosperous and still close-knit community. In recent years, industry and employment

losses have been so severe that the county now ranks among the poorest in all of the state. Laurel Hill, with academic distinctions, excellent faculty, shining classrooms and well-kept grounds, is a source of pride for the community and symbolizes the district’s investment in a brighter future for all students.

Laurel Hill, Scotland County, NC

www.scsnc.org

492 students, grades preK-5

White	59%
American Indian	22%
African American	18%
Hispanic	1%
Students eligible for free/reduced price lunch	76%
Students receiving SPED services	17%
Students with Limited English Proficiency	3%
Student mobility rate	14%
Average class size	16

Inclusion – A Catalyst for Change and Success

Teachers and parents credit the school’s success to Principal Goodman, who brought high expectations, strategic thinking, instructional know-how, and unflagging energy to Laurel Hill when she took charge five years ago. She,



however, credits the challenge—low achievement by special education students—and the faculty’s positive response, as the true catalysts for Laurel Hill’s success.

Only four years ago, students with educational disabilities spent most of their instructional time in self-contained classrooms, with limited exposure to the general education curriculum and their age-mates. Public reporting of student achievement, a requirement of the No

Child Left Behind Act, spotlighted Laurel Hill’s special education students’ achievement gap and kept the school from

meeting the Adequate Yearly Progress benchmark. This wake-up call motivated faculty to look for more effective ways of teaching children with disabilities. Influenced by Dr. Marilyn Friend's professional development video, *The Power of Two*, faculty members became convinced that inclusive education was the right thing to offer exceptional students, and that regular education students would benefit as well. This year, 90% of Laurel Hills special education students achieved proficiency in the state's reading test—a victory that didn't come easily or quickly.



With teachers motivated to reinvent theirs as an inclusive school, Laurel Hill began a several year change process that transformed teaching roles and assignments, raised teacher-student ratios, ensured grade-level planning, accommodated block scheduling, and energized assessment and instructional practices. A teacher recalled, "All these changes didn't happen overnight. We learned by trial and error. Sometimes changing one thing still didn't get it right; it just opened the door to something else that needed changing."

Teachers pointed to the principal's role in guiding change and finding the resources that made changes possible—using, for example, Title I and district funds strategically to employ highly skilled part-time teachers for core subject instruction. This effectively reduces class sizes for critical instructional groups and lets teachers work with fourteen to eighteen students at a time, about six fewer per class than the county average. Teachers said that the low teacher-student ratio makes differentiating instruction manageable for students with diverse needs.



Experienced and well-qualified teachers are among the school's strongest assets. More than half the faculty has more than 10 years of experience; five are Nationally Board Certified, and more are working towards this or administrators' certification. Principal Goodman actively recruits strong teachers to meet the needs of grade-level teams and carefully matches classroom and special education co-teachers by strengths and personalities. Most important, she knows what's going on in each classroom. She and Assistant Principal Bill Hardy make daily, unannounced visits into classrooms. Their visits are so matter-of-fact that if Principal Goodman misses a classroom, students ask her where she was. The visits have also helped keep standards high: one teacher said, "I want to be the best I can be when Ms. Goodman comes in, so I am always at my best."

Skill-Level Instructional Blocks

Laurel Hill follows state and district standards, with district-created online curricula, pacing guides, and assessments. Grade-level planning teams thoroughly review the curriculum and instructional objectives each week to ensure that all teachers address the same standards at the same time. Weekly goals and daily class schedules are posted outside each classroom so a visitor or an administrator knows what will happen during an observation. Teachers set timers during activity blocks and all of the school's clocks are satellite-synchronized, giving proof of the faculty's commitment to staying on task and staying on time.

They are encouraged to channel their creative energies into the subjects they love. Teachers in grades 3, 4 and 5 elect to be content specialists, rather than teach all subjects, and divide responsibilities for preparing and delivering instruction in reading, math, science, or social studies.

"I know I was born to teach this grade and especially to teach reading. I can pour myself into reading now," a teacher reported, with exuberance. Freed from having to prepare and teach in all of the core content areas, teachers acknowledge that "going with their strengths" gives them more time to prepare lessons, delve deeper into subject content, apply more and different instructional strategies, and share what they do best with others on the grade-level team.



Students move in instructional blocks for core subjects. Their assignment to groups is driven by their learning needs; consequently they may be assigned to different levels for different subjects. Laurel Hill uses "co-teaching"; classroom and special education teachers fully share instructional responsibility for all the children in the least restrictive setting. Teachers who work with the lower-achieving groups co-teach with a special education colleague. One co-teaching pair has learned so much from working together, they said. They both felt more competent and they have enlarged their "teaching toolkits." Co-teaching has been so successful that teachers now request to take on this challenge of teaching special education students alongside their age-mates.

