Best Practices Case Study

Kathleen Nickson, Spring 2008

Huntington High School
Huntington Union Free School District, Huntington

School Context

Huntington Union Free School District, located in Suffolk County on the north shore of Long Island, serves approximately 4300 students divided among four primary schools, two intermediate schools, one middle school and one high school. The district reports an ethnically diverse community comprised of approximately 60% White, 15% African-American, and 25% Hispanic students, many of whom are recent immigrants from Central America. The diversity is also socioeconomic, with populations of both extreme wealth and extreme poverty as well as a strong middle class.

Huntington High School is comprised of grades 9 through 12 serving approximately 1200 students. Built in 1957, the school is neat, clean and well maintained. Trophies from athletic and music competitions are prominently displayed, as are displays of student art work. Nine security monitors help keep an orderly atmosphere from the parking lots to the hallways to the cafeteria.

Student Demographics 2005-2006: *Huntington High School, Huntington Union Free School District*[i]

	Huntington High School	Huntington UFSD	New York State
% Eligible for Free Lunch	21%	26%	37%
% Eligible for Reduced Lunch	4%	6%	8%
% Limited English Proficient	7%	12%	N/A

Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution
    % African-American
    % Hispanic/Latino
    % White
    % Other
	
	13%
	18%
	67%
	1%
		
		13%
		23%
		62%
		1%
			
			20%
			20%
			53%
			7%

% Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards on Secondary Level English Assessments	83%	79%	69%
% Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards on Secondary Level Mathematics Assessments	88%	84%	71%
% Students Graduating	78%	75%	67%
Total Enrollment	1,175	4,421	2,772,669

Best Practices Highlights

- Strong support for all students, including English language learners, students with special needs, academically talented students, and students at risk,
- Efforts to combat negative societal issues impacting students' lives, and
- A culture of high expectations in a structured environment.

These characteristics are evident across five broad themes that frame the best practices study of which this case is one part[ii]. The sections that follow discuss specific practices at Huntington High School within each theme.

A Closer Look

Curriculum and Academic Goals

Goals

The mission statement of Huntington Union Free School District states as one of its goals "to educate students by effectively teaching an enriched body of knowledge, through the active participation of all students, building upon their unique talents and abilities to produce creative, self-assured responsible citizens who are capable of critical thought and action." This all-inclusive goal is evident in Huntington High School. The school offers several programs to help at-risk students as well as many honors and Advanced Placement courses for academically talented students. Many electives in core subjects and in the fine and performing arts provide numerous choices for all students. The principal asserts, "Success is making sure we support all students at all levels and needs."

Academic goals appear to come from the top down with some teacher input. The principal meets twice monthly with the eight department directors where they discuss academic goals, curriculum, and instructional practices. At the end of the year, the principal and directors talk to each teacher about setting individual and department goals.

According to the educators interviewed, in addition to academic goals, improving the attendance rate, graduation rate, and school safety are important.

Helping students cope with societal issues that negatively impact their lives is another school priority. For example, the school social worker chairs Huntington Safe and Drug Free Schools, a group that emphasizes drug, alcohol and tobacco education and treatment. For homecoming weekend the school sponsored a program to discourage alcohol use. When a student has substance abuse issues, the school may call for a team meeting with teachers, guidance counselor, social worker, principal and parents to meet with the student and discuss counseling or placement in residential or day treatment.

A school initiative this year is the formation of a bullying and harassment committee to combat these issues. Another program is Challenge Day. Its goal is to break down social and cultural barriers in school. Students of different backgrounds, personalities and abilities are nominated by teachers to participate and promote communication and a more positive school climate.

The school social worker, school psychologists, and guidance counselors work together with the faculty to address the many societal problems impacting the student population. One of them says, "It's important to be integrated in the team process and not be isolated."

Curriculum
The district's administrative organization includes eight directors who are responsible for discreet academic areas, K-12. They develop curriculum and provide it to their department members. According to a district administrator, the curriculums are in various stages of completion. The directors have done extensive work on the English, social studies, and math curriculums, providing curriculum maps and pacing guides. He says, "Curriculum revision is ongoing. It's a live document that's always subject to change." Teachers have the opportunity to recommend curricular revisions, a new text, or a new course through the Subject Matter Committee. The committee's recommendations then go to the Educational Development Committee, then to the assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction and finally to the board of education for approval.

