

# Best Practices Case Study

Linda Baker, June 2005

## Lawrence Avenue Elementary School *Potsdam (NY) Central School District*

### School Context

Nestled in the foothills of the Adirondack Mountains, the Potsdam Central School District covers about 230 square miles, with the village of Potsdam in the center. The rural village has a population of about 10,000 and is home to both Clarkson University and the State University of New York at Potsdam. The population of school-age children has been decreasing significantly over the past few years; in 2003-4, 1404 children attended district schools, with 455 enrolled at the one elementary school, Lawrence Avenue. School personnel see the small size as an advantage in maintaining small classes and enabling attention to individual needs. However, the shrinking school-age population presents financial challenges.

“Fostering an educated citizenry” is the mission of Potsdam Central Schools. “Our program should, as appropriate, enable our children to demonstrate mastery of basic academic skills, think critically and creatively, work cooperatively, act independently, communicate effectively, develop morality, and succeed both vocationally and educationally.” The district web page outlines priorities and action steps associated with working toward this mission.

### Student Demographics 2003-04, Lawrence Avenue Elementary School<sup>o</sup>

	Lawrence Avenue	Potsdam CSD	New York State
% Eligible for Free Lunch	24.6%	25.6%	37.0%
% Eligible for Reduced Lunch	9.0%	11.7%	7.2%
% Limited English Proficient	1.1%	1.0%	6.8%
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution			
% African-American	2.9%	1.4%	19.9%
% Hispanic/Latino	0.7%	0.7%	19.4%
% White	93.4%	94.9%	53.7%
% Other	3.1%	3.1%	7.0%
% Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards on Grade 4 ELA Assessment	85%	85%	63%
% Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards on Grade 4 Math Assessment	94%	94%	79%
K-12 Fall Enrollment	455	1404	N/A

Eligibility for free and reduced lunches at Lawrence Avenue Elementary is less than for New York State students in general, approximately 34% vs. 44% statewide. Ethnic/racial distribution also differs from statewide averages, with more than 93% white students at Lawrence Avenue compared to less than 54% white students throughout the state. About one percent of students, most from families associated with the local colleges, are learning English as a second language.

Students at Lawrence Avenue Elementary have performed well on state assessments. In 2004, 85% met or exceeded state standards on the Fourth-Grade English Language Arts Assessment compared to a statewide average of 63%; 94% of Lawrence Avenue students performed at or above standards on the Fourth-Grade Mathematics Assessment, compared to 79% statewide.

The elementary school principal, new this year, credits the success of Lawrence Avenue students to the leadership of her predecessor. As one teacher explained, “Our previous principal was an extraordinary person who went out of his way to support children.” In introducing herself to the school community on the district website, the new principal outlined her goals of listening and learning, implementing a new character education program, improving student attendance, enhancing technology use, and giving the building a facelift despite going without a faculty contract during the 2004-2005 academic year.

## **Best Practice Highlights**

Lawrence Avenue Elementary has a strong culture of caring and high expectations, supported by dedication and collaboration.

### **Caring Community**

The support of a college community was identified as a major factor in Lawrence Avenue’s success. Several people pointed out that the culture of caring extends to all students, “not just those whose parent are professors.” School budgets routinely pass without question, and community members attend school functions and stress the importance of education.

*This is a strong educational community.*

*Because it is an educational community, people are very in tune.*

*This is a college town. We have incredibly overqualified paraprofessionals here, often with college degrees.*

*We have a lot of townies on staff. About 40% of teachers on staff are from the area. They feel more responsible for their students. They know the kids and the families. I went to school here. We take ownership in our kids. We have had a significant number of administrators from the area. Those have been more successful.*

### **Striving for Excellence**

Local educators, families, and community members all have high standards for academic achievement at Lawrence Avenue Elementary. Students are expected to do their very best. Teachers and administrators are also expected to do their best to help students succeed.

*We expect great things of our students.*

*We have high teacher expectations. . . . a high standard especially in language arts and math . . . high standards in reading and writing*

*We are trying to ensure that all kids are successful, that they meet their highest potential. Every student can learn.*

*On this staff we have an extremely dedicated group of people who work long hours and volunteer to do lots of after-school activities and work on projects that improve our strategies for effective learning.*

*Not having a contract has changed the climate somewhat, but it's still a climate where teachers care about students and kids doing their best.*

### **Unity and Collaboration**

The Lawrence Avenue community seems united in its vision and its efforts to reach that vision.

