Last Month in FirstSchool

March 2012

North Carolina
In North Carolina, March began with a School Leadership Team meeting during which FirstSchool staff, school leadership and invited teachers delved deeply into the topic of Seamless Transitions. Collaboratively, we identified and discussed the key components of seamless transitions for students and families. School teams then took inventory of their current practices, shared promising practices with one another in a gallery format, and developed an action plan to either begin a new practice or expand upon an existing one. FS Snapshot and CLASS data was used to gain insights into the effectiveness of transitions between grade levels. Our next School Leadership Team meeting is scheduled for May 2nd.

At the school level, Sharon Ritchie, Cristina Gillanders, and Sam Oertwig worked with the teachers at Stocks Elementary. Full day meetings were held for each grade level to review new Snapshot and CLASS data in light of promoting academic and socio-emotional success of African American, Latino, and low income children. In addition, Susie Wilde, literacy consultant, and Sam Oertwig conducted the final seminar to the teachers at Bogue Sound Elementary. This month the focus was on the writing process and how being a critical reader builds the necessary skillset for being a successful writer.

Home School Partnership
Cristina Gillanders met with teachers in South Graham Elementary to discuss the practices of scaffolding and reflection, collaboration and
work with peers, culturally responsive practices, and curriculum integration and connection to the real world which are critical when working with African American, Latino and low income children. She also introduced the concept of using the families’ and communities’ ‘funds of knowledge’ as an example of culturally responsive practices that are connected to children’s sociocultural experiences.

Juliana Harris and Andrea Green, teachers from Stocks Elementary, visited South Graham Elementary to share with colleagues of the family team their experiences promoting home-school partnerships in their school. The discussion generated interesting conversations about the challenges and opportunities of working with families.

Teacher Education Conference
FirstSchool’s working conference on pre-service teacher education, co-hosted with the UNC-CH School of Education, sparked two days of vibrant and productive conversations among national and local researchers, teacher educators, and others involved in the preparation of teachers for 21st century schools. The conference, Learning from Our Differences: Re-thinking Pre-Service Teacher Education for Pre-K through 3rd Grade, took place March 29th-30th at the Carolina Inn. The invitation-only ‘think-tank’ event began with a welcome by Dean Bill McDiarmid of the School of Education followed by a presentation by Sharon Ritchie of FirstSchool’s efforts in North Carolina and Michigan. Conference organizer Rebecca New acknowledged the historic divide between scholarship in early, elementary and special education; the marginalization of early childhood in the teacher education discourse, and continued ideological debates among scholars within these groups about what teacher education is all about. The conference format provided a series of opportunities for participants from leading teacher education programs across the U.S. and within the UNC-CH and FirstSchool community to engage in deliberate exchanges of perspectives and programmatic differences related to the preparation of teachers from pre-K through 3rd grade.
The discussions were launched with brief panel “provocations” by national guests followed by working group deliberations and summaries. FirstSchool team members Dick Clifford, Gisele Crawford, Cristina Gillanders and Sharon Ritchie, along with several SOE faculty, helped to facilitate and document these discussions, with a focus on “touchstones” for judging teacher education program quality. Graduate student note-takers helped to make discussion groups’ unique and shared understandings public for all to consider. The School of Education also captured video-recordings to be developed into podcasts for future dissemination through LEARN NC. The final session invited participants to identify and begin working on key policy recommendations, university partnerships, joint publications and an interdisciplinary research agenda for the reform of pre-service teacher education.

Future initiatives and resources related to the theme of Teacher Education will be described on the FirstSchool website.

Michigan

Michigan, like other states, is undergoing bold educational changes. Change is not easy!

Recently, Mara Lud, the Principal of Gier Park was promoted to Director of Elementary and Middle School Education in the Lansing School District. Becky Stephens, one of the FirstSchool leadership team teacher participants is now serving as Interim Principal. In addition, the Lansing School District Board of Education has voted to restructure a number of schools in the district and Gier Park will become a preK-3rd grade building. We congratulate Mara and Becky and wish all the staff well. We are looking forward to our continued work with Gier Park.

The Pontiac Board of Education has voted to close Jefferson Whittier at the end of this school year as part of a district restructuring plan. It has been a pleasure having Jefferson Whittier as part of the Michigan FirstSchool team and we wish Principal Wendy Fitzpatrick and the staff...
success during this transition and in their new positions. We are continuing to work with the school until the end of the year.

We encourage FirstSchool principals and teachers to take their learning with them as they transition to a new environment. Individual teacher conferences to share Snapshot data and whole school CLASS data meetings are in progress. Professional development is being identified and implemented based on these data. Throughout our collaboration with staff, several big themes have emerged across schools: How do we incorporate more reflection into our instructional practices? How do we meet the needs of our boys? How do we share information learned at Leadership Retreats, back at school?

