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Westbury Middle School *Westbury Union Free School District*

School Context

Westbury Union Free School District, located in northern Nassau County on Long Island, serves approximately 4000 students divided among two primary schools, two intermediate schools, a middle school, and a high school. The district reports a diverse community with a large African-American population and a growing immigrant population primarily from Central America, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic.

Westbury Middle School serves approximately 850 students in grades 6-8. Built in 1934, the school is bordered by playing fields, a track, and tennis courts. It is in a pleasant neighborhood with single family homes and the public library directly across the street.

The school is clean, neat, and well maintained. Student art work, character education posters ('Manners Matter', 'Be Polite to Those Around You'), and student council flyers ('Dimes for Darfur') decorate the hallways. Near the cafeteria, flags are displayed representing the nations of origin for many of the students. The older building has many 'nooks and crannies', and all space appears to be utilized to its best potential. As one enters the middle school, security personnel register visitors in a computerized system. Eight security monitors, teachers on hall duty, and administrators all appear to know the students, contributing to the orderliness of the halls. The common threads in Westbury Middle School's 'Mission, Philosophy and Outcomes' are lifelong learning and success in a diverse society. These are posted in every classroom and office.

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

	Westbury MS	Westbury Union Free SD	New York State
% Eligible for Free Lunch	62%	63%	37%
% Eligible for Reduced Lunch	12%	15%	8%
% Limited English Proficient	14%	29%	N/A
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution			
% African-American	46%	44%	20%
% Hispanic/Latino	51%	53%	20%
% White	1%	2%	53%
% Other	2%	1%	7%
% Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards on Gr. 8 ELA Test	58%	56%	49%
% Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards on Gr. 8 Math Test	52%	50%	54%
K-12, Total Enrollment	849	3830	2,772,669

Best Practices Highlights

Reaching out to a diverse and high needs community

Without exception, those interviewed say the district's biggest challenge is helping the large influx of immigrant students. The language barrier, poverty, parents who 'shy away' from school, and interrupted education are among the many factors of this challenge. The school appears committed to overcoming these obstacles to student success. All written correspondence is distributed in three languages: English, Spanish, and French Creole. A computerized translation service is also available for parent meetings. The principal reaches out by being visible in the community and going to churches and cultural clubs. The Westbury Middle School Math, English, and English Language Learners departments have sponsored parent workshops to explain the New York State Assessments and the results of the assessments. In addition, the district provides English language classes for immigrant parents.

District administrators say,

The American dream is so alive for these people.

The different ethnic groups are celebrated in the schools.

Many come from countries where the educational system is underdeveloped. They come with limited classroom experience. Our challenge is to bring them up to the standards.

Extensive after-school tutorials and extra-curricular programs

Funded by numerous state and federal grants (including 21st Century, Liberty Partnership, Mpowering Kids, and Violence Prevention), the school offers an extended day program for tutorials and extra-curricular activities. Students are encouraged to attend tutorials after school, before school, and on Saturdays. Busing is provided and teachers are compensated. In addition, by contract, teachers stay after school two hours every month to meet with small groups and to tutor in their subject. The Homework Center provides homework help three times a week. All after-school programs provide healthy snacks. A teacher explains one goal of the extended day program, "Students need a place to be. [We can] keep students off the street and in a safe environment."

The middle school also offers more than 30 clubs and sports. Character-building programs such as Positively Me for girls and POP (People of Potential) for boys offer a variety of activities such as guest speakers, etiquette training, and ballroom dancing. Nassau County Community College and SUNY Old Westbury are partnering with the school using the extended day program and field trips to encourage students to go to college.

Embracing consensus and collaborative relationships among administrators, teachers, students and parents to maximize student achievement

All administrators interviewed cite the Comer Model as a model of community involvement that they fully embrace throughout the district. The superintendent explains, "The guiding principles are consensus, collaboration and developmental pathways to student development ... with student support teams and parental involvement." She also believes the model has brought 'systemic changes' to the district and has a positive impact on school morale. For example, 'the Triple S team' (Student and Staff Support Team) works to address the needs of students who have a variety of problems. According to the Comer website, "It connects all the school's student

services, facilitates the sharing of information and advice, addresses individual student needs, accesses resources outside the school, and develops prevention programs.” The assistant principal reports the Westbury Middle School Triple S Team is vital to the intervention programs for at-risk students.