*Our previous principal and our current have held us together well. We work well together, and each grade-level team works well as a unit.*

*We look for uniformity, work collaboratively to pilot new programs together, make decisions collaboratively.*

*We're a team working on not just academic but also social and character traits.*

*As a team, we spot children who need help and work together to help each child to become successful.*

*Contractual issues could have destroyed morale, but as the year has gone on we have united to support each other and to work with our new principal.*

### **Small Class Size**

Having small classes so that they can meet the needs of individual children is very important to the faculty at Lawrence Avenue Elementary.

*Foremost is small class size.*

*Our former principal was committed to low class size. He fought very hard to attain that.*

*Our board and administrators are very supportive of keeping class size down.*

### **A Closer Look**

The culture developed through the educationally supportive community, the striving for excellence, the small classes, and the unity and collaboration produce “best practices” that

extend throughout the five dimensions that frame the larger best practices study of which this is a part. After a brief description of supporting factors, the following sections expand on these best practices.

### **Supporting Factors**

Lawrence Avenue educators found many factors to explain their students' success. In addition to the practices highlighted above, the superintendent stressed the importance of long-range planning. "When I came to the district, there was no long-range education plan." She talked with board and community members to establish a process for planning. A stakeholder group then looked at the data and identified mastery targets for academic areas, as well as goals in other areas such as attendance. The district also faced a major financial crisis at that time. Despite the fiscal worries, the superintendent insisted that the focus be on academic improvement. "Now we talk about kids and communication, not money. We came a long way on the backs of staff working hard. The community and staff rolled their sleeves up and worked together."

Staff development has been another priority. Since there is no assistant superintendent for instruction, the superintendent and principals work with the faculty to develop inservice programs. They have been supported by a district parent and retired New York State United Teachers employee who now serves as a consultant for staff development. He provides workshops in the district for free and has also assisted with long-range planning.

Lawrence Avenue's new principal has focused on gaining understanding before making changes: "I watch, listen, learn." She met individually with all staff members early in the year to learn their ideas about the strengths and needs in the school. She has also reached out to parents and community.

Several teachers identified funding as the major challenge facing the district. They worry about decreased funding from the state, particularly with fewer students attending their school. There is considerable concern that the district may not be able to keep the small classes that they value so much. Part of that worry is about not being able to help students who need the most support.

Related to the concern for struggling students is the "difficulty of reaching the parents of children who seem to need the most help. A parent project committee has developed a program to help parents become better parents and support their children, but it is difficult to convince those parents to participate."

General communication with parents has been growing steadily, teachers told us. "We have far more communication with parents now." Teachers described getting parents' e-mail addresses as well as their mailing addresses so that they could send written communications home at least once a week. An active PTA does "some exciting things here in the building." PLAY, Parents at Lawrence Avenue for Youth, "... has a lot of great ideas and energy." They ran a book fair this year. PTA and PLAY worked together to raise money for authors to visit classrooms. Parents also volunteer to help in classrooms on an individual basis. Parents are in classrooms every day.

District planning teams and building planning teams develop goals and work toward school improvement. "At the school level, the planning team includes a teacher from each grade level, CSEA [Civil Service Employees Association], special area, special education, and two parents. It's very well run at this building. Each member goes back to our representative groups. One of

the teachers has chaired the building planning team for the last several years.” While several teachers praised the process, not everyone felt that the system was working as well as it could be: “I’m not sure that they operate well in this building. Shared decision making is an avenue to voice opinions, but I’m not sure that we really have shared decision making. I would like to see more respect for teachers’ feelings about issues that are very important to students in the building. It’s mostly top down in this district. Teachers tend to have more input in other districts.”

The 2004-2005 school year was a difficult one from the teachers’ union standpoint. “We are without a contract right now.” The union is “fighting strong right now for insurance benefits. For many years, we have taken no increase in pay so that we could keep benefits.” The union also helps with professional development and coordinates volunteer community activities.

### **Curriculum and Academic Goals**

In the words of a kindergarten teacher, Lawrence Avenue teachers and administrators “set very high standards for ourselves and our students.” They view state standards as providing excellent direction for curriculum and academic goals and report the benefits of working as a team to develop and implement specific curricula.

Teachers access curricula through web-based documents. As one teacher explained, “We have very specific curriculum guides for each area. The separate documents are very clear and leave little room for mistakes. Any new teacher receives the documents.” “The curriculum documents are always available,” added another teacher.

