

Kathleen Nickson, *Spring 2007*

J Taylor Finley Middle School *Huntington Union Free School District*

School Context

Huntington Union Free School District is located in Suffolk County on Long Island and serves approximately 4300 students divided among four primary schools, two intermediate schools, one middle school and one high school. In spring 2007 the district reports a diverse community comprised of approximately 60% white, 20% African-American and 20% immigrants, mainly from Central America. The diversity is also socio-economic, with populations of both extreme wealth and extreme poverty, as well as a strong middle class.

Finley Middle School is comprised of grades 7 and 8 with approximately 650 students. Built in 1965, the school is clean, neat, and well maintained. As one enters the building, there is a check-in desk for visitors in the 'blue zone,' the area where students gather before the start of the school day. It is surrounded by student art work to simulate an aquarium. The school store is in the lobby and sells school supplies and snacks. The seventh-grade teams are grouped on the first floor and the eighth-grade teams are on the second. Several student lockers are decorated with birthday greetings, and student work is displayed in some of the hallways. The overall atmosphere appears pleasant and orderly.

Student Demographics 2005-06: *J Taylor Finley Middle School, Huntington Union Free School District*¹

	Finley MS	Huntington Union Free SD	New York State
% Eligible for Free Lunch	25%	26%	37%
% Eligible for Reduced Lunch	7%	6%	8%
% Limited English Proficient	7%	12%	N/A
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution			
% African-American	15%	13%	20%
% Hispanic/Latino	18%	23%	20%
% White	65%	62%	53%
% Other	1%	1%	7%
% Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards on Gr. 8 ELA Test	63%	62%	49%
% Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards on Gr. 8 Math Test	80%	79%	54%
K-12, Total Enrollment	634	4241	2,772,669

Best Practices Highlights

Several practices stand out and shine through the five dimensions that frame the larger “best practices” study of which this case is a part. After a brief discussion of a few highlights, the sections that follow expand on them within the context of the five dimensions.

Embracing diversity and working toward success for all students

According to several administrators and teachers, Huntington has been a diverse community for many years and all its schools have a mixture of races and economic wealth. One administrator feels Huntington is a model of how to embrace diversity. “There is an awareness of cultural differences... [It’s] not adversarial. We make an effort to focus on what is common among us and not on what is different.”

As one teacher puts it, “The increasingly diverse population is a positive thing. It is the real world; it reflects a real demographic.”

The faculty and administration all agree that the challenge is to educate all the students no matter what their circumstances. Abject poverty, different cultural norms, language barriers, and learning disabilities are some of the challenges the school is facing. Tutorial programs are in place, along with a strong ESL department. Extra curricular programs dealing with diversity help students to accept and appreciate differences.

The team model fosters a unified staff who work together to support students

The team model of four core subject teachers sharing the same students is cited as the most important factor in unifying the teachers in their approach toward students. The team meets daily to discuss students’ needs and behavior. It is through the team that they intervene to help a struggling student or develop a plan to modify a student’s behavior. They work closely with the guidance counselor and meet with students and parents as a team. They share information about students and report getting to know students from many different viewpoints. One teacher says, “Students know they are responsible to the team not just to one teacher.”

Another explains:

The people who work here truly love this age group; just as much nurturing is going on as teaching—one does not supersede the other. At this level, if students don’t feel they are being cared about they will shut down; teams contribute to success.

All the teachers interviewed characterize the staff as very united and supportive—“The Finley Family.” Teachers voice a strong sense of cohesiveness that spills over into their work with students.

There is a level of respect and loyalty everyone has for each other—we truly believe in the kids.

People here are supportive in good times and bad times. Everyone helps one another, and you don’t feel you are alone.

There’s camaraderie; we all get along. We may have differences but have a lot of fun together.

It's an extremely supportive staff; a close knit group of people who have become friends and like working here and like working together. Everyone wants to do right by the kids.

