

Carol Forman-Pemberton, June 2007

## **Albert Leonard Middle School** ***The City School District of New Rochelle***

City Hall in New Rochelle is a stately ornate building complex on a main thoroughfare that borders the urban downtown and the train station that takes commuters the short distance into New York City; it also leads past several well-known college campuses into a well-kept residential neighborhood. The offices of the Superintendent of Schools in New Rochelle are housed in City Hall. The placement serves as an appropriate metaphor for the connection between the schools and the community.

The superintendent talks of the growth going on in the city—e.g., the building of high-end condominium complexes by Donald Trump—and worries about the viability of what will come after the building. While there is evidence of prosperity in the city, the population has a changing demographic and there are a growing number of students in the schools who live in shelters, are more transient, and whose families are not part of the growing economic prosperity. The two goals of the school district—excellence and equity—can sometimes seem like competing goals.

The community holds the schools and school success at the center of its attention. The schools get a lot of financial support, and board members show up for all school functions. But all of this support is housed in an atmosphere of very high expectations for performance: “The expectation is to exceed; the culture is to push for the exceptional.” “Excellence is a goal without a finish line.”

New Rochelle and the surrounding areas offer a lot of competition to the public schools. There are a large number of excellent private schools, and many in the community have the resources to use them. One of the areas of great pride in New Rochelle is that the students stay in the schools and are successful there.

In this era of cutting funding for the arts to focus on math and literacy, New Rochelle is somewhat unusual in the way that it incorporates the arts into the fabric of the school curriculum to accomplish its curricular goals. Rather than divide its large high school into two smaller ones, it moved to maintain a single campus to avoid a “have and have not” system and to add a large and impressive performing arts addition on the high school campus. The district is holding its musical performance concert at Carnegie Hall this year, and “the place will be filled.” Evidence of this incorporation of the arts is visible in the curriculum of the district.

### **Community, Context, Climate, and Culture**

The 2006-2007 school goals document states one of the school slogans: “At Albert Leonard, we want every teacher to be a leader, every parent a partner, and every child a success.”

**Student Demographics 2005-06: Albert Leonard Middle School, City School District of New Rochelle<sup>1</sup>**

	Albert Leonard MS	New Rochelle City SD	New York State
% Eligible for Free Lunch	17%	31%	37%
% Eligible for Reduced Lunch	6%	10%	8%
% Limited English Proficient	0%	13%	N/A
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution			
% African-American	32%	25%	20%
% Hispanic/Latino	14%	31%	20%
% White	49%	40%	53%
% Other	5%	4%	7%
% Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards on Gr. 8 ELA Test	70%	61%	49%
% Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards on Gr. 8 Math Test	68%	61%	54%
K-12, Total Enrollment	1,237	10,317	2,772,669

**Connections**

Making connections is an important part of the culture of New Rochelle. Almost everyone we interviewed mentioned it as a goal and as a factor in success. Teachers and principals were very conscious of trying to make connections with students to make them feel safe in an increasingly diverse academic situation and to make them feel confident in their ability to learn and to stretch their personal expectations and goals. Clustering teachers and students in small groups has made the teachers feel even more connected to the students and able to see and work with “the whole student” in consistent and diverse ways. The teachers feel that the administrators also know the students well. Researchers observed the principal greeting a large number of students by name and asking questions about specific classwork or projects. Students seemed very calm and comfortable with each other. In several excursions through the student cafeteria, we observed no students sitting alone or along the walls.

Teachers make connections with each other. They collaborate often and in multiple configurations—cluster meetings several times a week, grade-level meetings several times a month, department meetings twice a month, etc. Because of the frequent professional conversations and a fluid schedule created by block scheduling, they are very comfortable making interdisciplinary connections, creating what one teacher described as “one big class” rather than subject-specific classes. To this end, all teachers are given copies of all the NYSED standards, *Essential Elements of Standards Focused Middle Level Schools and Programs*, and encouraged to help each other out in working with standards in all subject areas.

There is a strong connection to parents in the school. The PTA has a supportive presence, both socially and financially through such things as teacher grants and providing some financial support for students in need. Parents meet with teachers regularly; some cluster teachers say that they might have a parent meeting scheduled as often as once or twice a week.