In the absence of a curriculum coordinator, the principal is the person responsible for seeing that curriculum is developed and revised. The principal meets with every grade level four times a year to look at curriculum. Teachers noted that it is usually the principal who suggests revisiting a particular part of the curriculum, and then teachers volunteer to take the lead in particular parts of the project. Teachers collaborate to develop the curriculum. A third grade teacher reported writing the essential questions for the science and social studies curriculum. Teachers also reported that they use resources from publishing companies to gather ideas, and a reading teacher mentioned having a great deal of involvement with introducing new programs and reading series. Teachers have found New York State Education Department resources particularly helpful in developing the math curriculum.

Teachers see curriculum changes as the schoolwide reform with the greatest impact on improving student achievement. “We have done a lot of work on curriculum to align with new state standards. We were meeting standards before, but now we align and create Essential Questions that go with each unit. We’ve reinforced the good things that were happening here and brought everything to the forefront of our minds. We could see what grade levels might be overlapping, create spirals, and move some units to be sure that all curricula were aligned without gaps or overlaps.”

Initially, grade-level teams work together to revise and update curriculum. “We work on the curriculum collaboratively. One person takes the lead for each academic area.” Then “we would go cross levels to find gaps. We’ll have all the map people K-4 get together and look for any gaps across the grades. Sometimes it takes two years to get new curriculum documents ready.”

Teachers have released time days as well as superintendent's conference days to work on curriculum revision. As another teacher mentioned, "We are always fine-tuning."

Administrators recently gathered information from a variety of stakeholders to establish long-range goals through 2007. While some teachers knew of or were involved in the collaborative goal setting, others were unaware of the process. One teacher mentioned that administrators "always ask us to set both personal and professional goals" each year.

### **Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building**

Both teachers and administrators see leadership as a key element in Lawrence Avenue's success. "We have had great leadership." Teachers give particular credit to a long-time elementary principal who recently retired. Many also praise the efforts of this year's new principal.

Potsdam Central School District takes pride in attracting good educators and having little staff turnover. The Board of Education has made it a priority to maintain "longevity" and to "stabilize" the staff. The board has recently changed its administrative hiring policy to "advertise throughout the state and network" to find the best candidates, the superintendent explained. "The board likes people to have experience." There has been some controversy about whether to hire principals from within the local system or to seek candidates with administrative experience in other districts.

Teachers participated actively in the selection process for the current school principal. A stakeholder committee screened the applications and participated in the first interviews for each candidate. The successful candidate participated in a series of interviews: The first round consisted of two 45-minute interviews with two stakeholder groups (teachers, parents, and community representatives, with a board member as facilitator); the second round consisted of three interviews -- by the building planning team, other administrators, and then the entire school board. Faculty members appreciated being part of the process and learning other people's perspectives on the requirements for principal. Choosing between the two finalists was difficult because both were internal candidates who had interned in the district. However, several teachers said that it was a "win-win" choice because either candidate would be an excellent principal.

The principal reported that she has experienced "a lot of mentoring through the administrative group, which meets every other week. We are all mentored both individually and collectively." Reading books together has also helped the administrative team; this year they read and discussed *Monday Morning Leadership* and *Skillful Leader*. The superintendent provides informal support and "lets them run their buildings." She stressed that she wants administrators to have "opportunities to grow" and "to take care of their personal lives so that doesn't become a crisis. ... We don't want our job to become a problem for your family. We need to communicate so that we can support families informally." The regional Board of Cooperative Educational Services also has an elementary principal network that provides support. Principals are encouraged to attend administrative workshops.

Development of internal candidates for principal is a continuing process that begins with encouraging people to consider becoming administrators. The district offers administrative internships wherever appropriate. There are no assistant principals in the district.

A collaborative process for selection of new teachers has evolved over the years. However, “it has not been used much recently because of the shrinking school population” and low teacher turnover. “The superintendent will ask for volunteers from teachers, non-teaching staff, parents, and administrators to form the committee,” which then sets standards, reviews two hundred or more applications, selects four or five candidates, and interviews them. Two or three candidates are called back for a second interview with the superintendent.

The district recently developed a new teacher mentor program, negotiated with the teachers’ union. Any new faculty member is teamed with an experienced faculty member, who receives a stipend. For example, “Every grade level is very supportive of every new staff member.” “The building principal works closely with new teachers, especially anyone struggling, to find ways to encourage and bolster that teacher.”

Lawrence Avenue Elementary has established a school climate in which teachers want to stay.

