

Carol Forman-Pemberton, June 2007

John F. Kennedy Middle School ***Utica City School District***

Each morning at the John F. Kennedy Middle School in Utica (NY), the principal stands at the single entrance to the school to greet and monitor the faces and body language of the incoming students—more than 1,000 of them. She says she sees a lot that way, sometimes pulling a stressed student aside for a quick chat or alerting a teacher that a student looked upset. Having the single entrance is an important step the school has taken in maintaining the safety of the students, one of the main school and district goals. For the principal, personally scanning each student at the start of the day is an important step in meeting the personal and academic needs of all students, the other main goal.

All along the New York State Thruway, small cities like Utica are struggling with some of the same issues as the big five cities—high poverty rates, large immigrant populations, transient students—without what they see as a fair share of the state educational funding.

In the Utica schools, 41 languages are spoken and 1,400 students are in ESL programs. The superintendent describes Utica as having the third largest refugee center on the East Coast. There has been a continually changing refugee majority in the city, first Asian, then Eastern European, and currently African. The relatively low cost of living of the area is a draw to the immigrant population, and this growing population has put a strain on already tight city and county funding for housing, social services, and infrastructure support.

Despite the economic strains on the community, the schools, especially the John F. Kennedy Middle School, have a long-standing tradition of commitment to education and community and work with new culturally diverse populations to make a safe and successful educational environment. In a school district where seniority allows first choice of school placement, positions at John F. Kennedy Middle School fill first and teachers compete for placement here. The focus and the support of the administration create an energized and unified faculty that uses its collective talents and energies to help all students learn and succeed.

Community Context, Climate, and Culture

One of the unique characteristics of the school culture and academic climate of Utica is the contrast between the pride of so many teachers and administrators in being from the city and the size and growth rate of the diverse immigrant population there. Many administrators and teachers were born and brought up in Utica. The director of secondary education describes himself as having been “born and bred” in Utica. The superintendent has worked for the school district for 24 years and describes her job as the final step in her career. The commitment to the community—by history or by choice—seems to be a strong factor in an across the board commitment to problem solving of both educational and social issues.

Student Demographics 2005-2006: *John F. Kennedy Middle School, Utica City School District*

	John F. Kennedy MS	Utica CSD	New York State
% Eligible for Free Lunch	58%	61%	37%
% Eligible for Reduced Lunch	12%	10%	8%
% Limited English Proficient	10%	14%	N/A
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution			
% African-American	21%	28%	20%
% Hispanic/Latino	13%	14%	20%
% White	62%	52%	53%
% Other	4%	6%	7%
% Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards on Gr. 8 ELA Test	48%	43%	49%
% Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards on Gr. 8 Math Test	37%	35%	54%
K-12, Total Enrollment	1025	9041	2,772,669

The problems faced by the school system are daunting. Some of the factors that have created issues of safety and security both within and outside of the schools:

- 71% of the students in the city live in poverty.
- Utica itself is ranked the 6th poorest district in New York State outside of the Big Five.
- Because so many parents need to work so many hours at low paying jobs, many of the students in the district are alone in the morning. Some as young as nine or ten are responsible for getting themselves up, fed, ready for school, and on the bus without adult supervision.
- In many families, the parents did not attend American schools, and the unfamiliarity with the system or the importance of education in the culture sometimes places a burden on the students.

Beyond the statistics, the current educational climate taxes both the school and the district as a whole. The superintendent spoke at length about the demands of standards-based education and No Child Left Behind (NCLB). While she says that the state offers very good standards, it does not offer a lot of support in meeting them:

The state does not allow a GED for graduation rates. An IEP with NCLB is not considered a completer, a diploma. With NCLB regulations, new immigrants take tests immediately. Currently they have a one-year grace period for ELA tests when it used to be three. There is no grace period for other tests. It is irresponsible. Frustration is there for students and staff. We try to assimilate immigrant children to our culture, but these regulations don't make them feel good. These regulations really hinder urban districts.

Yet despite the social and economic issues in the community, students at this school have done well on state assessments, particularly the ELA.ⁱⁱ The academic community in Utica is working hard to create and maintain an understanding that school is about learning and that education is very important for future success.

Teachers in the system petition to get to the middle school, and they stay when they do. Why?

