

Best Practices Case Study

Linda Baker, June 2005

Webster Elementary School Syracuse (NY) City School District

School Context

Webster Elementary School is one of 22 elementary schools in the city of Syracuse in central New York State. The elementary schools feed into nine middle schools and four high schools. The district is divided into quadrants, ensuring that elementary students can attend school within their own general neighborhoods. A total of 22,000 students were attending pre-kindergarten through grade 12 in the Syracuse City School District in 2004-2005, with approximately 550 of those enrolled in grades kindergarten through six at Webster Elementary.

The student population of Syracuse City School District is poorer and more diverse than students in New York State overall. Nearly seventy percent of students in the city school district are eligible for free or reduced lunches. Approximately half of Syracuse City School District students are African-American, and about nine percent are Hispanic/Latino. Five percent of district students have limited English proficiency.

While Webster Elementary has a larger percentage of students with free and reduced lunches (almost 80%), it has somewhat less racial and ethnic diversity than the district in general. About seventy percent of students at Webster Elementary are white.

Student Demographics 2003-04, Webster Elementary School^o

	Webster	Syracuse CSD	New York State
% Eligible for Free Lunch	56.1%	58.0%	37.0%
% Eligible for Reduced Lunch	21.4%	9.3%	7.2%
% Limited English Proficient	0	5.0%	6.8%
<u>Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution</u>			
% African-American	25.9%	51.1%	19.9%
% Hispanic/Latino	2.0%	8.6%	19.4%
% White	69.8%	36.5%	53.7%
% Other	2.3%	3.8%	7.0%
% Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards on Grade 4 ELA Assessment	62%	39%	63%
% Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards on Grade 4 Math Assessment	97%	63%	79%
2003-04 Fall Enrollment	556	21,235	N/A

Webster’s New York State School Report Card shows considerably higher levels of student success than the Syracuse district in general. In 2004, 97% of Webster students met or exceeded state standards in the Grade 4 Math Assessment, compared to 63% districtwide and 79% statewide. In 2004, 62% of Webster students met or exceeded state standards on the Grade 4 English Language Arts Assessment, compared to 39% in the Syracuse district and 63% statewide. Webster Elementary continues to focus on literacy as it works to bring the ELA scores to the level of the math scores.

Describing its schools as “Where Students and Learning Come First,” the district’s web site states that the district’s mission is “to ensure that all students demonstrate mastery of defined skills and knowledge, appreciation of diversity, and development of character which will enable them to become productive, responsible citizens who can succeed in a rapidly changing world; this is accomplished, in partnership with our community, by transforming our educational system to respond to the unique needs of each student through excellence in teaching and learning.”

Best Practices Highlights

Webster Elementary School is characterized by:

- Shared vision and high expectations
- Strong instructional leadership
- School as part of community, community as part of school
- Data driven change and collaborative decision making.

“Learning to do your personal best” could be the motto for Webster Elementary School. “Everyone works hard to help every student achieve.” “Children know that they are here to learn. Even kindergarteners know why they are here.” Cumulatively, everyone’s personal best creates a climate that is extremely positive and nurturing yet demanding and results oriented.

Shared Vision and High Expectations

At Webster, the vision and mission are not just words on paper but a collective longing of the heart and a collective drive to reach those goals. All staff members speak of high expectations for student learning and for their own learning as educators and as caring adults.

Every teacher can tell you the vision. We know why we’re here.

We have one thing in mind—what can we do in our school to enhance student achievement.

Webster is a school driven to create success for children. It’s all about their success.

Webster works at a continuum of excellence.

This is a learning community for adults and children. Adults in the building see themselves through the reflective lens of wanting to continue to improve their own performance.

Students share the vision and the high expectations. They value the emphasis on learning and the mutual respect. Correcting a new classmate who was being disrespectful and distracting others, a second grader expressed the cultural consensus: “We don’t do that at Webster School.”

Strong Instructional Leadership

Webster's school principal provides an outstanding "exemplar of leadership" that inspires everyone there. Informally and throughout our interviews, there was a continuing awareness of her role in building an environment of learning and support, in modeling priorities and best practices, and in helping all students and staff members to do their best. She sets the tone and the example. Her style of leadership is not bossy or grandstanding or egocentric but nurturing and creative and teambuilding. Her leadership inspires the leadership of faculty, students, and parents, who say about her that she . . .

. . . is the reason people stay. You can do your job. Everyone supports her and all of us.

. . . listens. She asks, "How do you feel about this grade level? What else would you like?" She makes changes to help people grow.

