

Kathleen Nickson, *Spring 2007*

Queensbury Middle School *Queensbury Union Free School District*

School Context

Queensbury Union Free School District, nestled in the foothills of the Adirondack Mountains, is primarily a residential suburban district located 45 miles north of Albany between the city of Glens Falls and the village of Lake George in Warren County. The district serves approximately 3,900 students divided among four schools (elementary, intermediate, middle, and high school) on a campus setting. Queensbury Middle School is comprised of grades 6 through 8 with approximately 1,000 students.

When entering Queensbury Middle School, a visitor finds a welcoming atmosphere of calm order. Built in 1951, the building is clearly well maintained, clean, and neat. Visitors and students alike are greeted by staff with a friendly smile. Student art work decorates the halls, which are named for positive character traits, such as Pride Parkway, Honesty Lane, Respect Avenue, and Inspiration Boulevard to name a few. The Art Club has produced murals throughout the building with character education themes. The building reflects a caring, comfortable place for learning.

Throughout the district, teachers and administrators express a shared vision for student success as stated in the mission statement to “empower all students to be life long learners, inspired to pursue their dreams and contribute to the global community.” The three themes of the mission statement were echoed by administration and faculty throughout the visit.

The teachers and administrators interviewed agree that the community takes great pride in its school district, which in many ways is the center of the community. The 200-acre campus includes play areas, an indoor pool, and the site of various recreation programs. The superintendent reports active parent involvement and support on a variety of fronts ranging from organizing reading pajama parties for elementary students to participating on the Superintendent’s Parent Advisory Group. The school community appears proud of its academic achievements, sports teams, and extracurricular opportunities. It has high expectations for students and supports the pursuit of helping students achieve their dreams.

Best Practices Highlights

A culture of striving for continual improvement—‘good isn’t good enough’

Superintendent, principal, department chairs, and teachers all voice the sentiment that Queensbury School District has a very good reputation; but they also agree, as the superintendent puts it, “We can’t be satisfied.” As one teacher reports, “Image is a priority. I think we try to come across as the best, and I think that the goal for the district is to reach that perception.”

Student Demographics 2005-06: Queensbury Middle School, Queensbury Union Free School Districtⁱⁱ

	Queensbury MS	Queensbury Union Free SD	New York State
% Eligible for Free Lunch	8%	9%	37%
% Eligible for Reduced Lunch	5%	5%	8%
% Limited English Proficient	0%	0%	N/A
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution			
% African-American	2%	2%	20%
% Hispanic/Latino	2%	2%	20%
% White	95%	95%	53%
% Other	1%	1%	7%
% Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards on Gr. 8 ELA Test	72%	71%	49%
% Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards on Gr. 8 Math Test	88%	88%	54%
K-12, Total Enrollment	945	3954	2,772,669

A culture of self-improvement is evident in the middle school. The principal asks his faculty, “When is good not good enough? Where can we improve? ... Complacency bothers me.” He credits the superintendent for instilling this attitude and also says parents want their kids to get a “better than solid education. They want an excellent one.”

One way teachers seek excellence is by setting high standards. For example, several teachers believe they go beyond the state standards in their classrooms and expect higher quality work than the state rubrics’ definition of exemplary. Several teachers report that the New York State Assessments became an opportunity to reflect on what they were doing and to work on improving instruction.

As a department chair explains, “We can say, ‘what’s a better way to do this?’ and not be penalized. Taking risks is okay. It is okay to talk about weaknesses, to put them out there, to make self-improvements.”

Emphasis on academic achievement in a climate of trust and collaboration

Student achievement drives the curriculum, but according to many teachers, the needs of the whole child are also addressed. An abundance of extracurricular activities, character education programs, guide rooms, peer tutoring, and the Queensbury Middle School Community Points Program all seek to recognize the many facets of a student’s life. There is a supportive climate throughout the school as evidenced by praise for students, principal, faculty, and colleagues. The principal is viewed as an instructional leader whose vision for student achievement is fully supported by the faculty. He is perceived as approachable and trustworthy. The teachers express a strong camaraderie that leads to collaboration and a general feeling of good will. Common planning time is scheduled for each seventh- and eighth-grade department as well as special education and content area teachers. Sixth-grade teachers have common planning time with the other members of their teams. This commitment to planning time facilitates both formal and informal collaboration.