**Unusual Union Configuration**

In New Rochelle, almost all of the people working directly with students belong to the same bargaining unit. The superintendent describes the arrangement as very unusual but one with which he has a good working relationship.

*I have never heard of this combination in an association before: teachers, guidance, secretaries, paraprofessionals, building and grounds. It is the only one like it in the state. The only ones not in the association are administrators. It is an interesting combination. The association wants to resolve issues. They show up for board meetings. They don't rock the boat without information.*

Teachers, including union leadership, confirm the culture of collaboration, mutual respect, and commitment to problem solving: "I am head of the union and a happy teacher in the building."

### **Changing Demographics**

There is an overall awareness of the changing demographics in New Rochelle. Most of the teachers feel that the move to clusters, heterogeneously grouped classes, and the commitment to both articulated, aligned curriculum and to differentiated instruction have allowed them to be very successful in creating safe and productive classes for every student. Some voice a concern that they are more successful with the social and emotional connections than they are with academic ones. Several speak of a seemingly invisible economic divide and the pressures family situations can put on students, especially in the academic climate of high expectations and expected success. However, they value the district commitment to both equity and excellence and volunteer time and support for the wide range of support programs in place in A. Leonard Middle School.

### **Shared Focus and Goals**

We found remarkable consistency in the articulation and implementation of a shared vision and goals in this large school and district. Most interviewees mention the goals of equity and excellence. Almost everyone mentions high performance expectations while at the same time stating that they are not a "test prep" organization. The principal speaks about developing a school culture in which learning is very important and getting all students to believe that they can be learners at a high level.

A shared commitment to the development and use of professional knowledge to improve student learning also prevails. For example, all interviewees speak of a need to continue learning to use data to improve instruction for students. There is a high emphasis on the critical importance of communication and collaboration in the building of professional knowledge. Professional respect is a phrase we heard often and saw in practice in everything from the teachers claiming to have "great" administrative support to district administrators being careful to not move a single thing when using another person's office for an interview.

### **Best Practice Highlights**

The culture of community and commitment results in "best practices" that extend throughout the five dimensions that frame the larger best practices study of which this case is a part. These dimensions are described below.

### **Curriculum and Academic Goals**

A clearly articulated vertical and horizontal curriculum plan is evident in New Rochelle, and the collaboration and professional development arrangements that have gone into developing and maintaining the viability of the plan are just as clearly articulated.

At the center of the curriculum at the Albert Leonard Middle School is the Middle School Learning Outcomes document. It is based on the New York State Curriculum Standards, and the district publishes it in both English and Spanish. The assistant superintendent for secondary instruction describes the process of its creation and use:

*New York State Learning Standards are the basis. Outside of that, we have used backwards planning for curriculum mapping for all curriculum areas. The process is always evolving. Now we are focusing on the NYS math curriculum strands and mapping learning outcomes. We use a combination of summer and released time to give us the most focus of teacher attention... It depends on the group, and the decisions are guided by the chairman who oversees it. Once curriculum goes through this process, then it is mapped and sequenced. Then we develop the FFA's—frequent formative assessments.*

The Learning Outcomes document is not stagnant but is in continual use and under constant assessment. Time was spent last summer reassessing the document and the teachers and administrators looking at it deemed it still very viable.

The district develops and relies on extensive and deeply embedded professional development to support the articulation of curricular expectations like those seen in the Middle School Learning Outcomes document.

*What we do best is provide the staff ongoing, consistent professional development. We continue to reinforce what we do so it does not become a flavor of the month. We establish the base and then refine and test it. Ours is a philosophy of delivery as much as content. . . . We have created a culture of professional development.*

The assistant superintendent describes the process of curriculum development over the last ten years as a consistent process of the study of data and needs assessment and the use of best practices from research and professional development to develop the responding program. The two main demands, she states, are that curriculum and delivery must be child centered and constructivist.

*Once we had the initiatives, we began to monitor progress with FFA's and then we could differentiate what the students get, especially with the after-school program. We do not want to just be a test prep agency, but we do need to prepare students for those tests. We are giving teachers the data to work with, and we are also providing professional development on how to use the data—to take a look at how we are doing and the state benchmarks. We look at strands and standards to do item analysis... In this way, we are creating the context for how we do our work. Then we develop the formative assessments and then measure it again. Ten years ago, we saw need for differentiated instruction, and now we have made it part of the formal instruction.*

### **Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building**

The school district shows evidence of a culture of mutual professional respect. The superintendent speaks highly of the accomplishments of the former superintendent, claiming that she “set the bar” for the relationship with the board and the community. Throughout our

interviews, each person refused to claim credit for any accomplishment but was very excited to share information about the accomplishments of other professionals. The principal introduces each teacher with a list of outstanding accomplishments—the social studies teacher who had been selected to be in commercial teacher demonstration videos with her lesson, the math teacher who had developed the data analysis system that had added so much to the school, etc.