. . . truly understands and prioritizes.

. . . [creates] a facilitation of teacher leadership and involvement, of decision making, so that teachers feel ownership.

. . . is a woman of integrity.

We know [she] means business but will support you personally as well.

And the principal explains how her philosophy leads to her educational practices:

I became a principal because I could make a difference in hundreds of children's lives.

My greatest moments are when I can be out and making walk-throughs. I need to be in classrooms. Ninety-plus percent of our teachers are real proud of what they're doing in that classroom.

I need to . . . support unconditionally.

We have to model for our teachers and children and people. We have to model what we believe.

Not just one tiny group of leaders. A variety of teachers take leadership in various aspects of program and communication. Various strengths, shared with each other.

School as Part of Community, Community as Part of School

The synthesis of school and community is immediately obvious at Webster. Faculty members accept and understand the challenges in students' homes and neighborhoods and help families and community groups to work with the school to build student success.

At Webster, we understand that school is part of community and community is part of school. Parents see and know and believe that this is the best place for my child's education.

Community buy-in. People want to see their children attending here.

We have the children only 6 1/2 hours. What we do in that time is key to kids being happy and feeling good about themselves. It's an environment where children feel safe, cared for. There is nothing more important than what is troubling that child or that parent.

Our major focus is based on what we are doing for our school community and how can we do it better.

Without parents, we wouldn't have follow-through. We have teamwork. We're all on the same page. The community buys into the system.

We have a family atmosphere. Parents love this school. If we could go to eighth grade, they'd love it.

For two-thirds of our kids, this is the best part of their lives.

This is home. For a lot of these kids, this is the best part of their day. When you know you have people depending on that, you step up to the plate.

Area colleges, community agencies, and business partnerships work with the school system to support student learning. Webster engages parent support from the time children enter school and works hard to sustain that high level of involvement.

Data-Driven Change and Collaborative Decision Making

At Webster, stakeholders are always examining student performance results and are actively involved in needs assessments and decision making. Teachers across the grade levels worked together to develop Webster's comprehensive School Improvement Plan; now they work together to implement all aspects of the plan and to study what they have accomplished and where they need to go from here. Webster faculty search for excellence and improvement collaboratively. A strong spirit of inquiry leads Webster educators to base decisions firmly on analysis of data.

This building became a leadership voice for change, and ... jettisoned to the top of the performance scale.

[We are] forever self-assessing, by grade and by school improvement team. This is only the beginning of our creation.

When our new superintendent arrived six years ago, the first book we all had to read was Who Moved My Cheese? [a popular analogy of change – school leaders continue to use analogies to help staff members see where they are as individuals and as a school.]

Energy and effort put change in practice.

We are reflective practitioners.

Webster's principal explains the schools' attitude toward change by quoting Miriam Wright-Edelman: "We must not, in trying to think about how we can make a big difference, ignore the small daily differences we can make which, over time, add up to big differences that we often cannot foresee."

A Closer Look

Supporting Factors

Webster's principal recognizes the importance of academically focused leadership: "It's important for staff to know that we as administrators are with you all the way, as instructional leaders, not as managers." All staff members are aware of the principal's goals: "1) to maintain a school culture that embraces effective learning practices; 2) to continuously analyze, examine, and interpret various assessments, milestones, and profiles to ascertain students' strengths and weaknesses; 3) to encourage and provide opportunities for teachers to engage in staff development; 4) to support implementation of the school improvement plan to incorporate effective best practices to improve school learning."

Faculty collaboration and shared decision making are functional and valued. The School Improvement Team made a special request to meet with interviewers during the data-gathering visit for this case study. Educators' pride in the supportive, team-based culture they have developed is evident in all aspects of Webster's organization and environment. "We all work together." "Every teacher takes ownership and responsibility for all the students in the building."

Teachers credit Webster's success to doing their own personal best and to inspiring students to do their best. "Playing with a purpose." "Learning comes from engagement." "We must take personal responsibility." "Everyone must improve and show their personal best."

Student engagement is a top priority at Webster. As the deputy superintendent notes, "It's not just what we want them to know and be able to do. It's what types of relationships we are developing." Student learning "means time on task, attendance, children actively engaged with thinking strategies."

Closed circuit TV every morning sets the tone for each day—emphasis on student achievement, direct communication, and warm encouragement. Parents, teachers, and administrators work toward the same goals and communicate with each other continuously. "We keep logs of phone conversations. We try to let parents know of improvements especially. We feel that if a child's parent and teacher are working together, that child will succeed." "The parent community is cultivated to be part of the learning support system."