The principal believes that forming relationships with all stakeholders is crucial to school success. Another priority is keeping parents informed of educational goals and their role in achieving these goals. He explains, “We can’t do it alone. ... Parents are involved here. The faculty makes decisions collectively and the PTA is very involved. They want the best for all the students, not just theirs. They see the bigger picture.”

A Closer Look

The characteristics described above reflect “best practices” that 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 district develops its academic goals with a strategic plan that ‘drives the direction of the district’ in a four-year cycle. Principals meet with the superintendent three times a year to first establish their building goals. At midyear they discuss how the goals are going, and at the end of the year hold a final review. Administrators meet at a yearly retreat to review and discuss the goals of the previous year. The goals remain until they are accomplished. The superintendent believes “everyone should know the strategic plan for the district and their building.” She also states, “Everything we do is centered on students achieving, improving and closing the achievement gap.”

According to the superintendent, the community promotes academic achievement. It wants to see the majority of students going to college and especially wants the top students attending Ivy League universities. The community has a vested interest in the success of the school district. “Property values go up when the district is good.”

The superintendent cites the School Review Team’s work as another process to track school progress. It is comprised of 30 people (60% from the district, 40% from universities and the ranks of retired educators). After the review process, principals write an improvement plan, meet monthly with the superintendent, and are given the necessary resources to improve.

The middle school principal states, “High student achievement is the number one ongoing goal every year.” Administrators report that key components for student achievement and success are contracts that inform both students and parents of academic and behavioral expectations. Each team develops a contract of expectations based on the school and team’s philosophy. All contracts must be signed by parents.

The assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction agrees that high expectations for students are an important factor in student achievement. He asserts that because of the diverse immigrant population and poverty level of many students, high expectations haven’t always been the norm. He explains that three years ago, no middle school students were taking accelerated

math. There was a concerted effort to place many more middle school students in the higher level Math Course A. Teachers received additional training, and high expectations for the students were articulated. All but one student passed the New York State Regents for Math Course A the first year, and all passed the Regents exam last year. Next year, even more students will be taking the course. “Raise the standards. . . . Respect the power that is in kids to learn.”

While the district has no formal review process for revising curriculum, directors look to where there is a need for revision. It does have a regular review process for textbooks. The Textbook Committee considers the age of the book and teacher recommendations.

A District Council in place is comprised of representatives from each building, a parent, a student, a representative of the teachers’ association, directors, and the assistant superintendent for instruction. The Council meets 10 times a year. The assistant superintendent describes his first year with the District Council as ‘complaint central’. At that time, he suggested the District Council shift gears and focus on curriculum. It has made progress, he believes, in devoting time during each meeting to progress reports from directors and discussion of curriculum. The Council also decides on district mini-grant requests. The assistant superintendent states that the District Council may be the logical place to formally review curriculum.

Curriculum Mapping

The teachers interviewed agree that the state standards are the guidelines used to develop the curriculum. Three years ago the district began using curriculum mapping software. It seems to have taken hold. Teachers state it is the curriculum map that tells them what students should be learning in their courses. Parents also have access to the curriculum maps. One teacher explains, “This access [to the curriculum maps] is very helpful to educate the parents.” The curriculum maps are revised and ‘tweaked’ every year. The principal hopes that an effort to align the curriculum across content areas will extend to exploratory courses as well. The assistant principal thinks that curriculum mapping has made it easier for department chairs to disseminate the middle school curriculum to the elementary schools.

New York State Assessments

The New York State Assessments have a great impact on the curriculum. According to one administrator, the curriculum is partially based on the content and format of the assessments. Several teachers describe their quarterly exams as mirroring the state assessments so that students become familiar with those types of questions. The eighth-grade English teachers have worked with the sixth-grade teachers on incorporating the types of questions on the state assessment (extended response, listening activities, and reading comprehension) into their curriculum as well as on the use of rubrics in scoring the English Language Arts Assessment. One administrator cites the state assessments as keeping all constituencies (teachers, administrators, students) on task.