In addition to subject specialties (who teaches what), grade-level teams also plan who teaches whom—that is, which teachers are matched with what groups of learners. These assignments are not static and teachers rotate, teaching high, middle, and lower-achieving instructional groups in turn. Schoolwide math and reading specialists support all teams with curricular resources and instructional strategies.

Library, art, music, computer, and physical education classes—the “specials”—are scheduled so that that grade-level teaching teams have three single periods and one double period (80 minutes) for planning and collaboration each



week. Teachers at every grade level saw this grade-level planning time as essential. One grade-level team described itself as “a well-greased machine,” using every minute of the time allotted. During planning, teams review the curriculum and pacing guides, discuss how students are doing, and consider how to adapt strategies to match different learning needs. Teachers agreed that they often forget which students are [special education] kids; the goal is to find ways to move everyone along the same curriculum.

Teachers keep their “specials” colleagues well-informed about the objectives and themes of their curricula. The librarian stocks classrooms with fiction and non-fiction material at different levels to build background knowledge. Specialists teach music, art,

and computer science classes from curricula that incorporate grade-level standards, and call on their learning disability training to accommodate different learning styles and reading levels.

The physical education class lives up to its mission to “provide our students with opportunities to grow physically, mentally and socially through a variety of activities.” Students spend the 40-minute class in continuous movement and activity. They begin class by stacking buckets as high as possible without toppling them, then move on to an aerobic activity. After coordinating the steps in the Shag, the state dance, they finish the period with a game of hockey or basketball. In a Laurel Hill physical education “rite of passage,” all 4th graders take swimming lessons and pass the swimming test, taught by the school’s seasoned physical education teacher and his corps of volunteers.



The Active Art and Science of Teaching

All teachers work across the curriculum on essential learning skills. All incorporate writing across the subject areas, always helping students put their thoughts into expressive sentences and paragraphs. Science lessons introduce concepts with new words that call upon phonetics rules for decoding. All teachers come together daily in “reading

dialogue" sessions to instruct a small leveled reading group for 45 minutes of guided reading and instruction in fluency, comprehension, and background knowledge. In one such class, students discussed poetry in terms of stanzas, personification, and alliteration, using cards the teacher had imprinted with these literary terms. After the children read the poem together, the

teacher helped them interpret it, using everyday language or things the students could relate to in exploring the poem. All lessons start with

"essential questions" that anchor new concepts to children's prior knowledge. For example, an essential question for the reading group was:

"How do good readers identify cause and effect relationships in the text?"

The teacher gave a real-life example:

"Because it snowed ten inches in Laurel Hill, what happened?" Students responded, "built a snowman, no

school, hit mom with snowball." The teacher accepted each phrase but also prompted students to expand their thoughts into complete sentences that showed the cause-effect relationship. When a student faltered, the teacher said, "I didn't do a good enough job of explaining this," and gave the student more help by quickly drawing a picture of a cause-effect example on the whiteboard. Soon after, the student observed, "This is really easy once you get used to it." In a twenty minute segment, students moved from concrete, real-life experience to extracting cause-effect relationships in their text, using cues such as "always look for because in the sentence." The rhythm of instruction flows from gentle to racing as students grasp knowledge through all of their senses. In a morning kindergarten class, students learned the sounds of the alphabet by dancing to a phonics song and tossing beanbag alphabet letters, then easily transitioned to asking probing questions using who, what, and when words, part of a thinking map session. In a pre-reading session of second graders, students identified title, author, and illustrator and discussed character, setting, and story line while the teacher helped them draw connections between their experiences and the vocabulary words. Students played tic-tac-toe to reinforce sight and vocabulary words, some of them challenge words from the third grade list.





Teachers change activities frequently. In a class on units of measure, the teachers used pictures, books, and other objects to demonstrate different units (length, weight, capacity). Using a tree map, students called out what can be measured under each unit: inches, feet, yards vs. ounces, pounds vs. cups and pints. The teacher pointed out what students needed to know for upcoming state assessments and students designed "measurement" booklets to help them remember key measurement facts and tools.

In another math class, co-taught by the math and a special education teachers, students recited the eights multiplication table using an overhead. "Look at how many ways are you learning—by seeing, hearing, and saying it," the teachers noted. When the students turned to a long division practice sheet, one of the teachers said, "Don't forget Do Monkeys Smell Bad Really," to which students replied, "Divide, multiply, subtract, bring down, and remainder." The teacher explained that these tricks help all kids remember math processes.

In a reading class of third graders, students began by noting their homework assignments in their planners, then participated in a written practice session on contractions through "call and response." One group called out the contracted word, such as "Let's," and the other yelled out "Let us!"