The emphasis on literacy is the most notable schoolwide reform in recent years. "Reading is number one, most important." "A child must be literate to succeed in anything." "Every school in the district had no choice but to buy into it. We bought into it big time." Using standards and assessment data, Webster prepares and implements a schoolwide plan for literacy improvement starting in kindergarten, and compiles lesson plans from kindergarten through grade five so that all faculty members can see all parts of the plan. "All teachers, all staff are accountable, primary level as well as intermediate." One of the strongest supports for literacy improvement is devoting two hours of uninterrupted time to English Language Arts each day in each classroom. "The ELA block is sacred. We don't interrupt for anything."

Faculty members recognize the challenges of poverty but do not allow their students' socio-economic status to be used as an excuse. "We cannot control that. We must focus on what we can control. We never say 'gosh, it's just a low group,' or 'this kid is unable to do it.' We don't allow ourselves to blame the kids or the families."

Described by an administrator as one of the state's big cities "with the lowest local taxes to support education," Syracuse had eight years with no increase in school budgets, but has now had three years with some fiscal improvement. "Flat funding has truly eroded our resource support." Since Syracuse is a "dependent" school district, the local board of education cannot raise the tax levy; the city's common council reviews the budget and determines local taxes.

An educational foundation started by the current superintendent helps to support special projects in Syracuse schools. Webster's grant committee submitted two proposals this year and received one for more than \$3,000. A community breakfast, "wall-to-wall people," raises money by highlighting the successes of the city's schools. The local teacher center also provides grants of up to \$1500 for ongoing activities and staff development. Webster's "teachers and staff are extremely resourceful with the funds we have." "We maintain success [not through money but] through collaboration and sharing of ideas."

The teachers' union is seen as a positive influence working for teachers' best interests, which, in the eyes of Webster teachers, means also working for the students' best interests. "At Webster, people volunteer to go above and beyond the contract." The union sponsors educational leadership conferences and works to keep class sizes as low as possible.

Curriculum and Academic Goals

Clarity of academic goals and curriculum is one key to success at Webster. The collaboratively developed school improvement plan provides the framework. Frequent meetings with district representatives, the school principal, and teacher groups develop the follow through and assess progress and plan corrective actions. School improvement teams, in place now for about twelve years, began with the district's involvement with the Effective Schools movement.

Elementary curriculum is developed districtwide by a committee of administrators, curriculum specialists, and teachers. A curriculum revision committee will meet in the summer of 2005, and work will continue after school and on weekends. Driven by the state standards, the curriculum is categorized by benchmarks and specifies the grade level at which each skill is to be introduced, reinforced, and mastered. For example, the English Language Arts section presents each of the four ELA standards and indicates what is to be accomplished at each grade level; the document's appendix provides vocabulary listings, samples of grade 4 and grade 8 ELA assessments, scoring rubrics, and timelines of assessments.

It is expected that state standards and the district curriculum will guide each teacher's instruction. All teachers receive curriculum guides and other directional resources. Most important to Webster's curriculum delivery is the month-by-month curriculum mapping that each grade level prepares collaboratively. Every grade has a long-term plan as well as an action plan for week-by-week instruction. An ELA curriculum specialist helped each grade in its initial planning for literacy; they used different themes from the anthology, charted them by month, and "made linkages" so that different content areas are all working on the same theme each month.

Through participating in development of statewide assessments, e.g., the new ELA assessment for grades 5-6; focusing on keeping up to date with the newest information; and sharing what they have learned, Webster teachers feel well informed about academic standards and assessments. They also believe that there is always much to be done to meet the goals, particularly the work on literacy improvement. Teachers constantly discuss challenges, needs, and effective practices.

Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building

Faculty leadership and capacity building are constants at Webster Elementary. There is less emphasis on staff selection, because there is little staff turnover.

“Literacy, experience, and training” combine with educational values and priorities to determine selection of new staff for the few openings that occur. Most new teachers at Webster are not recent college graduates. Some have been raising families before entering or returning to the profession. Some have taught previously in other schools in the district. Teachers who have been part of interview teams note satisfaction in working with administrators and other teachers to identify qualifications for teaching at Webster, to formulate questions, to conduct the interviews, and to discuss responses and make recommendations. The school principal makes the final decision, but it is usually based on consensus. One teacher recalled the interview for her hiring as “by far the best interview process—very pleasant, great questions. I left here thinking this is where I’d like to be.”

