

Jacqueline L. Marino, *Spring 2007*

Port Chester Middle School ***Port Chester-Rye Union Free School District***

School Context

Port Chester is a small working-class city in Westchester County, about 30 miles from New York City. Part of the Port Chester–Rye Union Free School District, the middle school is home to about 800 students in grades six through eight. Although surrounded by affluent districts, over half the school’s population come from low-income families. Over 75% of students are Black or Hispanic, and 26% are English language learners. Many of these come from Mexico and are under-educated and over-age for their grade level.

As a result of a decade-long focus on improving learning and the school environment, Port Chester has received both state and national recognition for raising achievement among disadvantaged students. One of the first middle schools in the state to receive a Safe and Drug-Free School Award in 1999, the school has since seen a steady increase in test scores. In 2004, it was named a New York State School of Excellence for increasing scores in math and English at least 20 percentage points over a four-year period. In 2005, the school received a National Blue Ribbon Award from the U.S. Department of Education. In 2006, the school was one of five in the nation to receive a Dispelling the Myth Award from Education Trust, a nonprofit organization dedicated to closing the achievement gap. One consequence of all this attention is that “people are moving into the community in droves,” according to the principal. Equally important, notes one assistant principal, the awards “brought notice to the school that the right things are happening here.”

One supporting factor for “the right things” happening is the longevity of many school personnel. Although the present superintendent is new, the principal has worked in his present position for 14 years, one assistant principal has worked in the district for 35 years, the other for seven. A number of teachers have taught here for more than 30 years, resisting the lure of higher salaries and “easier successes” in neighboring districts. “We could go to a district with privileged students,” notes one teacher, “but this is much more rewarding. The rewards are greater than with students who start closer to the top.”

Long-term support is also provided by the elected board of education, many of whom have children in the school and, according to the principal, “really look out for the community and are able to do a lot with the money.” A substantial source of that money comes from grants, which now total about \$6 million per year. “We can never have enough resources for a district like ours,” says the district director of grants. Echoing the school’s description as “a diverse school committed to success for every student,” the director notes that “every grant is focused on getting resources for those who need them.” Although school administrators and staff are the first to

Student Demographics 2005-06: Port Chester Middle School, Port Chester-Rye UFSDⁱⁱ

	Port Chester MS	Port Chester-Rye Union Free SD	New York State
% Eligible for Free Lunch	43%	40%	37%
% Eligible for Reduced Lunch	9%	10%	8%
% Limited English Proficient	14%	26%	N/A
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution			
% African-American	11%	9%	20%
% Hispanic/Latino	68%	69%	20%
% White	21%	21%	53%
% Other	1%	1%	7%
% Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards on Gr. 8 ELA Test	66%	65%	49%
% Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards on Gr. 8 Math Test	73%	73%	54%
K-12, Total Enrollment	790	3713	2,772,669

admit that student achievement has not quite reached the heights to which they aspire, the practices that have led to the school’s successes thus far can offer guidance for other schools with low-income populations.

Best Practices Highlights

Port Chester Middle School is characterized by:

- Visionary leadership
- An open and collaborative climate
- Attention to the whole child

Visionary Leadership

I’ve never seen a great school without a great principal.

The principal is a huge reason for our success.

Safety and success go hand in hand.

Success is having a vision and being able to transfer that vision to the faculty.

When asked, the principal attributes the school’s success to “how we care for our children, not only academically but behaviorally.” If comments from other school leaders and staff are any indication, this succinct statement encompasses a wide-ranging vision. Part of that vision is a focus on providing students with a secure and nurturing environment, where systems are in place to enforce rules, address conflict, and keep students safe. Part of it is a view of learning that challenges students to be the best they can be while also expecting them to find joy in the process. Still another piece is a coordinated effort to know and teach every student and to work toward instructional practices and configurations that best enable them to do so.

Evidence for this vision is clear. It is seen in the physical use of the building, with teams housed in color-coordinated blocks to maximize safety and minimize noise and disorder. It is apparent in the school's efforts to "nurture the special gifts" of each child, to "identify students' talents and build upon them," and to "make learning come alive." And it is visible in the co-teaching, looping, and integration of language arts skills that are the hallmarks of Port Chester's instructional program. School personnel credit the principal with laying the groundwork for these accomplishments as well as with developing the "professional trust" that has helped teachers to feel they are partners in the work.

An Open and Collaborative Climate

We are superstars at collaboration.

People are happy. We have a knowledgeable staff, willing to take risks.

We are a family here, and families take care of families.

The principal lets you run with things.