Staff Selection, Leadership and Capacity Building

The administrators who were interviewed are all experienced leaders with a similar philosophy of education. The superintendent describes the Westbury Board of Education as “very student centered. . . . They do a thorough review of programs, are supportive and a cohesive group of people.” She describes the Westbury Teacher’s Association as “a positive force. They are very

much about the school district moving forward.” It appears that all Westbury School District leaders have the same goal: student success.

Staff Selection

The assistant superintendent for curriculum, instruction and personnel oversees the process of selecting teachers and staff. To select a middle school teacher, the principal, assistant principal, department chair, and a teacher are involved in the interview process. References and letters of recommendation are checked. There is direct communication with the candidate’s supervisor and principal. The middle school principal looks for knowledge of the content area, some teaching experience, and preferably a Master’s degree. He asks for a demonstration lesson and discusses it with the candidate. He also wants the candidate to understand middle school students. He believes middle school teachers will not be successful if they “don’t understand the middle school psyche.”

Both administrators and teachers are quick to praise the current faculty:

[The faculty is] consistent and passionate. - principal

The teachers are committed and work very hard to do a good job. Overall the attitude is very positive. - superintendent

[We have] well-trained and dedicated teachers, experienced. [They are] highly motivated to get kids to do the right thing. - teacher

We all have the same mentality; we want these students to achieve. - teacher

[Teachers stay in this school because] we get support from the administration and other teachers. It’s the Westbury family.... [You] feel like you make a difference. - teacher

The superintendent is very involved in the selection of principals, including interviews and site visits. She looks for community involvement as a measure of commitment. She characterizes the job of principal as political and very stressful. Therefore she looks for a candidate who is fully committed and understands the considerable demands of the position.

New Teachers

When asked about programs for new teachers, everyone interviewed cites monthly meetings with the administration. New teachers attend these meeting for the first three years at Westbury Middle School. Topics for the meetings may include homework, parent contact, classroom management, and book discussions.

Capacity Building

The district provides three conference days for professional development. This year the thrust is reported as ‘incorporating technology in the classroom.’ Teachers report being surveyed to help decide on the offerings for the conference days. A recently hired staff developer works three times a week with the sixth-grade teams on best practices for mathematics and English. The English Department has in-house professional development courses for the members of the department, which cover such subjects as the New York ELA Assessments, tweaking the curriculum maps, and the use of portfolios. The assistant principal and the teachers agree that the district encourages attending conferences as another form of professional development. As one

teacher says, “Every time I applied to go to conferences, I went. When I come back, I report back and share.”

Instructional Programs, Practices and Arrangements

Teaming

Teaming occurs for grades 6-8. The sixth-grade has two-person teams and grades 7 and 8 have four-person teams. The teachers interviewed are strong proponents of the team approach and believe that teaming supports students academically, socially, and emotionally. A common prep time and meetings every other day contribute to the strength of the teams. The principal states, “I try to sit in on team meetings.”

Collaboration

Teachers report there is informal collaboration with team members and members of their departments during their common planning time. The English and social studies departments have formally collaborated, trying to connect novels they read in their two curriculums. English and art teachers have also worked to make connections between their curriculums. The science chair states that she encourages teachers to visit other teachers’ classes. “I have sent teachers into other classes to show how other teachers are doing something ... or for classroom management styles.”

An ESL teacher reports collaboration with content area teachers. The English teachers and ESL teachers collaborated on a glossary of terms for the New York State Assessments. The reading teacher comes into the ESL classes and the social studies teachers wrote the curriculum map with the ESL teachers. As one teacher explains, “We are trying to figure out strategies to address this population [ESL] to get them to meet those standards with collaboration with ESL teachers.”