An administrator describes several other benefits to having directors. They lead the vertical teams for developing a district-wide curriculum, and they know what is being taught in their discipline throughout the district. He acknowledges, "It's good to have the experts in the field looking at the classes."

One of the directors explains that the curriculum framework prepared with the teachers' input gives teachers ownership and creates an atmosphere of shared responsibility. She reports that in the area of ESL, the director and teachers are very involved in developing the curriculum with the "goal of supporting classroom instruction. [ESL teachers] need to know the curriculum in the general education classroom to align [their] curriculum with it."

The teachers interviewed express appreciation of the department directors' knowledge of the content. "We have a new director with recent teaching experience. He provides the curriculum guides. It's the best department I've ever worked with." One teacher says, "We use teacher meetings to develop curriculum together. We create quarterly exams and mid-terms." Another teacher states, "The state standards dictate what happens in terms of what is covered; how I do it is up to me."

The Huntington Foundation for Excellence in Education is a community organization that partners with the school district. With a focus on high quality educational experiences, it extends the school curriculum by funding the 'extras' the district cannot afford. It has, for example, provided funds for smart boards, video conferencing, science workshops, and performing artists.

Staff Selection, Leadership and Capacity Building

The principal asserts, "Teacher quality is top priority. We must rely on good instruction day in and day out." She expresses the importance of highly effective teachers throughout our interview. She is part of a collaborative effort with a hiring committee to recruit and hire teachers for Huntington High School. For the interview process, the committee discusses sample interview questions, has a uniform rating sheet, and watches demonstration lessons whenever possible. Another administrator says teacher recruitment also occurs through the district's close relationship with several colleges, especially those with a strong student teacher program. Teacher aides come from the community. An administrator states, "When hiring [special

education teachers], we have to find the match of skills for the position. I want broad based knowledge and then specific expertise." She also looks for candidates with knowledge of the core concepts for special education teachers such as the importance of IEPs, and she incorporates role playing in the interviews.

New Teachers

A mentoring program provides support for new teachers. According to one teacher, "It is crucial." It serves to introduce new teachers to the profession and the culture of the school and helps with day-to-day concerns. Mentors have one less duty assignment. Both mentor and mentee are given time during the school day to observe each other. When possible, a common planning time is scheduled. The district also sponsors a summer orientation. Several teachers mention the Project Adventure rope course as a fun team-building experience. In addition, the teacher center provides after school in-service workshops on various educational issues for newer teachers.

Teacher Evaluation

The formal evaluation process includes four observations a year for non-tenured teachers and one observation a year for tenured teachers. There is an end-of-the-year evaluation, developed in conjunction with the teachers' association, which includes a checklist and comments by the administrator. It also gives teachers an opportunity to write comments about their accomplishments for the year.

In consultation with the teachers' association, the principal developed a rubric on effective instruction. She uses it pre- and post-observation as a way to discuss teaching strategies and student performance. As a result, she says she now discusses more about what the students are doing and less about what the teacher is doing during an observation. She adds that teacher evaluation is an important facet of her job and she always tries to "do what's right for the students." She says her philosophy is to give first and second year teachers as much support as possible, including discussions with the mentor and director. If after the third year the teacher has shown little or no progress, the principal will not recommend tenure. She knows this may make some people insecure, but she states, "I won't settle and keep mediocre teachers." Consequently, she reports, "We have some wonderful teachers." The principal says she realizes she needs to verbalize "the good job people are doing."

Professional Development

Rather than the teacher center providing professional development as had been the case, under a new contract the administration is now responsible for staff development. The principal would like to see it "connected to a larger vision" but says it is currently department oriented. A teacher characterizes the professional development as "somewhat haphazard." One administrator says, "Central office is trying to make the professional development more meaningful." Another adds, "We're in pursuit of establishing a learning community with more focus on learning."

