# IV. James A. Duff Elementary School
# Floyd County, Kentucky

Core Knowledge

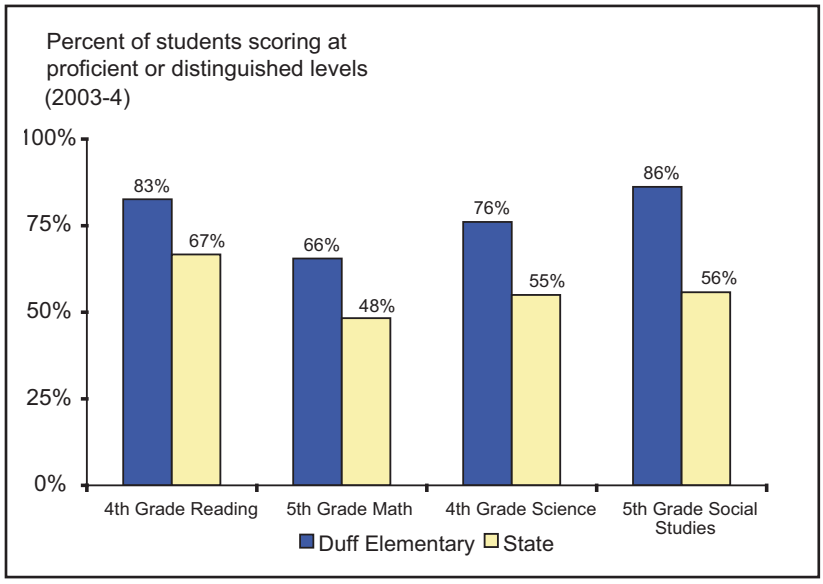
## Grades K–5

**Enrollment: 294**
**Low-Income: 100%**
**Non-White: 0%**

In the late 1990s, Kentucky's state accountability system rated James A. Duff Elementary a "school in crisis" based on low academic performance. "Our state test scores had hit rock bottom," recalls Duff's principal, Elizabeth Allen. Few officials at the state department of education were surprised: According to the 2000 Census, the poverty rate for families with children in the surrounding communities is about double the statewide rate and nearly three times the national average. Nearly all of Duff's students qualify for free- and reduced-price lunches.

But deep in the heart of Eastern Kentucky's impoverished coalfield country, a quiet but inspiring educational triumph has taken place. Over the last several years, Duff's assessment results have risen steadily, and in the spring of 2004 its test scores in forth grade reading and science and fifth grade math and social studies all surpassed state averages by impressive margins.

Once Labeled "In Crisis," Duff Elementary Pulls Well Ahead of Kentucky Average




(2004)

The turning point came when the school applied for and received a federal Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration grant. While researching programs that would fit Duff's needs, Ms. Allen attended a showcase of approved research-based designs. "I saw Core Knowledge being presented and fell in love with it," she recounts.

However, some of Duff's teachers expressed anxiety about the new curriculum, wondering where they would find classroom materials and whether students could handle the content. "After we began implementing it, I realized some of the first grade teachers were watering down the science. I

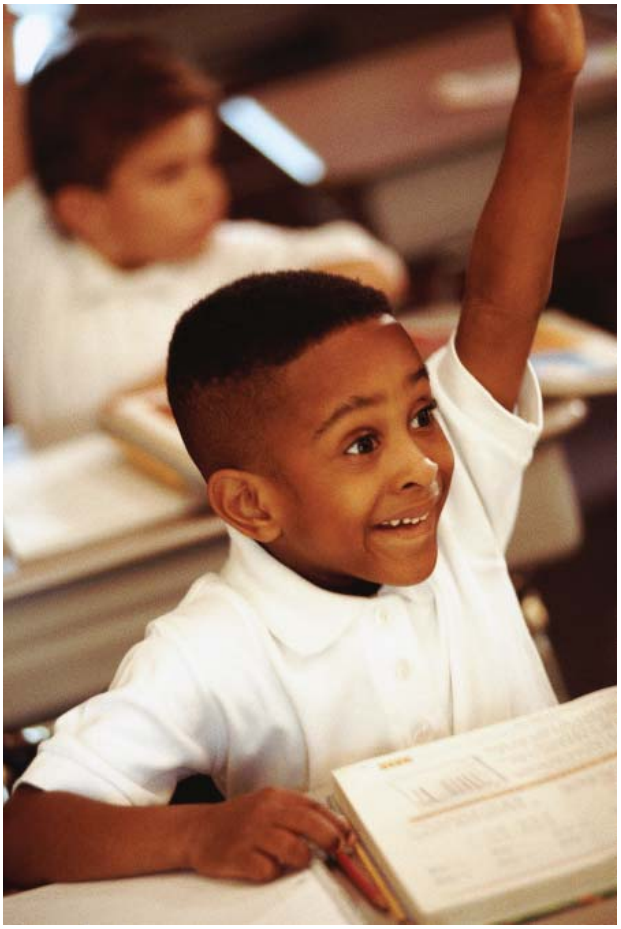
just happened to [overhear this] and threw a fit. I said, 'If these kids can learn about T Rex and learn how to spell it they can use these other science terms too.' But at the time they really felt like it was too advanced for our kids."

Teachers also had to work much harder to teach the new curriculum. "Very often in the beginning, I heard 'I'm having to study harder than the kids,'" recalls Ms. Allen. Nevertheless, she says, "They were amazed at how quickly the kids could comprehend these subjects." And that went a long way to converting them. It took two or three years for teachers to become acclimated to Core Knowledge, "but now everyone is won over and there's not one person who isn't excited about it."