Strong community support and involvement

The Huntington community appears to be very involved in the education of its youth. The assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction reports, "The schools don't stand separate and apart from the community." As a "rather sophisticated suburban community," Huntington supports both academic success for all its students as well as participation in extra curricular activities such as athletics, music, fine arts, and drama. There is a "partnership that exists [between school and community] that is unusual."

Examples of community involvement:

- Booster Clubs have successfully raised funds to help build a new football field and refurbish the auditorium.
- The Finley Middle School PTA solicited donations from local businesses for new landscaping near the entrance of the middle school.
- The Huntington Foundation for Excellence in Education (HEFFE), the community's own non-profit foundation, supports initiatives that the district can't typically fund. The Foundation gives teachers mini-grants and larger Star Grants. The seventh-grade science teachers recently received a Star Grant to equip three science rooms as 'smart rooms'.

The community also has representatives on the Shared Decision Making Team, the Educational Development Committee, and PTA Curriculum Council, and a member of the community serves on the selection committee for hiring new administrators.

Another way the community is involved is through two local agencies. The Family Service League provides pre-K programs for the district; and The Patterson Craig Clinic has a grant to work with the district to provide mental health counselors and social workers to the schools.

The principal voices the need to reach out to the minority community. "There is great community outreach in this town. For any district where there is poverty, you are not going to win if you don't use the community." He holds a 'pizza with the principal' night at the community outreach center. The middle school also sponsors a dinner for parents of students who did not do well on the state assessments. The goal is to inform parents about the assessments and give them strategies to help their children succeed.

The superintendent reports a very "child focused and education focused" board of education. Each year he and the board face the challenge of gaining community support for the budget. He acknowledges it is sometimes hard to "have community support in a time when property taxes are seen as exorbitant. We want to maintain confidence from the community...being mindful of it [the budget] falling on the backs of the home owners."

A Closer Look

Curriculum and Academic Goals

Both the superintendent and assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction agree the key priority for the district is academic excellence for all. They voice the desire to “maximize the potential for student learning and to reach the highest level possible. Literacy is a common thread that unites all of our efforts...it’s the underpinning of all learning.” They express a growing frustration with the “relative unfairness” of schools being designated sub-par when one group (such as English language learners) falls below the proficiency level on the state assessment. Teachers and administrators agree it is a challenge to provide appropriate instruction and prepare these students for the New York State Assessments.

New York State Assessments

The assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction says the academic goals come from assessment. The curriculum is data driven and changes in the curriculum come from performance and revisions in the core curriculum from the State Education Department. He also explains that any curriculum changes, innovations, or adjustments are made collaboratively through the Educational Development Committee.

The principal also says the way the school develops its academic goals is “based on New York State Assessment data,” and the teachers interviewed agree that the New York State Assessments are the guidelines used to develop the curriculum.

One teacher describes the process:

We look to the New York State curriculum, but that’s a lot of curriculum; so we look at what the state puts on the test. We change lessons to hit certain topics more than others. We teach certain skill sets they can apply to anything... regardless of the questions; if they use those skills they will be successful.

Many of the teachers describe their teacher constructed tests as mirroring the state assessments. The final exams are also modeled on the state assessments, using the same types of questions “so students get to know what it feels like... We’re getting pretty good at knowing what will be on the exams [New York State Assessments] and hitting those key points.”

Curriculum Maps

Teachers report working very closely with the directors in their disciplines and, together, they have developed curriculum guides and maps. One teacher says, “[We] made curriculum maps during departmental meetings to align curriculum and skills, so we’re not repeating the same things over and over.”

Another explains, “[We have worked on] curriculum maps for the last two years. They are done as a way to see what’s being emphasized by different teachers throughout the years.” “The only way for it [curriculum mapping] to be successful is to have teachers create it,” states another teacher.

The assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction asserts that curriculum maps for most subjects are in place “with the understanding that the documents are continually revised.” The

curriculum maps are not online, although the assistant superintendent says there are plans for the maps to be online in the future.

Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building

The administrators interviewed cite collaboration with teachers, the teachers' association, and the community as an integral part of their philosophy of leadership. For example, the Shared Decision Making Team, Educational Development Committee, and Staff Selection Committees are comprised of administrators, teachers, parents and members of the board of education. The assistant superintendent says, "Decisions are made collaboratively. We are not top down."

Both teachers and administrators report the importance of the eight directors in the instructional leadership of the district. The directors have K-12 responsibilities in their disciplines. The superintendent explains, "[The directors] are experts in their field of study...they are able to be a big support to the principals." Several teachers credit their directors for keeping them abreast of new instructional practices, research and curriculum issues.

New Administration

Finley Middle School's principal and assistant principal are in their first year in their respective positions, and both are new to the district. The teachers interviewed agree that the overall school climate has improved with the new administration. They cite past problems with disciplinary issues. As the principal put it, "The staff spoke loudly, and we have turned it around."

The teachers concur:

By October, the building was different.

What happened was true leadership...changed the morale of the building. There are still plenty of discipline issues, too, but the overall tone of the building has improved 100%.

As a front line teacher you can only do so much, but when you have good leadership, it makes a huge impact on the morale and that will get extended to the kids.

[The principal] treats people professionally, with a minimum of politicking.

The principal cites getting the teachers on board by listening carefully to veteran teachers and acting on what needs to be changed. There appears to be a more positive school climate and invigorated staff with the new administrative team. The principal states:

Teachers are visible in the hallways and students must be on time to each period class... after three lates, there is a disciplinary referral and students get lunch detention. Success means creating a better learning environment with good student management.

Staff Selection and New Teachers

There is a collaborative process for selecting new staff. Contractually, the teacher's association is included in the process; teachers serve as members of the selection committee. Members of the community also serve on these committees. Several group interviews are conducted before recommendations are made to the superintendent and the board of education. One teacher

reports, “I can work with any faculty member in this school, which is a credit to the administration for picking the right people.”

A mentor program for new teachers is run through the local teacher center. The teachers say the goal is to match a new teacher with a veteran teacher in the same department, although sometimes this isn’t possible. There is no monetary compensation for new teacher mentors, but as one former mentor says, “[Mentoring] improves new teaching and it makes the mentor improve as well.”

The district also requires new teachers to attend after school meetings once a month for the first three years in the district. The meetings are run by district and building administrators. Teachers also report informal mentoring within departments.

Capacity Building

The administration explains that the responsibilities for district professional development changed with the most recent teacher contract. The directors now provide most of the professional development for the teachers in their respective disciplines, and the regular meetings with the directors appear to be helpful to teachers. Teachers describe being made aware of the latest developments and best practices in their discipline through their director. They also look at the curriculum and state assessments together and discuss how to improve student achievement at these meetings.

Teachers report that the local teacher center constantly sends them information and offers numerous in-service courses. Others report that the district allows teachers to go to conferences as long as the money is available.

The transition to other forms of professional development as provided for in the new contract are still “in limbo and fuzzy for everyone” in this first year of implementation.

Instructional Programs, Practices and Arrangements

According to the teachers interviewed, there are no mandated instructional programs in the middle school. As one teacher put it, “We are free to be...as long as we are doing what we’re supposed to be doing.”

An administrator says, “There is an expectation that teachers teach to stated objectives, and lesson plans are based on student assessments.” Administrators also voice the desire to see differentiated instruction in the classroom. District administrators expect that after an observation, administrators give recommendations of good pedagogical practices, not just a recounting of what the administrator observes. A district administrator believes the mandated programs used at the elementary level have “equalized the playing field.” They are selected after research from a third party with no vested interest in the decision.

The special education department in the middle school is using a commercial reading program. The teachers say they notice a difference in the reading levels of the special education population after using this reading program for several years.