- The AIS (Academic Intervention Services) coordinator, who has been there 46 years, says it has a lot to do with teachers feeling safe and 100% supported in a well-run school.
- A science teacher credits the “can-do” culture of the building where everyone is on board with the belief. He describes a situation several years ago when they were caught off guard by a new regulation that there would be no ESL waivers for subject area testing. With 1,200 ESL students in the district, this was a major issue. However, they all worked together to prepare the students. He claims the spirit of “can-do” catches on and brings the faculty together.
- The superintendent points to the growing “we can do this together” understanding among the faculty. She says they are acknowledging that the days of closing the classroom door are over and that the teachers know they need to work as a team to assure student safety and academic success.

Best Practices

The culture of 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

Goals in Utica are set first by the board. Then the district, working through its administrative team, sets its goals, and then goals are set in each building. Data are used in all phases of the goal setting. The superintendent stresses the teamwork involved in establishing goals and priorities for the district and her personal commitment to keeping the process and the goals focused on student safety and academic achievement and free of the politics that can derail necessary focus.

The director of secondary education (until recently the principal of John F. Kennedy Middle School) claims that when the results came back from the initial set of statewide tests, they were not good—and that the results spurred changes in both curriculum and procedures.

Now the curriculum at John F. Kennedy has been closely aligned with the New York State Standards and articulated by curriculum maps for all subjects and all grade levels. The teachers at Kennedy point to their curriculum binders as the guides to what should be taught when and report a very high degree of consistency in the implementation of the curriculum.

Several years ago, with additional funding from a grant, the teachers from John F. Kennedy in each of the core subjects began a major curricular overhaul with a close examination of the state standards and benchmarks and began correlating their curriculum with those standards. A social studies teacher describes the process and its current application.

Three years ago we got a grant. We had to come in the summer for a week. We tore the tests apart and took the core curriculum apart and began to see what NYS was looking for. We prioritized the curriculum and created our curriculum folder. At the end of every

year, we update. It is considered part of the end of the year work. We have gone to the same lesson plans on just about the same day. We rework every unit every year before we teach it.

The annual updates to the curriculum include using the results on the assessments to look for gaps, updating the skill sets appropriate and necessary for each standard and unit, and reformatting many assessments to model the state testing format. In addition, textbooks have been selected to correlate with the standards and assessment format in the curriculum areas. Teachers have copies of the entire curriculum and use them regularly.

Not only does this core curriculum serve to coordinate instruction among classes in the building, it also serves as continuity for transient students. A number of students move among the Utica schools with some regularity. The consistent curriculum between the two middle schools addresses some aspects of the transient population.

We have worked with instructional pacing among buildings to facilitate movement among schools and so that student mobility would not make them totally out of sync. We do have magnet busing and some students move every month.

The director of secondary education says that the process of curriculum alignment works well at the individual and building levels where things are constantly assessed and revised when necessary. At the elementary, middle and high school levels, the curriculum revision process is a priority. If there is any problem with the curriculum alignment, he adds, it is in the transitions from elementary to middle school and middle to high school.

He goes on to describe the district process for program review. Program selection at the school follows a similar procedure to curriculum alignment with the addition of more players. When a program is up for review, the assistant superintendent calls in teachers from all grade levels involved. This selection or review committee is anchored by experienced and respected teachers in the subject area but also includes a true cross section of the people involved in the program change, including probationary teachers. The committee meets over the course of several months, using released time for teachers and including the building principal before a decision is reached.

Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building

Utica seems to have found a formula for building administrative capacity among its own professionals. Both the superintendent and director of secondary education are natives, and many teachers are also long-term residents and employees. Two factors in this retention and growth seem to be focus and loyalty. The superintendent talks about her total commitment to the job and not allowing anything other than student safety and success to drive decision making in Utica. She goes on to say that she will have to replace seven administrators this year alone because of a retirement incentive. While the district uses the anticipated venues for administrator searches such as wide range advertising and queries at agencies like the School Boards Association and a Superintendents' Council, she acknowledges that the pool is not always excellent. This led her to conclude that they needed to build capacity in all of their schools.

As part of the capacity building, she has set up an administrative mentoring program. She has enlisted a number of college professors who were formerly school superintendents to help her set

up the plan. The ultimate goal is to be sure that administrators are being mentored by those whose only agenda is to help.

My role now is to find the best administrators, create the team, and to share responsibility of providing very strong leadership to schools and communities. I see the pool and try to bring teachers early into facilitator roles to develop their leadership skills.