The Michigan Leadership Team
A day and a half spent together at the Michigan Leadership Retreat on March 20 and 21 provided an excellent venue for new learning and continued collaboration among Michigan’s schools. We were fortunate to have Sharon Ritchie, Sam Oertwig, and Gisele Crawford from North Carolina and Jody Glover, Program Officer for the Kellogg Foundation, spend the two days with us participating in activities.

Sharon shared “Raising Cain, Exploring the Inner Lives of American Boys”, a PBS video hosted by Michael Thompson, Ph.D. We also explored research regarding boys’ brains, self-regulation, and language development.

Progress on schools’ action plans provided great discussion and sharing of exciting practices:

- Shabazz identified elements of a Culture of Caring that promote positive self-identity. The school has developed strategies that focus on reinforcement of positive behavior.
- Gier Park has been reviewing strategies and incorporating more oral language development into classrooms. They are creating a
monthly reading focus and implementing activities to make every month “Reading Month”.

- Through collaborative conversations during grade level meetings at Birch Street, they now have a mechanism for sharing instructional knowledge and a more effective communication strategy. They also are focusing on providing positive behavior supports.

**Home School Partnership**

The Gier Park fathers’ focus group met for its final time in March. The four fathers that attended all three sessions were interested in continuing the discussions and would very much like to receive a summary of their times together. Some excellent ideas and support for the school came out during the meetings, such as fathers signing up to volunteer with projects and activities at the school.

Gier Park’s mothers’ group met with Patricia Briones for the first time in March with nine in attendance. They felt valued and comfortable to share their ideas. The parents have many questions and concerns regarding the changes in the district. Parents from all of the schools state that the focus groups allow those who have not been very involved in the school activities to feel that they have a voice, and are being heard regarding the education of their children.

Dr. McKinney will be convening the Home School Partnership liaisons to identify next steps.

**Outreach**

**Publications**

The *Handbook of Early Childhood Education* edited by Bob Pianta has just been published by Guilford Press. FirstSchool efforts are show-cased in a chapter entitled “Restructuring and Aligning Early Education Opportunities for Cultural, Language and Ethnic Minority
Children’ authored by Cristina Gillanders, Iheoma Iruka, Sharon Ritchie and Carolyn Cobb. This comprehensive and forward-thinking book bring together foremost experts to examine what works in promoting all children's school readiness and social-emotional development in preschool and the primary grades to review the breadth of current knowledge about early education and identifies important priorities for practice and policy.

An article by Cristina Gillanders, Marvin McKinney and Sharon Ritchie titled, “What kind of school would you like for your children? Exploring minority mothers' beliefs to promote home-school partnerships,” was published in Early Childhood Education Journal. The article describes an approach that has been used by FirstSchool to help schools understand low income minority parents’ goals for the education of their children and design responsive strategies to support these goals.

**QRIS Learning Table**

Iheoma Iruka and Sharon Ritchie were the invited speakers to the first in a series of online learning community opportunities developed by BUILD and the QRIS National Learning Network aimed at “Assuring that state quality rating and improvement systems are responsive to children who are culturally, linguistically and ability diverse”. Eight states that applied to be part of this project (California, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, New York, Oregon, and Pennsylvania) participated in the two hour presentation and discussion entitled ‘Striving for Equity.’ which focused on helping states determine the evidence they have for how well their state was doing in serving young children who are culturally, linguistically, and ability diverse. Iheoma provided the research base to spur their efforts and Sharon addressed the need to reframe thinking in order to make good decisions about what they are looking for, what they should measure and what professional development should support their goals.

**National PreK-3rd Grade Work Group**
On April 11\textsuperscript{th} (3-4:30 EDT) that National PreK-3\textsuperscript{rd} Grade Work Group will present their second in a series of 7 Webinars on PreK-3\textsuperscript{rd} grade education. Thank you so much for agreeing to be a part of the second in our PreK-3\textsuperscript{rd} Grade National Work Group webinar series. The session is entitled “School Administrators: PreK-3\textsuperscript{rd} Instructional Leaders,” and will provide attendees with a broad set of perspectives on PreK-3\textsuperscript{rd} leadership as well as contribute to a deepening understanding of the issues, best practices and opportunities for success at every level from school to district to state. The majority of the webinar will be devoted to hearing from leaders who are engaged in ongoing PreK-3\textsuperscript{rd} grade efforts at the principal, superintendent and national level. To register please go to: https://www3.gotomeeting.com/register/933856230 A web site has been created to house information on the webinars: www.prek-3rdgradenationalworkgroup.org.