Collaboration

Teams report they collaborate daily on student issues and that informal collaboration and sharing of materials is also very prevalent. There is some attempt at cross-disciplinary collaboration with

English and social studies, but cross-disciplinary collaboration does not appear to be a strong presence in the school. A special education teacher reports some collaboration with core teachers, but often it's more just 'touching base.' All teachers agree there is a need for more vertical collaboration.

Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis and Use of Data

In addition to New York State Assessments, student achievement is monitored by departmental quarterly exams and final exams. Teachers cite teacher constructed tests, homework, labs, and daily interaction as other ways they monitor their students' progress. There is a district expectation that teachers should continually monitor their students. The assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction says, "Teachers who follow-up with kids and keep on top of them with continuous communication tend to be the most successful [teachers.]"

Many teacher-constructed tests, the quarterly exams and final exams mirror the New York State Assessments. One teacher explains how they use the state assessment results to adjust their instruction. "We look at last year's results and find out where they are weak on a particular topic. The following year we add more materials and teach differently. We analyze the state exam kid by kid, question by question."

Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustments

Recognizing Achievement and Student Incentives

Students are recognized for academic achievement in traditional ways with Honor Roll (divided into Principal's List and Honorable Mention) and National Junior Honor Society. The principal describes plans for a character education program called Falcon Club based on "performance, attendance and character." It involves student incentives and motivations for the entire student body. He explains, "It's more about being a good person. Academic standards aren't A's and higher."

The principal also describes a new incentive for students who have multiple course failures. They go into a program called the Principal's Challenge. Students are rewarded for eliminating any report card failures. They receive a certificate, a letter home, \$3 credit for the school store and a pack of sugarless gum. He hopes to institute a Dean's Challenge for students with behavior issues.

A student mentor program also serves as an intervention for at-risk students. Teachers volunteer to mentor a student one-on-one for the entire year. The mentors counsel them and they participate in outside activities together.

English as a Second Language Population

Interventions for the ESL population appear to be especially promising. According to one teacher, "ESL is making its own program in and of itself. It used to be piecemeal...It has evolved; they now have ESL social studies and ESL science so they get the content in a setting that addresses their needs." The ESL teacher agrees that part of the success of the program is because it tailors the students' schedules to the various levels of proficiency. She says, "We support them in their native language while they are learning English. We also have ESL math; it has the same content as a regular math class. It's not that they can't follow the math, but they can't follow the language."

Another intervention program that is reported to have helped ESL students on the New York State Assessments is an after-school tutorial program funded through a grant. They meet twice a week with teachers other than their classroom teachers. They prepare for a different state assessment every ten weeks. Most of the students have continued with the program throughout the year.

A teacher describes ‘The Girls’ Group’ as a program for Hispanic girls. A bilingual social worker helps them deal with social problems related to cultural expectations and fitting into a different culture.

After School Help

Contractually teachers must stay after school for forty minutes twice a week to provide students with academic tutoring and extra help.

Inclusion and Academic Support Classes

The district follows an inclusionary model for special education students. Only the severely impaired are not mainstreamed. Special education teachers ‘push in’ to the core classes and assist special education students. An attempt to keep the numbers in inclusion classes low is reported. In addition, special education teachers teach a class called ‘Study and Organization’ for their special education students.

The academic support classes’ purpose is to support students who are struggling but are not classified as special education. There are five students in academic support for each grade level. The teacher says, “It’s often a poverty issue; they will talk to us because there are only five in a classroom.” The students are taught academic skills and study skills and get help preparing for exams. “It’s a resource room for non-classified students.”

In a Nutshell

Finley Middle School embraces its diversity and accepts the challenge of providing a good education to all of its students. Its strong, united staff reports working together to help students achieve academic success.

J Taylor Finley Middle School
Huntington Union Free School District
Greenlawn Road, Huntington, New York 11743
http://www.hufsd.edu/SCHOOL_11022.html

¹ 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.