Following that exercise, the children quickly moved to their next activity for the day: learning about China. They used the KWFL grid (what do we Know? What do we Want to know? How do we Find out? and what did we Learn?) to find facts, as opposed to opinions, about China. Prompted by the KWFL questions, a student confidently stated, "We know they eat a lot of rice in China," while another added, "Yes, they also use chopsticks." Students used the classroom's many resources about China, a world map, and a globe to verify some of the facts they had written on the KWFL grid, and were encouraged to use "who, what, when, why, how" to probe for details after their classmates made statements.



The teachers used different reading strategies and techniques to keep the students engaged. Students learned more about China from a story on tape. They discussed the title and background of the story and used the recording to look for clues about the story. The children were asked to take a “picture walk” to learn more about what the story



was about, and were asked to predict what the pictures told them about the story (this story was about helping people and volunteering). In the final 20 minutes of the class, color-coded groups of students received assignments and went to their stations, some working independently on vocabulary words while others worked with the classroom or special education teacher on phonics and decoding skills.

Knowing How Students Are Doing

At Laurel Hill, student assessment is everybody's business. The district and school leadership—superintendent, principal, vice-principal, and curriculum specialists—track students' performance on state tests, pinpointing areas of strengths and items missed. District benchmark tests are aligned to district curricula and every six to nine weeks teachers get feedback which they use to place children in small instructional groups and to “move them up” when they are ready. Teachers conduct item analyses from district assessments and daily work to determine what content students missed and what skills need re-teaching. “Assessment is our roadmap,” a teacher said, “the map tells us when to back up and when to move ahead, but we know that every minute we teach matters if we are going to stay on the road.”

Grade-level teams of teachers spoke of “shar[ing] a brain.” Planning time is full of brainstormed ideas, strategies, and materials. Because the teachers know all of the children in a grade, and share responsibility for teaching them, they can encourage each other in difficult times. They won't give up on a single child, they said and described going “way beyond the extra mile” to find strategies that work.

The school responds quickly when children fall behind. Each year, about 10% of Laurel Hill's students are referred to the Student Services Management Team because of academic or social concerns. Made up of an administrator, guidance counselor, social worker, two veteran teachers, a special educator and the school nurse, the team

discusses students' learning needs with parents and brings in community resources, if needed, to solve problems. The school's optional tutoring and enrichment program, funded by the district's 21st Century grant, offers scholars academic tutoring, homework assistance, and structured sports and exercise opportunities. Parents testified that the school works diligently to connect families with the support and resources students need.

Importance of Routines and Structure

Students know how to work independently, with partners, and in small groups. In every class, students moved seamlessly among different instructional settings. Teachers at all grade levels talked about the importance of high expectations for learning, predictable consequences for behavior, and consistent classroom routines.

Teachers at Laurel Hill are masters of routine and transitions. With students moving among groups and activities several times an hour, teachers achieve order through deftly executed transitions: One clap means "stand up"; two means "push in your chair"; three means "move to the circle." Students wear their shirts tucked in and travel the halls in near-silence.



They carry their supplies from class to class in school-provided tote bags and use planners and note-taking books as organizational aids. Student work tables have baskets with pencils and paper to save instructional minutes that are otherwise lost when students grope for supplies. Worksheets are designed to serve as graphic organizers.

Teachers help children succeed by providing structure and discipline. The whole school shares a consistent approach to behavior and each teacher records behavior on color-coded charts. No child is kept in at recess time, but some students have to "walk off some minutes" at recess as a "misbehavior consequence." Parents are called "early and often" and the principal and teachers work with families to manage problem behaviors.

In Summary—A Culture of Success

At Laurel Hill, success for all students is driven by high expectations, collaborative teaching, consistent discipline, mutual respect, and faculty empowerment. Parents speak very highly of their principal "who raised the bar" and the teachers who work so hard with their children. The school embodies the "It Takes a Village" concept, a parent said,

referring to teachers as “family.” Another parent added, “even if a child is ‘labeled’ as having a problem, the school does not treat him differently.” A father said that he liked the school’s rules and the rewards students get if they follow those rules. Another parent said that she feels that there is “a lot of learning besides academics” and appreciated that students are taught to be independent and encouraged to take on responsibilities.

Teachers credited Principal Goodman with helping them focus their teaching and for setting high expectations for everyone. Praising her ability to recruit highly qualified teachers who are willing to work hard—and the autonomy she gives them to perfect their craft—teachers said the changes she instituted have changed the school culture and led to dramatic improvement in student achievement.

Laurel Hill End of Grade Results				
% proficient and above: 5th grade Reading				
	2003	2004	2005	2006
All	78	95	99	91
Low income	74	92	98	89
% proficient and above: 5th grade Math				
	2003	2004	2005	2006
All	82	91	96	73
Low income	77	89	95	71