Coherent, consistent and dynamic curriculum

The district embraces technology and data to drive changes in curriculum and instruction. The New York State Assessment results point the way to improvement. The middle school aligned its curriculum with the state standards and through curriculum mapping (using a commercial software program) created a unified approach to curriculum. The idea that the curriculum is a ‘living document’ that is ‘tweaked’ to address the needs of the students is a repeated refrain. Teachers have incorporated a unified method of assessment that mimics the state assessments. They prepare students by familiarizing them with the types of questions asked on the state exams. Teachers report not teaching to the test or devoting a great amount of time to test prep; rather they are teaching what students need to know to succeed in school and in the future. Frequency distributions on quarterly exams that mimic the specific skills on the state assessments are also used by teachers and administrators to focus on effective teaching and learning.

A Closer Look

These practices underlie and cut across the five dimensions that frame the “best practices” study of which this case is one part. The sections below expand on each of these dimensions.

Curriculum and Academic Goals

With the arrival of a new superintendent five years ago, improving student achievement became the primary focus for the district. Although Queensbury students were doing well on the state assessments, a new mission for improvement was articulated by the board of education and administration.

The superintendent explains, “The board identified student achievement as a priority ... and the superintendent is accountable with performance goals. How do we move ahead academically and show the rest of the world that we are doing a great job with our kids academically and preparing them for the future?” he asks. “We’re never done; we have to go up the next step of the ladder,” he adds; and the middle school principal and faculty repeat this sentiment.

The first step was for the board of education to set academic goals. The superintendent recommended a strategic planning program, and after board members did research (including training in Chicago) it was adopted. The program focuses on the future, ‘the big picture’ complete with a mission statement and five Action Teams (Curriculum, Global Community, Culture, Trust, and Dream) comprised of board members, administrators, faculty, parents, and students. On the district website the Curriculum Action Team delineates the goals and results from the previous school year as well as future goals.

Comparing Queensbury to the three highest performing school districts in the area (not just to their local BOCES schools) is another example of how the district set its academic goals. Through this comparison, it was determined where improvement was needed to move from good to excellent—always with the caveat they will never rest on their laurels.

Curriculum Mapping

For the last three years the district has invested resources in curriculum mapping. Prior to adopting the commercial software to do so, the district tried curriculum mapping with limited

success. Now teachers report it has taken hold and provides a uniform approach to curriculum and assessment.

When the process began, the focus was on how to do it rather than on the why. The assistant superintendent indicates that over time, teachers have begun talking about the why. Although it has required some backtracking, curriculum mapping has become the foundation for curricular coherence.

The teachers speak very positively about curriculum mapping. It provides a way to align curriculum with the state standards as well as a way to look at curriculum vertically: eliminating overlap and assessing gaps. Teachers say it has brought unity to all the middle school departments. For example, every seventh- and eighth-grade English language arts class now reads the same novel at the same time. The math department teaches the same lessons on the same day and gives the same tests and quizzes on the same day. Rather than squelching creativity, the teachers say it provides better support. There are more opportunities to reflect with colleagues on what is being taught, to bounce ideas off one another and to share teaching strategies. Each department creates a consensus map at the end of the year; this map provides new teachers with a detailed curriculum to follow.

The curriculum map is “the what,” the teacher is “the how.” - ELA teacher

One veteran department chair explains, “Curriculum mapping was a big undertaking: three years of pulling apart the curriculum and making sure it is aligned with the standards ... Now that it is done, it is very worthwhile.” And another concurs, “I’ve never experienced as much growth as I have in the last five years.”

The curriculum map gets into the nitty gritty of what’s going to happen in the classroom and the standards are attached to the curriculum map.” - teacher

Everyone interviewed agrees it is not static but a very dynamic curriculum. “It is a living document.” “It’s like my plan book.”

Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building

Staff Selection

Strong leadership is an important component of Queensbury School District’s success. According to the superintendent, “Finding the right building leaders is absolutely essential.” The superintendent and board of education look at the district’s needs and try to find a candidate who fulfills those requirements and understands the district’s philosophy and goals. The superintendent states he is very involved in selecting new administrators for the district.

Responsibilities for the selection of teachers and staff for the middle school involve the principal and assistant superintendent. First the middle school principal reviews applications and chooses six to eight candidates to be interviewed. The prospective teachers are interviewed by the principal and an advisory group. After conferring with the advisory group, the principal recommends three candidates to the assistant superintendent. The assistant superintendent then interviews the three candidates and makes the selection.

When asked what he looks for in a candidate, the principal says having a second certification such as special education or math or reading is important for sixth-grade positions. He also looks for a team player who is flexible. He reports that he listens carefully to ascertain if the candidate is student centered - someone who will empathize with students' struggles. The principal often recruits candidates at conferences or from smaller local districts. Several of the teachers interviewed started their careers as student teachers at Queensbury. Promotion from within is said to be fairly common. Both the new assistant superintendent and middle school principal were district employees. The Lighthouse Teachers (teacher/technology experts) are all 'in house' hires, as are the department chairs we interviewed.