The director of secondary education also has had success with Utica's capacity building approach. When he was the building principal at John F. Kennedy, he hired six different assistant principals. Four of the six have since gone on to principalships of their own.

Administrative Continuity

The long-term tenure of administrators and teachers has worked well for Utica. The teachers at John F. Kennedy Middle School feel very supported and very focused by the continuity. A science teacher talks about the situation:

At the end, [teachers] feel support from administration. We are lucky to have long-term administration. This was not the case for all schools in the district. Some had such rapid change in administrators they could not refine what they were doing. We were fortunate to have nine years with one principal. Teachers were backed both with discipline and strategic academic goals. Sometimes we felt like we were really being pushed, but that is all part of it, too.

A special education teacher notes an additional contextual benefit of the administrative continuity. As a teacher working with many students from many cultural backgrounds, he notes how the consistency of administrative focus leads to a very consistent student program. With such a diverse student population, he underscores how important it is to have all the students hearing the same messages about both their studies and the school social norms. Not only is it unifying, he says, but it makes curricular and behavioral expectations explicit and consistent over time and among all the teachers.

[Our former principal] had a lot to do with making things happen. He targeted things more. He had us keep focusing rather than using a shotgun approach to solve problems. ... With the diversity you have to stay together and be consistent or the wheels will fall off. A lot of difference among the teachers would only add to the confusion. We are all in same boat.

Professional Development

Administrative continuity works well, but it is not continuity for its own sake. In addition to the administrative capacity building, there is a focused effort on the professional development of teachers so that they can make the most of the supportive educational environment. The superintendent talks about the need to use data of all kinds, even anecdotal data, to identify the true needs of the school and district. She goes on to identify the need to empower teachers and to educate them about how to proceed in meeting the needs of students. She warns that it does not happen overnight, but that commitment to thoughtful and supported professional development is essential.

One example of a way Utica is "using its own" professional talent is the use of retired teachers, one or two years out, as "gap facilitators." Currently several of these gap facilitators are working with special education teachers on pedagogy and content. Because they are not employed as

teachers in the district and because no evaluation is involved, the set up provides a non-threatening, substance rich, and context specific learning situation for teachers.

Mentoring

Utica has developed a mentoring program for new teachers. It begins with a three-day summer orientation and the assignment of a mentor for each teacher. The new teacher and the mentor meet regularly, have a day a month of released time to work together, and the new teachers also have released time to observe veteran teachers. Teachers who have served as mentors at John F. Kennedy say that, although 35 hours a year is the required minimum of contact time, they meet almost daily at first with the new teachers and then somewhat less as the year goes on. These mentors also say that everyone in the new teacher's department and team contributes to the mentoring in important ways. The mentors themselves take several mentoring courses, meet in the beginning of the year with the mentor coordinator to review the basic understandings, and meet several times during the year as a group after school.

Instructional Programs, Practices and Arrangements

Universal Academic Support

Using data as the basis of decision making is an integral part of the culture at Kennedy and in the school system as a whole. One example of the fruitful use of data-driven decision making is its application to the schedule tweaking at Kennedy. About eight years ago, the middle schools moved from the traditional nine-period day to block scheduling, which had students meeting their classes every other day. The first year after this schedule change, the test results—in this case English and math—were not good. The principal examined the possibilities for change.

He identified one of the issues as a lack of continuity in skills practice and in the time for developmental learning activities. He “tweaked” the schedule to add what is called “math lab” and “ELA.” Essentially this added a 40-minute, alternate-day period of math and language arts instruction with the same teacher to the 80-minute every-other-day schedule. A student has a full-block math class on one day and a half-block “math lab” on the alternating days. The math labs allow time for skills practice, drill, extension activities—and a continual and continuous focus on math every day.

English and ELA are set up a little bit differently. Every student has a full block of English every other day. Formerly, only the students who qualified by state testing or special education IEPs had additional reading instruction; additional instruction was also added for those students identified as needing Academic Intervention Services (AIS). The schedule change added “ELA”—planned, supported, coordinated, concentrated reading and writing instruction—for a 40-minute period on the days alternating with the regular English class for all students.