The word "family" pops up often in conversations about why staff are drawn to Port Chester, why they stay, and how they describe the school climate. They point to the principal's willingness to "listen to the teachers" and "take our advice." They highlight the openness of the administration to new ideas, from the Leadership Team's suggestion to reorganize Graduation Day to the custodian's recommendations for improving the outdoor play area. Teachers talk about "functioning together – like a family" and "feeling needed – like a little family." The principal seeks teacher input to school problems and relies on his Leadership Team for making decisions, "from minutiae to lofty-goal-setting." "If it's not working, we work to fix it," says one of the Team Leaders. "He believes in meeting the needs of the teachers the way we meet the needs of the students."

Opportunities for collaboration abound. Teachers are asked to assume leadership roles – as Team Leaders, subject-area coordinators, and specialists – enabling them to collaborate on curriculum development, instructional units, and intervention plans. English language arts teachers work with content area teachers to embed language and literacy activities across the curriculum. Classroom teachers and special education teachers work together to address the needs of each student in their classrooms, improving their own skills in the process. Says one sixth-grade teacher, "The collaboration program is the best thing that has ever happened to me as a teacher," adding that partnering with a special education teacher has made her "so much more comfortable" with modifying and differentiating instruction to the benefit of all students in the class. An eighth-grade teacher agrees, adding that "you need to work as a team; there's nothing a teacher can accomplish alone."

Attention to the Whole Child

There's more than just academics.

Good teaching is an understanding that you are modeling and touching the lives of these children.

Parent involvement is a continual goal.

We are driven to raise test scores, but we are educating the whole child.

The school's Mission Statement declares a commitment to addressing more than just students' academic growth: "Our aim is to ensure that all students will achieve academically, develop socially and discover their unique gifts and talents." Teachers echo that commitment in their stated goals and priorities. They aim to enhance "the happiness of students," "individual expression," "the way students get along," and "efforts to help others." To that end, they try to "make learning come alive," require wide reading, assign collaborative projects, and stress academic and real-world connections.

"Success is multi-faceted," notes an assistant principal, capturing the sentiment of others in the school who reject a narrow view of what it means to be educated. Drawing on his experience living and working abroad, the principal includes among his goals that students become "more worldly," supporting overnight trips, after-school enrichment, and fund-raisers for social causes. As an example of the latter, one administrator describes a recent walkathon to raise funds to eradicate malaria in Nigeria: "Two hundred and fifty students walked the halls and raised close to \$4,000. If you go on the *Nothingbutnets* website, we're there – Port Chester Middle School Makes a Difference."

"Parent involvement is key" is a common theme. While school personnel acknowledge the difficulty of maintaining contact with parents who may be working two or three jobs, they are diligent about making and returning needed telephone calls, posting class and school information on the school's website, sending weekly reports on request, attending PTO meetings, and sponsoring workshops on topics of interest to parents. A highlight of the foreign language curriculum is the annual pot luck supper, a festival of ethnic foods and music, in which "everyone is enjoying and celebrating all of the other cultures." Together, administrators and teachers work to demonstrate their belief that "Parents are allies. The school and home make a real community working together."

A Closer Look

The characteristics described above – visionary leadership, a safe and caring environment, and attention to the whole child – reflect "best practices" that shine through and cut across the five dimensions that frame the best practices study of which this case is one part. The sections below expand on the characteristics in the context of the study's framework.

Curriculum and Academic Goals

The curriculum is coordinated – aligned and spiraling.

You have to have staff involved in decision-making.

Literacy is not just the English teacher's job.

We are all ELA teachers here.

State standards predominate in planning the curriculum. Although teachers have considerable flexibility in their approach to instruction, all draw heavily on the pacing guides and resource documents they have developed together during the summer months. Teachers revise the guides on a regular basis, always in collaboration with their peers within and across grade levels.

Inspired by the principal's conviction that "every teacher is a teacher of literacy," teachers work hard to address within their content area the 24 "Essential Skills and Strategies" they identified as being critical to success on the New York State Assessments in language arts, mathematics, social studies, and science. Developed with the aid of an outside consultant, the list includes traditional comprehension skills such as finding the main idea and interpreting graphic aids, literary skills such as using and interpreting literary elements, and test-taking skills such as analyzing questions and understanding rubrics. At the beginning of each month, these "bundled skills" become an important focus of team planning as each language arts specialist introduces three or four of the skills to her team and leads her content area teammates to plan appropriate ways of incorporating the skills in their instruction during the month. Team members also discuss ways of mirroring the writing formats found on state assessments in their own writing assignments.