Looping

Seventh and eighth grades are looped. The team stays with the same group of students for both grades. As the assistant principal explains, “Looping takes care of vertical teams. The looping has been very effective. ... Before the focus was on eighth-grade assessments. Now both grades share the burden [of the state assessments].” A teacher asserts, “Looping is great. So much time is not wasted getting to know students [the second year]. They know the routine. Getting them to do the homework took all of seventh grade and now the spring of eighth grade they finally are all doing it. It took the same routine over and over.”

Lesson Plans and Student Centered Instruction

Lesson plans are submitted to department chairs weekly for non-tenured teachers and monthly for tenured teachers. Every lesson plan must include the standards addressed in the lesson, the learning objective, and the presentation of content. All administrators agree they want to see more student-centered learning. Administrators look for students engaged in meaningful work that causes them to think and “ask questions of themselves and others and make applications to their own lives and the world.” Several teachers voice similar expectations: “There should be a student-centered classroom with cooperative learning even if it’s just think-pair-share.” In science, “hands on activities” are strongly encouraged. An ESL teacher asserts that ESL students need “a student-centered approach where the children have to do the reading and writing.... They are in the center of the learning ... hands on, building things [pyramids] and learning writing, speaking, geography, even geometry.”

Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis and Use of Data

In addition to the New York State Assessments, student achievement is monitored with teacher constructed exams and departmental quarterly exams. According to the assistant principal, one challenge is how long it takes to get the results of New York State Assessments for placement in AIS (Academic Intervention Services) classes. The assistant superintendent would like to develop a diagnostic prescriptive model based on data. The district contracts with a test developer for diagnostic tests in order to home in on the specific skills and deficiencies of individual students. Professional development on how to use the data from the exams is provided for teachers. The district has a data analyst who disseminates data to administrators, who then distribute it to the teachers about their students.

Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustments

Recognizing Achievement

Everyone interviewed agrees that recognizing achievement, both academic and behavioral, is very important. Teachers and administrators cite the Student Achiever of the Month program as an effective way to recognize student success. Each team selects a student who exemplifies the philosophy of the team. The students are celebrated at a recognition breakfast to which parents are invited, pictures are taken, and plaques received. There is a large display in the main hall with photos of the Students of the Month. Traditional ways to recognize students are also in place: Honor Roll, National Junior Honor Society, school newspaper articles, and certificates. There are incentives to help motivate students to reach goals. For example, students have field trips and dances that they must ‘earn’ the right to attend by fulfilling expectations spelled out in the beginning of the year. One teacher’s advice, “Focus on the high achieving students. Call their names [on the PA], not the detention students’.”

Teachers are also recognized with the Teacher of the Month Award selected by the principal.

After-School Tutorials

The extended-day tutorial program is repeatedly cited by the staff as the intervention that helps students the most. As we toured the building after school, we saw many students working with teachers in small groups. The principal characterizes the tutorials as being for *all* students. The achievers often help as peer tutors or with the younger students. The school reports being very fortunate to have numerous grants that help fund these after-school programs.

MARS for At-Risk Students

A program that originated with the principal addresses at-risk students. MARS (Maximum Achievement Results and Success) is designed as an alternative for students who are not successful in a normal school setting. It is a self-contained program in the middle school building. It has 15 students, a special education teacher, content area teacher, and a social worker. The principal explains that the goal is for the students to succeed academically, but they often have to first work on social-emotional issues as well as attendance. The principal says it “involves a lot of loving, tender care.”

English Language Learners

The ESL teachers work closely with content area teachers. One teacher explains that the standards for English Language Learners parallel the standards for English Language Arts and Social Studies. The curriculum in the ESL class uses high interest books with friendly easy-to-

read print. He follows a literacy approach in his classroom. One challenge is many students are not literate in their native language because they have had interrupted education or have never been to school.

In a Nutshell

Westbury Middle School acknowledges the many challenges its minority and immigrant students face. Through the acquisition of several grants, the school provides numerous programs to help all students achieve school success. The administration and faculty are dedicated professionals who work together both in the classroom and after school, so all students grow academically, socially, and emotionally.

**Westbury Middle School
Westbury Union Free School District
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http://www.westburyschools.org/middle_school/**

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.