Math labs and ELA classes are smaller than the regular math and English classes. For the most part, students have the same teacher for math lab and math class and the same for English and ELA. This restructuring of the schedule now provides daily contact with the teacher and the core subject content in a context that allows more individual support, access to remediation, including any mandated AIS, and extensions for all students whenever they need them, and focuses school resources and student time on core academic areas.

Mandated After-School Tutoring

Many students at John F. Kennedy require extra assistance from their teachers in order to meet the demands of curriculum and state assessments, but they were not always staying after school for this help. So the former principal developed with the teachers a systematic approach for assuring that students got this extra help by implementing a plan for mandated tutoring.

One of the biggest hurdles was the fact that students did not always stay after school voluntarily. In response, the principal began the “escort service.” Near the end of the school day at Kennedy Middle School, security people from the school make rounds of the classes and escort requested students to a central meeting place where they are met by the teachers requesting their presence. Teachers prepare a list of students that they would like to stay with them after school and submit the list to the main office before the end of the school day. The security people then pick up the students in their last block of classes to assure their presence in the tutoring sessions.

Many students were being asked to stay after school by several different teachers. To relieve this confusion, the school dedicates one day each week to a subject area. For example, Monday may be math day and Tuesday science day. Fridays are for non-core subjects such as art or technology. While a teacher can request that a student stay on any day, the subject area teacher of the dedicated day gets priority. In this way, a teacher is guaranteed at least one after-school session per week to work with a student who needs tutoring or to make up a test or assignment.

To make this program possible, four extra buses were required. Grant money was used to initiate the program, pay teachers and get transportation for students.

One effect of the program was to separate after-school academic tutoring from disciplinary after-school detention in the minds of students and parents. Parents have been very supportive of the tutoring program. Students have shown academic progress. The number of F’s has gone down dramatically. Students are also able to receive more and more individualized preparation for state assessments. With more student contact time, teachers are able to implement more of the learning strategies they have been learning about through professional development.

Academic Suspension Program

To deal with minor disciplinary issues, the school has an after-school detention program that runs at the same time as the tutoring program. Teachers each volunteer a few days a year to run the program. It runs from the first day of school to the last.

For students with more chronic disciplinary and attendance issues, the principal instituted a day program that focuses on the development of behaviors and skills that will allow students to become more successful students. The 14 to 16 students assigned to this program arrive at school around noon and are not dismissed until 5:30 p.m. They are picked up by a special bus at their homes (rather than down the block) so parents can witness students getting on the bus and take responsibility for student attendance. At the end of the day, the process is reversed so parents can witness students coming home from the program.

The program has an academic component in which they can keep up with the work in their core subjects. In addition, students in the program get anger management classes, social services support, and someone from a character education program to help them work on interpersonal and social skills. According to an administrator, having this program in a separate location but in

the school works well as an alternative site to an outside placement, where he fears “they would pick up bad habits,” or to a more traditional suspension, which would remove them from a supportive academic environment altogether. The director of secondary education reports that the attendance at this program is 98%—higher than the regular day program.

Organization of Professional Staff

The after-school tutoring program has been very successful with students, but it also takes place in a time period many teachers in other schools use for collaborative curriculum development. In order to maintain ongoing collaboration among teachers and to maintain coordination of curriculum and assessment, the administration has had to make use of other coordination strategies. The principal lists some of them:

Each team has a team leader. Each department has a department head. These leaders are seasoned teachers with a lot of knowledge and communication skills. They teach. They have one less duty a day so they can use the period every day to collaborate with teams and departments. Teachers meet informally at many times during the day, and many departments meet daily first thing in the morning. Departments meet at least once a month formally and teachers also meet on half days. We put classrooms and department offices in the same wings to increase communication. We also try to arrange common prep time for same grade subject area teachers.

A math teacher also mentions a math coordinator who works among the buildings, 6-8, to help coordinate the curriculum and to share successful techniques. The math coordinator is a former teacher now working in this capacity. The teacher reports seeing the coordinator two or three times a week.

Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data

“The assessments and the exams are the be all and end all.” So says the director of secondary education (and former principal of the John F. Kennedy Middle School). In response to the first round of testing in math, which he claims “hit them over the head,” he looked to the master schedule for some answers and instituted the math and ELA labs described above. Changing the schedule was only one way the school and district used data to improve instruction.