Professionals in New Rochelle seek to understand a task in all its complexities, to exceed expectations in the performance of the task with all the stakeholders watching, and to work as a seamless team to deliver excellent results. The superintendent calls himself a “systems” person and says that he looks at “what taxes the system” with data and analysis before making changes. Another unspoken yet readily observable aspect of leadership in the district is that working diligently and very competently in a group toward the stated goals is expected. The rubrics of the Annual Professional Performance Review for teachers, which is based on work of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, foregrounds the category of “Collaborative Relationships,” and a distinguished ranking in this category requires “substantial contribution to school and district events and projects, leadership with colleagues, and successful engagement of families in the instruction program.” Researchers rarely heard the pronoun “I,” but rather “we” and “our.”

The assistant superintendent describes what she considers high quality teaching this way:

*Rigor. Relevance. Relationships. Challenging curriculum. Absolutely differentiated curriculum. Engagement and motivation. Metacognition and self-assessment on the part of the students. Clear rubrics. Modeling. Teacher preparation. Teachers have to be experts in their own field and then deliver instruction in such a way that students learn it.*

While the expectations are high, the district both supports and relies on the professionalism of its educators to meet those expectations. New Rochelle has created a culture of professional development that is based on data, needs assessment, and vertical and horizontal communication and articulation.

### **Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements**

When asked how instructional programs were selected in New Rochelle, the answer is that there is one criterion: Does it improve student performance?

#### **Small Learning Communities**

The establishment and use of small learning communities for both students and teachers is one practice that is deeply ingrained in the culture. Both the superintendent and the assistant superintendent mention it as an important change that has resulted in improved performance across the district. In the Middle School, the practice has been further refined in the establishment of both student and teacher groupings.

Classes in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade are arranged in clusters. When the current principal arrived at the school, it had already established teaming. The move to smaller clusters—interdisciplinary teams of teachers working with smaller heterogeneous groups of students—was implemented to raise the bar on current and future success:

*When I came, we had teaming. We began working . . . at creating higher standards for everyone. We developed guidelines for creating situations where students could be most successful. All parents wanted students to be challenged and make sure they were learning skills they needed to be successful when they left the middle school and high school. We worked to set a foundation. Our main goal is not that they [students] are successful here but that they are successful after they leave here.*

### **Organization and Use of Leadership for Communication and Curriculum Alignment**

When the move was made to reorganize the students, the school also realigned the teacher structure. Cluster leaders were added and grade-level leaders established. The administration also recognized the need for subject area leadership to continue. Previously, department chairs had been split between two middle schools. More chairs were added so that each building had a department chair for each core subject. The principal feels that this professional alignment serves well to establish and maintain open and frequent dialog about the alignment of curriculum, practice and assessment.

*I believe in teacher leaders. I have an excellent staff. In the school, we have ten cluster leaders and three grade-level leaders. This way, we have two-way communication. We all talk about how to implement best practice and to make sure ideas hit the classrooms.*

### **Differentiated Instruction**

New Rochelle has used its professional development culture and resources to educate the teachers about and strongly encourage them to use differentiated instruction techniques. Each teacher has had at least two days of formal introduction to the philosophy and techniques. Since the initial training, teachers in different arrangements—clusters, departments, etc.—have had additional training. Teachers have moved beyond the initial training to the development and sharing of what they call “gourmet lessons,” which are especially well-developed differentiated lessons. Teachers not only use the lessons with students and contribute them to the pool, they also share them with each other in an atmosphere of collegial learning and assessment. One social studies teacher was asked if the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) could film one of her gourmet lessons for inclusion in their nationally available support materials on differentiated instruction.