While "thinking about and doing it were a big change," admits one teacher, it helped that their principal led them to see how frequently the state assessments required students to understand language in complex ways. He also supported their efforts with opportunities for professional growth and with his attitude of "Let's try it and see." "I would set it up so teachers would not fail and would see the benefits," he says. Now the teachers convey a sense of pride that "we are all teaching ELA." "When you improve the language, you improve everything else," notes an art teacher. "Even the math teachers see its importance," says another. The director of grants echoes this assessment, adding that "the ability to communicate with someone is probably the most important thing an educated person does." Although the transformation has not come easily, helping students to recognize and use language arts skills in every content area is "now just part of the conversation."

Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building

You're only as good as the people you surround yourself with.

We have a great consultant; we're so lucky to have her here.

We support one another in a common goal.

According to the superintendent, school leaders are "always on the hunt" to recruit effective teachers, sometimes intentionally luring them from a neighboring district and including individuals from other fields who might be persuaded to the "advantages of a calling in education." Candidates are screened at the district level but are then "pushed to the right principal." At Port Chester Middle School, they are interviewed by the Leadership Team, "so the staff has ownership in hiring." The superintendent asserts that "one of our best practices is our hiring practices," and "it's a blend of growing our own and looking outside for the best talent."

With the understanding that their teachers are in different phases of professional growth, the district offers a variety of courses through the teacher center at SUNY Purchase and the local BOCES. "We have no trouble filling courses," says the principal.

Teachers convey a similar appreciation for the professional development that supports the school's focus on language and literacy. Contracted for 27 days a year, a consultant has worked

in the building for the past ten years, helping teachers to align their curriculum with state standards, select core literature, analyze state assessments, determine the “Essential Skills and Strategies,” and develop parallel tasks that mirror the assessments. Teachers and the principal applaud her leadership. “The teachers trust her,” affirms the principal, adding that “the more we provide in resources, the more every kid will be successful in every subject.”

School personnel praise their mentor program, both for the assistance it provides new teachers and for the opportunity to give back what they have learned. Says one eighth- grade teacher who has become a mentor, “I love teaching new teachers what I know. I feel like I have to pass on what my mentor taught me to someone else.”

They also mention their *Teacher Evaluation Document*, a “new tool” prepared by the district-wide Evaluation Committee, with the support of the teachers union. It addresses four dimensions of professional practice (planning and preparation, classroom environment, instruction, and professional responsibilities) and includes a rubric for rating teacher performance along a continuum from Unsatisfactory to Master Teacher.

Probably the biggest aid to capacity building is the team concept. Teachers describe their opportunities to work together in superlatives. Whether working as part of a team, co-teaching with a special education partner, or designing curriculum with subject area colleagues, they agree that these experiences make for an enjoyable and stimulating place to work and “foster closeness among teachers and students.”

Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements

We believe that every child has a special gift. Our vision is to get that gift to come out.

Success is involvement.

Priorities are academics and test scores. You can do both.

I love to learn new things with the students!

The picture that emerges of instructional practice at Port Chester is one that encompasses meaningful work, active engagement, and interdisciplinary connections within carefully designed configurations.

Although test expectations figure prominently in their thinking, teachers try to go beyond mere “test prep” to helping students do the thinking required by the test. As explained by one seventh-grade teacher, “I want them to have inquiry based learning: to ask the questions, find the answers, and express that learning.” The school’s “School-wide Planning Instrument,” the form used for teachers’ lesson plans, promotes those goals by requiring teachers to identify the “critical/ probing questions” they will include in their lessons.

Student enjoyment of learning is a priority. In describing a popular unit on money management, a math teacher says, “I want to make math fun. I need the kids energetic and happy, not frustrated.” A social studies teacher agrees, “We do hands-on learning in all classrooms; it lets students take ownership.” An art teacher, referring to the opportunities she provides for students

“to express themselves without fear of judgment,” says, “We try to reach every student’s academic potential, to identify students’ talents and build upon them.”

Interdisciplinary projects help students to pursue individual interests, see connections among the disciplines, and use the language arts in many contexts. The art teachers’ contributions are especially appreciated by school staff, who point with pride to recent projects on Colonial America, the social realist Jacob Lawrence, and a historical monument project honoring heroes of the American Revolution. Both teachers and students are encouraged to share the results of their efforts in public forums.

In addition, “Everything has a reading component,” says one of the art teachers. Students have seven periods each week for Sustained Silent Reading. Computer research and specialized vocabulary are part of every project. Mathematics instruction includes “how to read problems.” A Reading Challenge Program requires students to read and annotate 25 books a year of their own choosing. As a result, says a science teacher, “our students are becoming more literate,” and, according to a social studies teacher who regularly integrates literature in her lessons, “This [reading] support genuinely works.”

