d@ Uriarte
THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

Dynamic
school

picks up
the pace
'At risk?

facility
. shows success

W

henever people talk
about, the benefits
of school district
consolidation, 1 think of
Wilson Elementary School .
District, made up of a single,
school. •
Whenever we lament how
low-income, minority stu-
dents cannot succeed, cannot
compete with children of
privilege and affluence, I
point to the Wilson experi-
ence.

Whenever teachers com-
plain that Hispanic parents
just don't support their kids
at school, or even show up for
parents night, 1 suggest they
apply to Wilson.
This is a school district
that is beating the odds.
By any measure, Wilson is
"at risk." No less than 94 per-
' cent of its students qualify
for free lunches. Three of
five students qualify as Eng-
lish-learners, the children of
immigrants. Some of the
families survive just a couple
of rungs above migrants. In-
deed, the school continually
wrestles with mobility,

Of 30 Head Start students
one year,. 12 .will be gone by
the second grade, replaced
by 15 new arrivals from an-
other district, another state,'
another country.
Role models? For a long
time, the school was next
door to a woman's prison. -At
recess each day, the kids
would hear the loudspeaker
blare; "Inmates, return to
•your cells/'
The district had a long his-
tory of anemic academic per-
formance. In the 1980s, the
high school dropout rate of
Wilson students approached
90 percent. They tried every-
thing: Offering college schol-
arships to anyone who gradu-
ated; sending counselors to-
the Phoenix Union High
School District campuses to
monitor Wilson students'
progress, pleading with
PUHSD officials for assist-
ance. Nothing worked.
Today, it's just the oppo-
site. The Wilson Charter
High School, established
eight years ago, has a gradua-
tion rate of over'90 percent.
Two-thirds of these kids are
Wilson elementary, grads.
Same kids, same demograph-
ic, different results.
This year, 133 ©ut~of-dis»
trict students attend Wilson
Primary School under the
open enrollment program.
Here's why they come:
Wilson is designated as a
"performing plus" school by
the state Department of Edu-
cation.
Carolyn Borger and Pat
Murawski were finalists for
Rodel Foundation's Teacher
.of the Year. Two teachers
from the same school.

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DE URIARTE
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Located at Fillmore and
30th streets in a rough, seedy
part of east Phoenix, sand-
wiched between Phoenix El-
ementary, Balsz and Roose-
velt districts, Wilson's at-risk
population is higher than any
of the PUHSD feeder districts.
Yet its AIMS scores are better
than most, comparable to any.
Wilson students are scoring
higher than the state average
on the AIMS tests.

The school has gone high
tech. Each student in every
grade works on an individual
computer. Teachers work- off
interactive SMART Boards to
instruct and monitor every
student.
"We go on virtual field trips
in social studies, where we'll
tour the Louvre or explore a
Brazilian rain forest," boasts
Marco Ruiz, a fifth-grade
teacher who is passing on his
technology .training to the
kids.
Teachers integrate technol-
ogy into every lesson, from
music to geography, science
and math. "In Fast Math, they
feel like they're playing
games, but they're really
working math problems," Ruiz
says proudly.
Wilson kids already have
learned Power 'Point, Excel
and Word, even though most
don't have computers at home.
That's a great advance for
them, narrowing the gap be-
tween the haves and have-
nots.

The computers' are the re-
sult of a fortuitous sale of-
school property at 24th Street

JOHN SEVERSON/THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

Cesar Vargas, a fourth-grader at Wilson Primary School, concen-trates on a project, part of the charter's increased emphasis on math.

and Buckeye Road"for expan-
sion of Sky Harbor Interna-
tional Airport.
The 21st-century high tech
arrived as part of the vision of
las locas, the crazy ones, board
members like Mercedes Ro-
bles, Grace Ruiz and Trini Nu-
nez, and it was embraced by
school officials, including for-
mer administrator Roger
Romero; current Superintend-
ent Tony Sanchez; Principal
Cyndy Campton; the resource-
ful tech manager Betty Olivi-
er; J.G. Thompson; Bebra
Burdick; and the late Jeff
Seimer, longtime business
manager.
Still, it's not just the technol-
ogy. It's the time. To increase
sluggish math scores (that
kept it off the list of model
schools that became the focus

pf the Morrison Institute and
Renter for the Future of Ari-
zona's "Beat the Odds" re-
port), Wilson increased math
classes to two a day, from 45
minutes to 90 minutes a day,
110 for seventh- and eighth-
graders.
After-school remedial
classes are attended by about
400 students (more than half
the student body). The last bus
leaves at 6 p.m. It offers night
programs for adults, too.
When this revolution . was
launching, Mercedes Robles
never heard of business guru
Jim Collins, author of the best-
seller Good to Great and con-
sultant to the "Beat the Odds"
report. Yet Collins' philosophy
of disciplined thought, people
and actions aptly describe how
things get done at Wilson.

Assessment and ' collabo-
rative solutions are ongoing.
Teachers meet every Wednes-
day afternoon to tweak in-
struction, training and curric-
ulum. "We've never been com-
placent," Campton says. Next'
year, for example, Wilson en-
ters a partnership with Ari-
zona State University to help
students prepare better for
high school and college. New
tutors will land on campus.
There always are chal-
lenges, new and old. Like so
many school boards, particu-
larly in minority districts,
Wilson's has had its share of
political turmoil, intrigue and
recalls. A fresh cohort of hope-
ful, but .needy youngsters en-
rolls every semester. The
frantic scramble for money
never ends,, especially for a
district where injections of
federal money boosted pro-
grams.
Still, the faculty here under-
stands something good is hap-
pening, Staffers commute
from as far away as Maricopa
and New River to be a part of
it. Wilson's cohesion and disci-
pline lured Araceli Cecefia
from a neighboring school dis-
trict to lead the first three
grades. Former Wilson stu-
dents like Marco Ruiz, Marco
Leon and Sylvia Vasquez are
eager to return as faculty.
Wilson School District calls
home to one of the poorest cen-
sus tracts in Arizona, but it's
succeeding, despite the odds.

Richard de Uriarte is an-
editorial writer He can be
reached at richard.deuriarte@
arizonarepublic.com or
(602) 444-8912. "