Differentiated instruction has been a successful tool for New Rochelle in maintaining their two primary educational goals—excellence and equity. The widespread use of the practices has allowed heterogeneous classes to maintain both academic rigor and a focus on the needs of individual students. Many of the teachers speak highly of their training and continued study and use of the strategies they have learned. The assistant principal speaks of the significance of training in differentiated instruction in connection with individual student needs and AIS (Academic Intervention Services):

*Differentiated instruction is a strategy the district chose to help us deal with AIS and meeting different needs. When teachers are in school being trained, they are most likely to try things and change practice. Differentiated instruction has stretched us all a lot as ways to meet [student] needs in our classes.*

### **Using School Culture to Meet Goals**

When one of the interview sessions ran a little over the scheduled time, there came a knock on the office door. A student very politely asked the principal if he was coming back. He

immediately apologized to everyone and left with the student. What he was missing was a Principal's Lunch. Once a month, 15 students from across the grade levels and socioeconomic circles of the school are invited to have lunch with the principal to discuss what is right with and what might be improved about the school. Each participating student gets a letter sent home about his or her contribution. The principal tries to incorporate the ideas into school planning and to give credit for the ideas back to the students. In all the conversations with students, he uses the phrase "our school" to encourage taking ownership of issues and solutions.

The Principal's Lunch is only one strategy he uses to bring student participation into the "excellence and equity" goals and to establish a message that it is "cool" to do well in school. He has established practices like "catch us doing it right." Another is the "Plus Five" club whose members have brought their grade point averages up 5 points over a marking period.

A school newspaper, *The Inside Look*, is another venue for creating connections. It is a multigenre and multicolored science/arts related publication that demonstrates one of the ways that students are encouraged to make and share significant learning contributions.

### **After-School and Summer Programs**

When asked about other programs, the principal defers to the math and technology chair to describe not only technology use but the after-school and summer programs they are working on together.

*The use of data elements are the biggest change we have made. We now have the capacity to develop and use school-wide data. Globally, we use it to be sure we recognize our special needs students and provide the best program for them. We have a number of programs. Math and ELA are the big targets.*

*So, we have established Learning Academies, which is what we call our after-school program. Teachers in all content areas will work with the neediest students. Teachers commit one hour a week. There were 450-500 students who were invited, and there are more than 300 actively involved in ELA and math. We began early in the year for ELA focus and later for math to get maximum amount of time on task. We do need to address literacy full time. Learning Academies run three days a week with a recreational component and an additional hour for academics. Teachers are paid extra for their time and we get a good turnout. We are only limited by the number of teachers who are committed.*

*We also have Saturday Academies. These we run for our students who are most skill deficient and have the most problems. We run them for 2-3 Saturdays in December and January and again in February and March. The program targets [those who score 2 or 3 on the State Assessment] but we don't exclude anyone. The Saturday Academies are intensive sessions with test prep, literacy, and skills development. We use incentives to reward kids to come. We have over 100 kids per Saturday; once we had 140. These are staffed with some of the same people as the Learning Academies.*

*A third program is the Summer Academy. We try to look at this as an early intervention program. We have 16 half-day sessions in July. We focus on literacy, math and a computer element. The students get some skills and the staff provides a lot of assistance.*

*We get a good cross section of students. The program also allows for collaboration with parents.*

*We are in the process of collecting data on the Summer Academy to see if we are making a difference. Binders prepared by teachers monitor attendance, performance, and pre/post test scores. We have good attendance—about 84%. We had nearly 200 students last summer. . . . We charted each student with pre/post percentage change. In the data, we can also see program analysis. In the summer setting we didn't have all the socio-emotional background support. We need a counselor, for example.*

### **Focus on the Arts**

The arts play an important part in the school. The principal speaks at length about trying to create a culture that appreciates all of the arts and gets students involved in them. An after-school dance program for interested students whets their appetite for an extensive high school program. The school play this year had 175 students from a wide range of student groups involved in the production. More than 100 students are in each grade's chorus as well as in the orchestra. In addition, there are several instrumental bands. The principal ends his discussion of the arts with the connection to the community and the goals:

*Carnegie Hall and Lincoln Center? We fill it. It is the whole community coming together. Ozzie Davis and Branford Marsalis were hosts. Athletic teams do well. But the focus is always in the classroom.*

### **Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis and Use of Data**

New Rochelle's superintendent says that data are important, but the use of data is much more important. He uses data before suggesting changes to the systems in place. The assistant superintendent emphasizes the significance of the use of data to identify program and professional development needs. The principal talks about the use of data in a number of contexts, not the least of which is to meet the twin goals of equity and excellence.