In addition to teaming and co-teaching arrangements with inclusion teachers, the school “loops” students in seventh and eighth grades and hopes to include sixth grade in the process next year. Those involved are quick to identify its benefits – increased knowledge of students and parents and a greater awareness of prior learning, thus reducing the time needed for fall review. But, adds a social studies team leader, “Looping puts more accountability on the teacher.”

Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data

We’re not overwhelmed with data.

The faculty are dedicated. We know exactly what the students’ needs are.

When asked to identify key priorities, the district director of grants states, “We use data to drive instruction and intervention, to move our children forward. We don’t take anything for granted.” For Port Chester, the movement forward began with the discouraging results of the first standards-based state assessments in 1999. Where those results spurred the revision and alignment of curriculum, the intense focus on English language arts, and team planning, today test data continue to influence instructional decisions. When eighth-grade teachers attributed low achievement to their large class sizes, test results supported the need for an extra teacher in each of those subjects. When achievement in those classes improved, that information was used to argue for an additional teacher to reduce class size in the seventh grade. Data analysis also supported the school’s decision to “loop” seventh and eighth grades for English language arts, math, and social studies. The observed benefits of that decision are prompting discussion of adding sixth grade to the mix.

Students’ needs are a regular topic of conversation at team meetings, although often that discussion goes beyond formal test results to include unobtrusive measures. Says one seventh-grade science teacher, “We have the benefit of lab stations. I can watch as they work and see

their learning.” Similarly, an art teacher says, “I circulate around the room and look through the work and see how they are doing.” Teachers value the power of performances to convey students’ understanding. “I’ve found that projects support students who have talents other than academic ones,” says a seventh-grade social studies teacher. A colleague adds: “For every project we use, we try to include all the intelligences and all the domains – so everyone has a chance for success.”

Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustments

Success for every student is not just a motto; it’s a reality.

We have an administration that supports us 100%. They provide what we need.

It’s nice to be acknowledged and to know what others have been doing.

Port Chester personnel are especially proud of the services they provide to students with special educational needs. Those services begin with including most all special education students in regular classrooms, where a special education teacher partners with a classroom teacher in each of the core subjects. The two teachers plan and adapt lessons and provide testing modifications for individual students. The two also work with the other teachers on their team, coordinating content, integrating language and literacy skills, and working to make their approaches and expectations consistent across classes. Classroom teachers praise their special education colleagues, saying, “We look to them for strategies to help kids,” and “I’m more conscious now of the need for differentiation.” At the same time, staff avoid making distinctions in the classroom. “We make an effort so that no one can tell the difference between the two teachers and the two groups of students,” and “I’ll do activities that benefit special ed kids yet are good review for the others.” Students in need of extra help also have access to AIS (Academic Intervention Services) during the school day from their language arts and math teachers, an after-school program that offers both academic assistance and enrichment, and Americorps volunteers, who provide one-on-one tutoring.

Recognition is part of the culture at Port Chester. The principal introduces faculty meetings by thanking teachers for recent accomplishments. He also encourages them to share their successful practices at team meetings and professional conferences and invited several of them to accompany him to Washington, DC, to accept the Dispelling the Myth Award. One teacher says, “The principal recognizes us: ‘You’re doing a good job.’ I pass that on to students; they need it more than I do.”

One way teachers pass it on is by rewarding deserving students for academic excellence and other achievements at quarterly award assemblies. They make an effort to recognize unique gifts and contributions to the class “so the same students are not recognized all the time.” In addition to these formal presentations, “lively competitions” such as the “Cutest Pet Contest,” “Crazy Hat Day,” and the long-running school television game show “Operation Brainstorm” help contribute to the “positive, friendly, congenial” environment the administration and teachers seek to establish.

In a Nutshell

When visitors from other schools ask the principal for his secret to Port Chester’s transformation, he is likely to answer, “Everything is time.” He reminds his listeners of the nearly 15-year drive to make the school safe for students, engage teachers in being part of the solution, and inspire students to higher levels of achievement. According to many in the building, that effort has produced a sea change in the school’s culture. One teacher says, “Now everyone cares about each other, and the teachers and kids love being here. This is like home. If you didn’t have that feeling I don’t think the rest would fall into place.” Echoing her theme, an administrator contends, “In order to build a school of academic excellence you have to change the culture, change the way we see children, and pay attention to every detail our children face.”

Port Chester Middle School
Port Chester-Rye Union Free School District
113 Bowman Avenue, Rye Brook, New York 10573
<http://www.portchester.k12.ny.us/ms/mshome.htm>

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

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