In addition to school and district data, Utica has also developed and maintained a policy of using data on the classroom level as part of its culture. Formative assessments are “an expectation, not an option,” says the superintendent. At Kennedy Middle School, common unit exams and ten-week assessment are given and used in the core subject areas. Teachers use the results to modify and redirect instruction. At the beginning and the end of the year and during inservice days, teachers go over test results to correlate strengths. Principals use them as part of the professional growth and teacher assessment process.

For example,

- The ten-week math tests are cumulative. Teachers look at particular students’ scores over time as well as whole classes’.
- On the ten-week tests, teachers model multiple choice strategies on the state assessment and give immediate feedback.

- Unit tests in the core subjects are the same from teacher to teacher, as a result of alignments done as part of a Comprehensive School Reform grant, and are used to evaluate trends.
- The principal uses the data from the ten-week grades, specifically a grade distribution report for each teacher, to identify problem areas for quick remediation.
- The Academic Intervention Services (AIS) coordinator makes sets of state test results for each teacher. They are arranged first by level to see where the students are and then by item analysis to spot curriculum gaps or other trends.
- Part of the district professional development plan is to give several teachers from each building training in how to interpret and use data for instructional intervention and for them to serve as turnkey trainers for other teachers in their buildings.

Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustments

Follow Through on Curriculum Alignment

Three years ago, the core curriculums at the school went through major overhaul to align them with state standards, required skills, and lesson pools designed following work with research-based best practice strategies. A number of steps have been taken to ensure the curriculum is being followed on a regular basis.

- Administrators spot check classes and lessons randomly. If one perceives a problem with pacing or content, immediate feedback to the teacher makes sure that months or a whole school year do not go by with students being behind.
- Team and department leaders keep curriculum binders current and also check the pacing of individual teachers along the curriculum map.
- Teams and departments work to establish common formative assessments that are in line with the standards and curriculum.

Early intervention

Focus on early interventions of all kinds—early in the day with students, early in the year for pacing problems, early in the actions for disciplinary issues—seems to be a key success strategy to maintaining positive momentum in Utica. Several more examples of the focus are:

- Utica now has universal pre-K, and many of the sites are community based.
- The district is working at early identification of kindergarteners. The bottom 5% of the class is screened regularly to see if delays are developmental or indicate disabilities.
- The district is looking at early intervention in the classroom for immediate reteaching.
- Occupational and physical therapy are available early on.
- The district is developing a strong language and ELL professional connection to maximize results for students. For example, they have found that some ELL techniques also work well with language-delayed students.
- The district is responding to a citing for too many minority students in special education classes by looking at entrance testing and screening tests from the reading series to identify students in need early on.
- The district is responding to the findings above with class size reductions, team teaching, class sharing and other in-class interventions.

- The school is very proactive about attendance. The in-house suspension supervisor calls the home of each absent student each day. The principal calls home on the second day of absence. Someone contacts the parent, even going to the parent’s place of employment.

Professional Development

Administrators in Utica agree that there are very high expectations of teachers, but that these high expectations are paired with fair compensation and both personal and professional support. Teachers at the John F. Kennedy Middle School echo those understandings and add that they feel both challenged and safe.

The superintendent says specifically that she has both high expectations and a desire to help teachers work at their highest levels. “Teachers want to do well, to know they did everything they could.” To this end, she has worked hard to establish an embedded, well-defined, and content-rich professional development program.

- Teachers have eight professional development half-days per year, four whose schedule and content are district driven and four discretionary, to use to study data, curriculum adjustments, or new concepts of practice.
- Presenters and workshops have regularly been brought in on research-based practice to help teachers refine instruction and to keep current with research.
- Professional development has been offered and supported in many areas important to teachers: reading in the content areas, differentiated instruction, curriculum mapping, behavior management, and a wide range of content specific offerings.
- The focus of much of the professional development has been on practical suggestions, such as graphic organizers, differentiated instruction toolboxes, etc., for teachers to implement and assess immediately in their instruction.
- Specialists have been brought in to work with administrators to “grow thoughtful classrooms and thoughtful administrators.”

In a Nutshell

John F. Kennedy Middle School in Utica makes use of a strong commitment to community to provide both a safe learning environment and a well-articulated, well-supported research-based and data-driven academic program to a widely diverse student population.

John F. Kennedy Middle School
Utica City School District
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<http://www.uticaschools.org/kennedy/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://nystart.gov/publicweb/Home.do>). This case study was conducted in Spring 2007 and was based on State Assessments for the years 2002-05.