On some topics, e.g., bullying, response to intervention, differentiated instruction, professional development is for the entire faculty. Other offerings are department specific and led by the directors. One teacher reports," The director has given very practical information and activities." Another says, "There is constant staff development at monthly department meetings."

The teacher center still provides in-service and graduate-level courses throughout the school year and summer. Teachers are encouraged to attend professional conferences and workshops when the budget allows.

Instructional Programs, Practices and Arrangements

No instructional programs are mandated, but several are strongly encouraged. Among them are: differentiated instruction, diversity of presentation, student-centered learning, an emphasis on writing and critical thinking, and literacy strategies across content areas. An administrator states, "We take great stock in higher-level questions." He describes high-quality teaching as "self-evident when students are engaged in learning, students talking the talk and asking the questions." The principal reports a scripted program used in some reading classes for students with special needs

Teachers are also encouraged to use technology to support instruction. An ESL teacher says she likes to use the smart board and computers because it motivates her students, many of whom don't have computers at home. One of the computer labs, however, has very old computers that crash, much to the dismay of students and teachers. Several teachers mention the need for updated technology throughout the school.

Although it was difficult to get into place, ninth-grade teaming is now considered very successful. Teachers share the same students and have a common planning time for collaboration. The principal reports that ninth-grade teaming is "a great support for teachers so they can support students." Informal collaboration occurs at department meetings when colleagues share materials, websites, and project ideas. A teacher describes how collaboration may occur "over lunch. We sometimes lesson plan together." Special education inclusion teachers share a common planning time with the general education teachers they work with.

A Structured Environment

A prevailing theme among Huntington educators is the need for high expectations in a structured environment. They voice concern that students need to be taught to behave appropriately in order to "have the ability to perform beyond the high school setting." One educator states, "We want students to achieve mastery and be able to behave appropriately and be kind." Another says, "It's a problem when teens don't delineate between adults and their peers." Many teachers appear to believe a structured environment with behavioral goals benefits the students of Huntington High School.

Kids want boundaries. They appreciate and respect it. They need discipline that has consequences.

Standards have to be raised. We need to get students to understand that school is not an extension of the neighborhood hangout.

I assume they are intelligent and want a Regents diploma. Just getting by is not acceptable to me. . . . I insist on boundaries, standards, consistency and fairness. No negotiating with teenagers; it's not in their best interest.

Children here are great, but they need structure.

They [the students] need clear expectations . . . to know how to interact with adults and each other on campus.

Many note that along with high graduation rates and good test scores, success includes behaving appropriately in school and in the adult world. They believe this is important so students can reach their full potential.

The Challenges of a Diverse Student Body
The faculty we interviewed embrace the diverse student population, while acknowledging that with diversity come challenges. For many teachers, there is a language barrier with some Hispanic students and their parents. Many parents work several jobs and some students work to help support the family. As one teacher put it, "[For these students] homework is the last thing on their mind." The teachers also wish that the school had more partnership with some parents. The school is also trying to get more diversity in the honors and AP classes, where students of color are underrepresented. Most students enter the honors classes in middle school and stay in them throughout high school. To increase the number of minority students in these classes, one teacher says, "We need multiple points of entry into these programs." The desire for the school community to connect with the diverse population in achieving the common goal of educating all students to a high level is clearly evident with the educators interviewed.

Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data

An administrator credits the directors with monitoring the curriculum, assessments and data. He believes that state assessments have "made us more responsible and accountable for bringing every child to a higher level of functioning." Analysis of student assessment data informs curricular revision.

The guidance center is responsible for tracking graduation requirements. Guidance personnel work with both students and parents in looking to the future. To ease transition to the high school, test results, grades, attendance and behavioral data are examined at meetings with the middle school counselors.

Informational profiles for special education students from the Instructional Support Team and Committee on Special Education are reported as "in depth," where teachers "get a rich understanding of the student." These profiles help students' transition to the high school and help the teachers understand the unique needs of each special education student.

To monitor student progress, teachers cite the use of traditional assessments including homework, quizzes, labs, unit tests, projects, midterms and final exams as well as New York State assessments. Some of the teachers assert that the state assessments do not reflect student learning "because it sets the bar too low." They say the Regents 'curve' is too low.

Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustments

Recognizing Achievement
The school website and morning announcements recognize all types of student achievement, from National Merit finalists to athletic victories to art and music award winners. The teachers interviewed describe the Pride Award as important to the school culture. Each month a different department chooses five students to be honored for things such as an outstanding effort or turning things around. Parents are invited to attend an after-school ceremony when the students get the Pride Award certificate. The top 20% of the senior class is honored at the Distinguished

Senior Dinner. In turn, the seniors recognize and honor teachers that inspired and influenced them. The principal recognizes staff efforts with the Super Staff Star of the Month. Staff members are recognized for a variety of reasons as 'stars.' A random drawing for a prized parking spot is awarded monthly to one of the stars.

Academic Intervention for Struggling Students
The Transitional Program and the Turn Around Program are two reforms faculty cite as having a positive impact on student achievement. The Transitional Program is for students who essentially failed eighth grade, are not special needs students, but are sent on to the high school. The students generally lack literacy skills, study skills, and time management skills. Small self-contained classes focus on these skills and help their transition into high school level work. The Turn Around Program is for tenth graders who are not identified as special education students but did very poorly in ninth grade. They complete tenth-grade work in small, structured self-contained classes during a shortened day. They then work on making up their ninth-grade credits.

An administrator describes the education of students with special needs as "very much a consultive-collaborative approach.... It is no longer special education versus general education." She explains that the system is all one system that meets the broad spectrum of student needs. The inclusion program is reported as very successful in offering inclusion opportunities whenever appropriate.

If a teacher has concerns about a student, a referral is made to the Student Review Team, which may then refer the concern to RTI (Response to Intervention) or CSE (Committee on Special Education). They look at the individual needs of the student and determine the appropriate services or interventions.

Tutorials are formal help periods in the core areas with a tutor who works with a small group of students. Guidance counselors monitor attendance and student progress and report to parents. During lunch periods there are drop-in tutorials, and teachers stay after school at least one day a week to help struggling students. According to one educator, "The staff is great and will do whatever is needed."

Students at risk of dropping out of school have several options to help them complete their education, including the Alternate High School run by a BOCES, Huntington Evening Alternative High School, and Wilson Technological Center, which is a half-day vocational program.

English Language Learners
The English language learners are 90% Hispanic, many of whom are newcomers to the United States and have little formal education. The high school offers bilingual instruction in global studies, living environment, and math. Another course is the Native Language Arts class, which is the English language arts curriculum taught in Spanish. One of the ESL teachers says that research confirms that instruction in the native language is the most effective way for students to learn the concepts they need in order to succeed in school. The two-year curriculum is formatted to prepare them for the English Regents exam. The ESL aides are all bilingual and work one-on-one with the neediest students. Instead of a study hall, ELL students are scheduled in a tutorial to work on reading and writing skills. An administrator characterizes the school district as very supportive of the ESL program. ELL students are an important part of the student body and she wants them to succeed.

In a Nutshell

With the challenge of a diverse population and increasingly negative societal pressures, Huntington High School offers a wide array of programs and support services with the goal that all students succeed in reaching their full potential. The faculty and administration set clear expectations within a structured environment fostering student success. Clearly they want what is best for students and work toward that goal.

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http://www.hufsd.edu/schools/highschool/hs_index.html

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[i] Demographic data are of students in the 2002 entering cohort and are from the 2005-06 New York State Report Card (https://www.nystart.gov/publicweb/AllDistrict.do). This case study was conducted in spring 2008.

[ii] This case study is one of a series of studies conducted by Just for the Kids-New York, beginning in 2005. For the study of high schools, conducted during the 2007-08 school year, research teams investigated ten consistently higher-performing and five average-performing high schools based on student performance on New York State Assessments of English, mathematics, science, and history. Researchers used site-based interviews of teachers and administrators, as well as analyses of supportive documentation, to determine differences in practices between higher- and average-performing schools in the sample. In half the higher-performing schools, from one-third to three-quarters of students qualify for 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 has been sponsored by the National Center for Educational Achievement (NCEA).