The superintendent is confident that, "the district attracts quality candidates because it has a reputation as a wonderful place to work." This is echoed by several teachers:

We have a reputation for outstanding education and we draw high level teachers.

People think this is a great place to live, work, raise your children, and get a good education. This is a draw for bringing in high level teachers.

We have a principal who appreciates who you are and that you're giving yourself to these children every day.

On finding special education teachers, "The biggest challenge is to find an individual that is highly skilled and can work with groups of people, not just alone."

The principal believes the way to retain good teachers is to look for the strongest people, support them as much as possible, and use them as models until the best "becomes the norm."

Focused Building Leadership

The middle school principal's strong leadership is repeatedly cited as a decisive factor in the middle school's successful reforms. He is described as focused and determined to improve student achievement while providing a nurturing community for both students and staff.

The superintendent says of the principal, "I cannot sing [his] praises high enough."

Teachers express confidence in his leadership numerous times:

We have a trusting administration.

I feel totally comfortable to talk about concerns with the principal.

We have strong support and trust.

The principal understands the importance of having a plan for implementing change. For example, it was his idea to institute a new type of homeroom called Guide Rooms. Almost every adult in the building is involved with this change. The Guide Room adult (including the principal) has the same 10-14 students for the three years they are in the middle school. When the idea was discussed, some of the support staff were reluctant to take on this new responsibility. School visits, presentations, and training of the entire staff helped get everyone on board. Now Guide Rooms are repeatedly cited as an example of a successful innovation in the middle school. The Guide Room is more than a time for taking attendance. It is also a time for

birthday celebrations, discussions of character issues through ‘conversation starters’ and is reported as a pleasant environment to start the day. Those interviewed believe Guide Rooms help make a big school smaller and more personal. The Guide Room structure also helps students develop a relationship with an adult over the three years of middle school. From the inception of the idea, to bringing it to the Building Leadership Team, to planning the training sessions, the principal understood what was needed to make the change a success.

The assistant superintendent sums up the principal’s style: “[He is] the driving force as to why the middle school is doing so well. He is very thoughtful about what he implements. He wants to know the basis for doing anything. He’s not afraid to hold people accountable.”

The principal is also characterized as an instructional leader. His top priority is to have a team model in place for the middle school by the fall of 2008. The sixth-grade is already teamed, but seventh- and eighth-grades are still structured under the old junior high model. Again, the principal has a plan. He wants to train all teachers in teaming across curriculums in the next school year. There are financial obstacles (more staff) that need to be overcome; but through research and good planning, the principal is sure he will achieve this goal. He explains his approach to implement school-wide teaming, “I put a team together to do research to look at different models. [Now] I want a year of training.”

It is evident that a new idea is researched by administrators and teachers alike, ranging from school visits to an expert’s presentation. The interviewers perceived a respect for professional expertise and teamwork; reform is an inquiry process not an imposition from “on high.” Conversations about reform revolve around improving curriculum and instruction to achieve student success.

Capacity Building

Professional development permeates the district from the board of education to administrators, teachers, and support staff. Contractually, the teachers are required to complete ten hours of professional development each year, but according to several teachers, many go far beyond the required number. The district provides numerous professional development opportunities throughout the school year and summer. Many recent offerings have focused on how to incorporate technology into the curriculum. Many report that conferences outside the district are also encouraged. The superintendent thinks it’s good for staff “to look beyond the borders.” Departments can also create individualized professional development—such as a book study group or class observations.

The superintendent explains how the board of education was involved in its own professional development. They read Thomas Friedman’s *The World Is Flat* and had a discussion with the AP History class, which also read it. The district is characterized as a place where everyone is learning. The superintendent reports, “Even the board is always learning too.”

A strong mentoring program for new faculty is firmly embedded in the middle school. Mentors are compensated but volunteer for the program. They are assigned a new teacher, typically from the same department, are trained by the district, and meet for three days during the summer with the new teacher. Very specific guidelines are in place concerning the mentor’s responsibilities: the number of required meetings, how to document meetings, suggested topics for discussion. The mentor’s relationship with the new teacher is considered confidential. The principal explains

that if there is a problem with a new teacher, he is not allowed to discuss this with the mentor. He reports working directly with new teachers and has the reputation as being forthright and helpful.

Queensbury School District invests time and resources in professional development for faculty and administration with a focus on district-wide reforms. Superintendent Conference Days, course offerings, and conferences are perceived as well planned and useful. Through these opportunities, the staff is educated about the newest research, instructional practices, and the incorporation of technology in the classroom.

