By ROBERT PIERCE

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All elementary schools in USD No. 480 made Adequate Yearly Progress on the 2009 Kansas state assessments, and McKinley Elementary was near the top of the list for its scores in reading in math.

Kathy Wedel is currently in her first year as principal at McKinley, and she said last year's scores were particularly exciting as a teacher because she played a part in the scores.

McKinley scored 89 percent in reading and nearly 84 percent in math for 2009, above the state targets of 79.7 and 77.8 respectively. Those standards will rise again this year, as the state targets for 2010 have been set at 82.3 percent for math and 83.7 percent in reading

"Each year, it just continues to climb higher," Wedel said. "We also need to make sure that our students are meeting those scores."

She said Liberal schools use data from fall MAPP scores, and by doing so, the school can help direct students better in both reading and math.

McKinley also uses Study Island, a reading computer program, to begin students' days.

"The questions are formatted like the reading and the math that's on MAPP tests," Wedel said. "I think it's important for them to be familiar with that."

Throughout USD 480, all teachers have learned to use vocabulary used in Kansas assessments, which they teach to students from an early age.

"They give them words that they need to learn," Wedel said. "They teach that through the years from kindergarten up."

In elementary schools, third grade students take assessments, and Wedel said children at that level use formatives to help them learn what they need to for the test.

"We have to teach the students how the use the formative," she said. "They have a toolbar at the top they use to highlight, strike out answers and how to use it and how to log on."

McKinley likewise has a Title I program, and Wedel said this is used to help kids who educators, based on MAPP scores, feel need additional help.

"We have them go to Title I, and we put them in small groups and some even close to one-on-one on a couple of them to help them read better and build their reading schools," she said.

Like other Liberal schools, McKinley uses Literacy First, a data driven program, which Wedel said allows educators to divide students into large and small groups.

"In small groups, we break down into centers, and they build on those reading skills that help them fill in those gaps," she said. "I think that's just a plus, and after they feel like they know their information, they wait a couple of weeks and then test them. Then they know that they are ready to move on. We know as the teachers and the principal they are ready to move on to the next level."

McKinley currently has an enrollment of 163 students, 41 of whom are third graders. The school also has an instructional coach, who Wedel said has done a great job focusing on Literacy First.

"She's also organized in the different areas where her job description is, and she's done a great job on that," she said. "I really believe a lot of the teachers have seen the increase of knowledge in their students, which is great."

Wedel said what teachers are doing in lower grades will help students in intermediate and middle schools.

"That's why I think (Literacy First) is such a great program," she said. "We are filling the holes."

She said this helps children learn to read better and have a better foundation in reading.

"Through that, they're going to take that with them when they go into the intermediate schools and middle schools and high school," she said. "I just think that's a huge plus."

Wedel said assessment education begins as early as kindergarten.

"When they're learning to read at this time, we're building the foundation of their reading program, of what they know," she said. "This is how they're going to do better in intermediate school, in the high school, and I think this is how we're going to make it happen."

Wedel said she is always challenged as an educator, whether it be as a teacher or a principal, and with assessment targets scheduled to rise next year, she is even more focused as a principal.

"We're doing (Literacy First)," she said. "We're doing the early morning computer time. We're breaking down to small groups, more individual learning to meet their needs. I feel like we're on the road to positive programming here and to meet the AYP challenge."

Wedel praised McKinley teachers as well as paras, who she said have been a positive help to teachers.

"They've been there for them," she said. "We have a building para who's done a great job, and we have a title para. I think that's been a real plus."

Wedel said she is excited about how formatives are going at McKinley.

"I think the students are working hard," she said.

Kansas assessments are scheduled for the first part of March, and educators are preparing and helping students meet the goals to meet standard of excellence, Wedel said.

She said she is also very proud of students for working hard on MAPP tests.

"I'm proud of our third grade students and teachers for striving to be focused on doing the formatives and the MAPP tests," she said. "All of our teachers have done a good job working on the Literacy First. It's a new program. I think they're seeing the pluses with it, and it's been positive."

Wedel said through data from Literacy First, teachers can see how much students have grown and learned.

"It's awesome," she said. "It is just awesome to see that. Whatever we can do to help kids learn,

that's what our life is about in education and as parents. If we don't step up and help them at home as well as in school, we're not doing the best for them as children. They are the most important – our students and our children."

Wedel said educators want children to succeed and graduate from high school and move on to higher education.

"It's important they get their education," she said. "I'm real proud of all of our teachers here and the paras and everybody who works together at our school. We're a family here, and we work together for the benefit of the student."