One benefit of Core Knowledge has been its carefully sequenced content beginning in kindergarten. Because Kentucky doesn't test social studies until forth grade and science until fifth, early elementary teachers often give those subjects short shrift. "You can't wait until fourth or fifth grade to start teaching about social studies," says Ms. Allen. "You can't do it. You've got to start early and build their knowledge. I preach that it starts in kindergarten and works its way up. You can't expect forth or fifth grade teachers to teach everything."

Perhaps not surprisingly, Duff posted especially high scores on the last round of state science and social studies assessments. For example, 86 percent of Duff's fifth graders scored "proficient or distinguished" in social studies, compared with only 56 percent of fifth graders statewide.

Ms. Allen says that early knowledge-building has greatly helped reading achievement as well. "I don't think there's any doubt that the vocabulary and background knowledge helps with reading comprehension. Our reading scores have gone up … across the board. Reading in all the content areas has made a big difference."



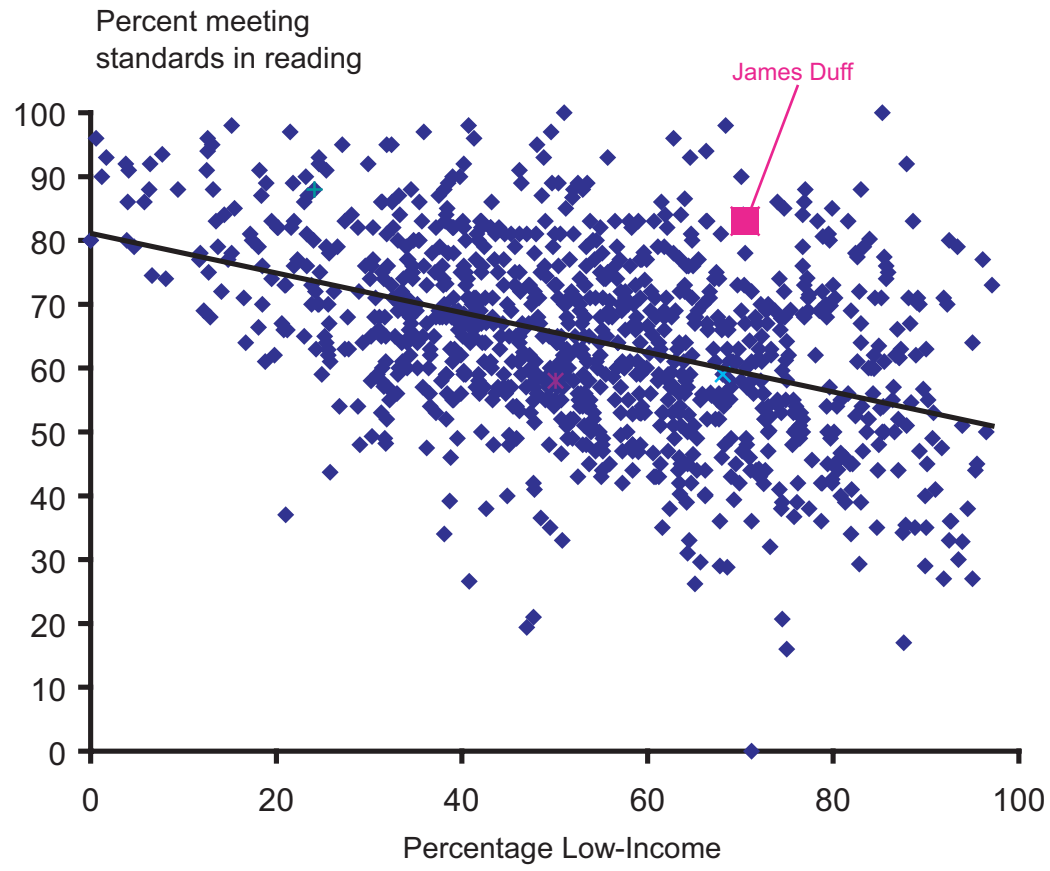
Professional collaboration has increased greatly as well. "It has made this school a much more cohesive unit," Ms. Allen says of Core Knowledge. "It has made us a team." Now, she notes, "Because every grade level now has common planning time and they plan together, most turn in group lesson plans rather than individual lesson plans. And our teachers talk about the curriculum starting in kindergarten all the way through grades."

Ms. Allen chafes at the suggestion that rich content is somehow "developmentally inappropriate" for Duff's younger students. "We have shortchanged five and six year-old children for a long time. They are ready to learn unless they are developmentally delayed," Ms. Allen says. "They love it. They thrive on it."

Indeed, Ms. Allen claims the curriculum has improved the overall culture of the school. "I think it's improved the culture by way of these projects and the richness of the curriculum and getting kids involved and really engaged in learning." She and her staff are eagerly anticipating completion of a new nature studies lab that will greatly expand the school's capacity for "hands on" science teaching.

Ms. Allen is adamant that the Core Knowledge curriculum is an especially good fit for a student body like Duff's. "We're in the Eastern Kentucky coalfield mountains. We're very rural. The closest thing to a city is Prestonsburg [pop. 4,400], which is really a small town. Core Knowledge has made our kids much more aware of the larger world. It's a wonderful, rich curriculum and has made a big difference in our school."

Duff's Students Achieve High Scores in Reading Despite High Poverty




Source: Core Knowledge Foundation analysis of data from www.schoolmatters.com