Instructional Programs, Practices and Arrangements

The curriculum at Queensbury Middle School is designed around the state standards, and the instructional programs and practices are designed to foster student achievement. The curriculum maps provide a consistency in content, and the district is promoting a consistency in instruction through several programs.

Learning Focused Strategies

According to the assistant superintendent, research-based, learning-focused strategies provide a framework for teachers to plan their units and lessons focusing on what students will be doing and learning. Some of the key concepts include activating prior knowledge, having an essential question for each lesson, engaging students in a learning activity, and summarizing what they learned. The interviewers heard references to the essential question and summarizing from several teachers.

We are strongly urged to start with essential questions on the board—this is what we want to know. It gets the kids to see at the end of class [what they learned].

[I learned]... good techniques for summarizing. For example, one of our department goals is that we pervasively do it [summarize] so that kids will be able to do it on their own.

The training for learning focused strategies is district wide and ongoing. The plan is to train department chairs and curriculum leaders in the strategies, and they will support future training for the rest of the staff.

Strategic Planning

The superintendent credits strategic planning as the tool that facilitates looking at the ‘big picture.’ From the strategic planning model came the district’s mission statement (“to empower all students to be life long learners, inspired to pursue their dreams and contribute to the global community”). This statement helps shape the direction of instruction in the district. Many teachers and administrators voice the need to help students become critical thinkers and life-long learners:

Knowing how to learn is very important. The process is as important as what they learn.

How can we motivate all kids so they want to learn?

We try to make sure that kids apply the knowledge we give them.

You want to make them be critical thinkers, to problem solve—we've given them the tools to work their way through it.

They [administrators] want higher-level questions, they don't want rote.

Make students when they graduate from high school—make them so they can contribute to society.

The superintendent makes the point that empowering students to pursue their dreams or to contribute to the global community is not something that will be tested on the state assessment, but they are important goals for the district. Many voice a similar sentiment that education is more than just test achievement.

Literacy Training

The principal expresses a strong interest in literacy across the curriculum. After researching the dropout problem, he concluded that reading difficulties were often at the core of these students' leaving school; thus the focus on literacy. He hopes to create a literacy council for the next school year and continually fosters literacy strategies across disciplines.

It is reported that the ELA coach and the English language arts teachers have been helping integrate literacy strategies across content areas. For example, there was an initiative to foster listening skills in all classes even though the listening section only appears on the ELA state assessment. Social studies and science teachers observed ELA classes to see note taking techniques used during a listening exercise. They adopted the same note taking strategy. The social studies and science teachers also adopted the ELA writing format TEEC (topic sentence, example, example, conclusion) in their courses. The English teachers are incorporating social studies nonfiction readings into their classes. As an ELA teacher says, "I'm not just concerned about ELA. We do a lot of things that are supportive as a building."

Collaboration

Teachers and administration cite collaboration throughout the school. A few examples include: grade level department members plan together during common planning times, inclusion teachers plan with regular education teachers weekly, and state assessments are graded by all members of a department. The following teacher quotes attest to their belief in collaboration:

We don't compete with each other. We look at how we can help each other.

The days of teachers going into their classroom, shutting the door, teaching, and going home are over. There are no more isolates in this building.

Many teachers say the new teaming model will foster even more collaboration. "I don't have time to get with English to do a two-week project. The teaming will open up that avenue."

Incorporating Technology into the Classroom

State of the art technology is available to teachers. Forty-two inch plasma monitors and a teacher computer in every classroom, two mobile laptop carts, upgraded internet speeds with broadband, new software, and personal response systems for students are a few examples. Teachers report that the district's focus is now on incorporating technology into the classroom as evidenced by the number of professional development courses on technology.

The Lighthouse Teacher Program is one way the district is fostering the use of technology. Every building has a Lighthouse Teacher. The middle school Lighthouse Teacher described his role as “someone on the front lines to give training and support.” Lighthouse teachers are trained by the district and compensated for this additional responsibility.

Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data

According to teachers and administrators, monitoring student progress is driven by analyzing data from New York State Assessments, quarterly department exams, and teacher constructed tests. The assistant superintendent says teachers do an item analysis to look for patterns in student learning that may lead to a change in the curriculum map. One teacher explains how the ELA coach assists in data analysis and may model a lesson or provide information based on the analysis.

The principal looks at frequency distributions of the quarterly exams as well as report card grades to see how students are doing. He states that the frequency distributions may be used by teachers to set goals for themselves for the next year. The principal may also recommend professional development courses based on these data.