### **Frequent Formative Assessments**

The middle school math chair and technology guru demonstrated a data collection and analysis program he has developed in the school, and which the school depends on for much of its information. He also shared a recent set of Frequent Formative Assessments (FFAs) that include not only an item analysis, but also suggestions for specific component reteaching and skill reinforcement. One component of the data program has been the development of FFAs for all core courses. The principal describes their origins and significance:

*We want everyone to get a 4 on the state test; we want everyone to be accelerated. We rely on the use of data. We use data to drive educational instruction AND programs for individuals. We are a large middle school. I am accountable. So we started FFAs. Each course has the same final and the same test at two other times in the year. The biggest thing was not to use data as a punishment but as a learning tool. We use the data to look at program and at individuals.*



### **Use of Data to Meet Individual Student Needs**

The math chair speaks of how the teachers use data to identify student needs and growth, to select appropriate individual learning goals, strategies, and materials, and to do program analysis.

One social studies teacher talks about how the data not only help her see where students are in their learning, but in learning about individual students. She says that the process has made her aware of how important feedback is to students, how it is imperative to get assessments back to students, to monitor how they use that feedback themselves, and to help them use feedback in positive ways to sustain growth possibilities.

The principal speaks of using all kinds of data, not just test scores, when trying to meet student needs. He gives the example of trying to make a decision of whether or not to accelerate a student: “We use indicators to accelerate rather than criteria. We look at work ethic. We don’t say kids have to have all of the criteria in order to accelerate.”

### **Use of Data to Frame Collaboration**

The principal and all of the teachers emphasize not only the nature of the data being collected, but how the data frame their professional conversations. Data analysis has become an important component of how teachers in individual clusters identify student and curricular needs. When the vice principal was asked what another school could do to become like A. Leonard Middle School, she speaks of the supporting role of data:

*Fire up the collaboration. Get department people to work across the curriculum and grade levels. Pull out the data and use it as a magnifying glass to clarify what we are doing in the classroom. Use data as a tool not a stick. Everyone wants to feel effective—data helps you do that. ...Go backward to what kind of student you want. Be proactive. Be reflective.*

### **Springboard**

One program that was adopted at the district level is Springboard, a College Board-sponsored program for Grades 6-12 that provides students with opportunities to read, write, and think mathematically through thematic units. The program is spiraled and sequenced and offers a “systemic, seamless, and rigorous mathematics curriculum.” Springboard also offers student success data that allows teachers to closely monitor math skills and process acquisition and development in students.

### **Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustments**

Students are closely monitored through the small learning communities and the continual use of data to assess learning. The school offers a number of programs for students who are not yet meeting the standards. The letter about intervention services sent to parents lists ten specific opportunities for intervention, including additional daily classes, after school assistance in ELA and math, after school homework support, and several summer programs. In addition, there are spaces in which to describe individually designed support steps.

The district is currently undertaking a literacy audit and a major literacy initiative focusing on literacy across the content areas. Surveys were recently completed in the high school, and the committee has proposed a three-year strategy. The humanities chair at Albert Leonard will be taking a leadership role in establishing a common language of literacy skills across subject areas

to facilitate this work in the middle school. The school has also added reading interventions to assist their struggling readers.

Every year, after a testing situation, a group of teachers and administrators sits down to debrief. They create a list of “what to do differently” items as well as a list of what procedures to keep; they then bring out these lists in advance of the test scheduling and planning sessions for the following year.

Faculty members mention some experimenting with looping to facilitate transitions at the middle school. The assistant superintendent mentions developing a curriculum for a dual language program.

The work on making the 6<sup>th</sup> grade transition into the school culture is described in an article “Change is Hard: Easing into the Middle Grades” co-authored by the principal, a current teacher, and a former department chair at Albert Leonard in *Principal Leadership* (March 2007).

## **In a Nutshell**

The Albert Leonard Middle School provides its students with a rigorous and accessible educational program based on equity and excellence in an educational atmosphere of clearly articulated goals and mutual professional respect.

**Albert Leonard Middle School**  
**The City School District of New Rochelle**  
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<http://albertleonard.nred.org/home.aspx>

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<sup>1</sup> 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.