Faculty members are in agreement as to why teachers stay at Webster. “Teachers stay because everybody is on the same page. Everybody is appreciated as well as accountable.” “If you’re not about children, you won’t be in this building.” “Administrative support, collaboration among team members, and support from each other keep us going. No one wants to leave. It’s very satisfying to teach here.” “I love my job. Many teachers can’t say that.”

“Everybody jumps on board to help when someone new comes in.” Informal mentoring has always been a part of the Webster culture; with the new state mandate that requires mentors for new teachers, the program has been formalized. Teachers also describe administrators as being very supportive of both new and continuing teachers: “The principal and vice principal help a lot.”

The mentoring process and the collaborative climate encourage teachers to visit each other’s classrooms. A music teacher describes exchanging classroom visits with a new colleague twice a month and using team teaching to support the mentoring effort: “She’ll lead, and I’ll help. I’ve learned so much, so many strategies to get kids excited. It’s a great learning experience. It makes you feel young and helpful.” Several teachers note that they visit other faculty members’ classes often: “Just let [the [principal] know. She’ll arrange coverage.” Teachers also use their planning time to visit other classrooms.

Faculty members feel ownership of professional development. Superintendent Conference Days “are very useful.” Teachers help to determine areas of focus through planning at staff meetings. Sometimes staff will volunteer to present on areas of expertise. “Everybody gets involved.” The principal also works with individual faculty members to suggest workshops they might like to attend and to help them plan their personal professional growth.

Continuous collaboration with colleagues is important to all the teachers interviewed. “You can’t teach in isolation.” By helping each other, teachers help all students at Webster. Sharing good practices becomes a “habit with kids as well as teachers.” Special education teachers especially note the importance of working together to establish connections across the subject areas and grade levels: “At the beginning of the year, we did symmetry in music, art, and physical education, as well as in all classrooms.” Teachers also work together to support each other and all students in maintaining a positive school environment. “If you see [a problem] in another class or student, you feel comfortable speaking to the child and taking care of what needs

to be done so that students meet expectations.” “Sharing sessions every other Friday” are among several scheduled means of collaboration.

The Syracuse City School District has a program for identifying potential leaders within each building. For several years, the district hosted a dinner for potential leaders, with funding provided through a grant. Potential leaders were tapped and had the opportunity to work together toward school improvement.

The process for selection of principals has depended on the superintendent at the time. Webster’s current principal, when a vice-principal, responded to a memo encouraging people seeking administrative promotions to submit resumes. She was interviewed by a district internal committee and then by a committee composed of Webster teachers and parents. Those serving on recent interview panels for administrators indicate that the interview teams usually include a principal and vice-principal, several classroom teachers, and sometimes a psychologist or social worker. Parents have apparently not been involved in the interviews in recent years.

Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements

Among the specific expectations for high-quality classroom instruction at Webster, student engagement and active learning are mentioned most often: “Children engaged fully in the learning.” “The word is engagement.” “Student-teacher interaction.” “Body language—kids leaning into each other.” “Excitement, energy.” “Students doing effective listening, raising hands, asking questions, very involved in the classroom.” “Lots of hands-on activities.”

Instruction at Webster is expected to be positive and purpose-driven. “See the objectives on the board.” “Kids know what the objective is.” “The teacher is very positive in terms of how the lesson is presented.”

Effective classrooms use a variety of teaching methods—whole group instruction, cooperative groups, student pairs, teacher/student one-on-one, and individual work. The environment may be momentarily loud or quiet, but it is flexible. Good teachers “may change plans midstream because something else will work better.”

A districtwide textbook adoption committee selects instructional materials so that all schools have the same resources. Driven by No Child Left Behind, the process includes teacher representation, using criteria to narrow the textbook options (usually to four series), examination of samples and presentations by company representatives, and voting within each building. Everyone can vote. The district curriculum specialist makes the final decision, usually based on faculty consensus or vote.

The district mandates use of the series adopted—the Scott Foresman reading series, the D’Nealian writing program, and Math Investigations. The district is committed to teaching problem solving and critical thinking skills, as presented in the Math Investigations program. Each teacher also receives a financial allotment to spend on other resources to support classroom instruction—for example, non-traditional math manipulatives. “Everyone has bought into it,” but teachers also feel that they can supplement and adjust mandated materials to meet the needs of their students. “We do our own thing a lot.”

Teachers believe that an instructional team “downtown” evaluates mandated programs, perhaps based on assessment scores, and makes decisions accordingly. Reading specialists follow up on

the evaluation of reading series. Quarterly milestones are submitted to the district for math and English language arts.

Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data

Ongoing data-driven analysis of student performance is crucial to Webster's success. It occurs "in many, many ways," according to teachers and administrators. Analyzing data from New York State assessments is a major component of Webster's system for monitoring student performance. Webster educators praise the state assessments and find them meaningful in supporting their work with students. The 2004-2005 state assessments were described by Webster's principal as the best yet, "the fairest assessment I've seen come through the state." The district uses skills and sub-skills on state assessments to monitor school performance.

One example of monitoring at Webster is Milestone Assessments: the school's reading specialist periodically compiles data by grade level and by teacher; the principal asks the teachers to look at the School Improvement Plan and the objectives and goals of the grade level and then break the data down to identify strengths and weaknesses and "root causes"; the principal studies the data, looking particularly at highlighted children – those not passing – and then has instructional conferences with teachers to discuss strategies and support for these children. Faculty members see great value in these individual conferences with her: "We discuss what we are doing and what we need to do," and then implement their plans. Intervention committees and child study teams support the process.

Teachers and administrators also do a great deal of in-house monitoring of student progress. Most use the planning and monitoring provided by the Scott Foresman reading series, described as "phenomenal." "Technology is a big part" of student assessment; teachers use classroom software systems such as Apple Writing. Running records are kept, especially in language arts. Teachers develop daily classroom point systems and criteria for marking-period grading. Webster's principal reviews report cards and communicates with teachers on student progress. There is no software data monitoring system.

Teachers discuss academic performance with students and parents on an ongoing basis. Fifth grade students, for example, have scheduled conferences with teachers every few weeks to review their progress. Teachers call parents and send notes home regularly so that parents are aware of those areas in which a child is doing well and those requiring more attention.

Monitoring of teachers' instruction supports monitoring of student learning. Webster's principal reviews each team's long-range plans and individual teachers' lesson plan books periodically. The staff handbook outlines the expectations for instructional planning. In-service training supports particular needs identified by administrators or teachers. Faculty members describe the teacher evaluation process as valuable and helpful. The principal "is very fair. It's always clear what's expected." Teachers prepare "individual growth plans," choosing their own goals at the beginning of each year. Both they and their principal evaluate their progress toward meeting the goals and discuss that progress in a post-evaluation conference. The principal "writes a narrative, focusing on how teachers are adjusting instruction to meet student needs." The goals-driven process includes an end-of-year teacher reflection on what was accomplished. Teachers also receive feedback on lesson plans, on the comments they write for student report cards, and on informal observations of classroom environment and interactions. "You don't dread talking with administration. They are here to help."

Developed in conjunction with the teachers' union, the new model for the formal evaluation process began with training administrators in effective implementation and includes timelines for evaluating probationary and tenured teachers. In addition to the goal setting and reflection noted above, the model includes a teacher's choice of classroom observation or portfolio presentation, but only one teacher opted for the portfolio assessment this year. Administrators agree with the faculty praise for the model: "I love the model," said the principal.

Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustments

Success at Webster is widely recognized, both within the school community and beyond. At the beginning of the school year the Syracuse newspaper spent a week in a fifth-grade classroom. "We did great," said the teacher. "Those things make you feel like you've done enough to make a difference."

Teachers see the best recognition, whether for youth or adults, as personal and one-on-one. Students feel personally affirmed by a great deal of specific positive feedback from their peers, parents, teachers, and administrators. Doing one's personal best is the emphasis for everyone in the school community.

"Children buy into the program. They need acknowledgement and recognition the same as adults." Success is recognized through quarterly school assemblies and a huge end-of-year awards program, through "student of the week" and Friday "lunch bunch" programs in classrooms, and through a wide variety of other means.

Intervention for struggling students happens constantly, through individual and collective effort. However, the district provides little financial help for intervention because Webster has been consistently high performing. "When you are very successful, you get very little. You are punished for doing well. Getting very little has taught us well that it doesn't take money to be successful." "Because of our success, we have bare bones. But our teachers haven't skipped a beat. Teachers come early and stay late. People go above and beyond. The reward is in doing it. Our teachers and assistants do so much out of love."

In a Nutshell

Webster Elementary School stands out in its city for its high expectations, strong leadership, sense of community, and student achievement. Leadership is inclusive; teachers take an active role in decision making and in constantly assessing progress and seeking improvements.

^o Demographic Data are from the 2003-04 New York State Report Card (<http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/reprcd2004/home.shtml>). This case study was conducted in spring 2005.

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