The principal also provides English and math teachers a table he created using data warehouse software. It gives an item analysis for each student. One teacher calls it the Lucky Charms Chart because items are coded using different colored symbols. She finds it a valuable tool to analyze the needs of her students.

Recognitions, Intervention, and Adjustments

Recognizing Achievement

The principal describes many programs to recognize students for academic achievement and good citizenship. The Principal’s List and Honor Roll are published in the local newspaper, ‘Students of the Quarter’ have their pictures displayed in hallway cases, and perfect attendance certificates are awarded in June. A points program recognizes contributions to the Queensbury Middle School Community through participation in sports, clubs, and service to the school. The principal says one of the most important awards is the Robert F. Iusi Award given to students who have overcome great odds or have made a dramatic turnaround in their academics or behavior.

Academic Interventions for Struggling Students

It is evident that the faculty is concerned with identifying and helping struggling students. Several after school programs were developed because of their concern. For example, QMS (Queensbury Middle School) Cares is an after school program for students who habitually don’t do their homework. It meets four times a week and is structured as a contract between the student, parent, and school. The contract requires cooperation and attendance. Students are recommended by teachers but are never mandated to attend. It is run by a math and social studies teacher and a support staff person. The support staffer keeps track of student grades and homework and contacts parents and teachers.

There also is a Homework Club run by the Guidance Office. It’s an informal after school program for students to do their homework in a relaxed atmosphere with adult supervision.

The English Department's after school program called ELAASP (English Language Arts After School Program) was developed to help students on the cusp of not meeting proficiency standards on the English Language Arts State Assessment. Different aspects of the exam are addressed in a classroom atmosphere, focusing on test taking strategies, test mimicking, and small group instruction. It runs for eight weeks and is open to any student. The staff who work with the after school programs are compensated and there is transportation for the students. The assistant superintendent reports a good AIS (Academic Intervention Services) program within the school day. Students are identified through the state assessment results with the focus on individual weaknesses. They have AIS class every other day.

The special education department chair describes a change in philosophy that occurred about four years ago. It was decided inclusion was the least restrictive environment for most special education students. Teachers attended conferences and made school visits to prepare for the new inclusion model of teaching. With inclusion, special education teachers for seventh and eighth grade 'push in' to the core classes. Their responsibilities vary. One teacher reports co-teaching, while another says the special education teacher helps all (not just special education) students during class activities. The general education teachers interviewed say they plan with the inclusion teachers at least once a week. Homework modifications and test modifications are discussed as well as what lessons need 'pre-teaching.' An English teacher describes the result of pre-teaching in a support class, "She [the special education teacher] sees them [special education students] right before they see me. Then they come in my class and their hands fly up in the air to answer. She gives them the tools to participate. It's great because it doesn't single them out."

The special education chair states that the middle school is waiting for the finances (additional staff) to put inclusion in the sixth-grade as well. He also explains that several of the special education students now in sixth-grade have unique needs. There is a request for a skills level classroom using a language acquisition curriculum. The plan is that when teaming comes, there will be a special education teacher on each team. He says the success of the "inclusion program is linked to communication between teachers. It's what drives the train."

In a Nutshell

Queensbury Middle School's administration and faculty appear fully invested in student academic achievement while addressing the needs of the whole child. The school district invests time, money, and technology in support of these goals. To stay ahead of the curve, new ideas are researched, planned for and implemented involving all stakeholders. Student success is fostered through a caring, collaborative school culture.

Queensbury Middle School
Queensbury Union Free School District
455 Aviation Road, Queensbury, New York 12804
<http://www.queensburyschool.org/Schools/MS/index.htm>

ⁱ This case study is one of 10 produced as part of a larger study of middle schools conducted during the 2006-07 school year. Research teams investigated 10 consistently higher-performing and six average-performing middle schools based on student performance on New York State Assessments of 8th-grade English Language Arts and Mathematics. Researchers used site-based interviews of teachers and administrators, as well as the analysis of supportive documentation, to determine differences in practices between higher- and average-performing schools in the sample. In half the higher-performing schools, poverty levels meet or exceed the state average (as measured by the percent of students receiving free or reduced lunch). Average-performing schools were matched as closely as possible to the higher performers in terms of student poverty levels, geographic location, size, and student ethnicity. Results were organized along five broad themes that form the framework of the national Just for the Kids Study of which the New York study is part. The national study is sponsored by the National Center for Educational Accountability (NCEA).

ⁱⁱ Demographic data are from the 2005-06 New York State Report Card (<https://www.nystart.gov/publicweb/Home.do>). This case study was conducted in Spring, 2007.