- ~ *We don’t lose anybody here unless there are cuts.*
- ~ *People enjoy working here and know that it’s a great place to raise a family.*
- ~ *People want to stay because we have had good leadership and have high morale; it’s a good comfortable place to work.*
- ~ *This is a very positive, encouraging, enjoyable place to work.*
- ~ *Teachers stay at this school because we are one of the higher paid districts in the county.*
- ~ *People from other districts want to be here.*

Staff development is made available through encouragement to attend workshops in the area as well as through in-house workshops. Teachers say that staff development has been very helpful to them although they sometimes feel a lack of follow-through and wish experts could be brought back to “do it again and again”—“It’s been a little disconnected for me,” says one teacher.

### **Instructional Program, Practices, and Arrangements**

The instructional program at Lawrence Avenue is developed collaboratively, using committees of teachers. Teachers select new program features such as a new reading or math series, weigh their alignment to local curriculum and state standards, then pilot the programs and provide feedback on the results so that all teachers can help reach a consensus. Once teachers select a program, it is mandated, but teachers are given flexibility to make adjustments based on the needs of their students.

*Teachers are given respect to make judgments. Because test scores are high, the opinion of teachers is valued.*

*We talk with each other to be sure that the program meets the standards.*

The process is mostly informal, but a planning team meets monthly to discuss programs to determine what needs to be “tweaked” or changed: “It’s a continuous process.”

Lawrence Avenue teachers and administrators describe effective classroom instruction in terms of classroom dynamics, instructional stance, and lesson planning and delivery:

- ~ *All students are engaged—talking and/or writing. Get students involved in every aspect of the lesson as much as possible.*
- ~ *Students are focused and on task.*
- ~ *There is energy on the part of the students and the teacher.*
- ~ *Respect is going both ways.*
- ~ *The classroom is conducive to learning. It's inviting and welcoming, organized but not overly organized, not sterile and stiff, a place where kids are comfortable and teachers are comfortable.*
- ~ *Flexibility is built in so that unexpected responses can result in slight changes of direction.*
- ~ *Literary skills are embedded in every lesson across all curricula.*
- ~ *The focus is on the kids, not just the lesson.*
- ~ *Your students need to know that you love them and that you love what you do.*
- ~ *Be sure you have a clear-cut idea of what you're doing—have a plan, step by step.*
- ~ *Allow children time to work together and then independently.*
- ~ *Chunking is taking place—little spurts of delivery of information along with hands-on activities.*
- ~ *Have appropriate assessment within the lesson.*

Teachers have mixed feelings about the impact of the state accountability system. “Because the school district is more attuned to achieving success with testing, everyone looks more closely to be sure that every minute of the day is being spent at its optimum.” A fourth-grade teacher described the stress of preparing for major testing at that grade level: “It has changed my teaching unfortunately. I teach toward the assessment. I feel stressed to cover material that I can’t present effectively in that amount of time. We cram at the end. I’m not against assessments, but I would like to have the time to teach what they need to know or would like it to be pared down. We just got over the ELA and can’t let down. We have to get right into math and science because they are coming up immediately. The kids feel it because the teachers feel it. I try to make them calm.”

Language arts instruction receives particular emphasis in Lawrence Avenue classrooms. Teachers see the approach to teaching language arts as very different from what they learned in their initial teacher preparation programs or used in their early years of teaching. “Back then, every child went through every text book at every level. Everything was sequenced. There was a much more rigid progression through levels of reading... now we know that reading and writing are symbiotic. Not a day goes by that my kids don’t write. They used to get writing only at the end of the year [in first grade]. Now it’s a huge dimension of what we do every day.”

Lawrence Avenue Elementary uses a six-day schedule that allows for variety of timing for different subjects. Teachers support the idea of uninterrupted block time for subjects such as language arts but find that there are still too many interruptions—students leaving for music or speech lessons, people calling on the phone, custodians and tech people coming in. One teacher told us that something has to be changed to allow for more uninterrupted class time: “I don’t know who can do it. You need the power of God.”

Instruction for students with special needs is delivered using a variety of models. Teachers noted several examples of what they describe as a “flexible” system decided on a case-by-case basis: A student with Asberger’s Syndrome had an aide in the room at all times; a student who is a

selective mute goes to the resource room for a half hour each day; Title One reading and math students leave to receive extra help; two students come into the classroom for math only; a student comes into the classroom for the Character Ed. Program, students receive help from the resource room teacher comes into the room for one hour every day; students with physical limitations have aides with them at all times.

### **Monitoring: Gathering, Analysis, and Use of Data**

Building planning teams and a districtwide long-range planning team coordinate school improvement initiatives at Potsdam Central Schools. As targets are established, they are shared with the community at large so that parents and teachers can see what needs to be accomplished. Updating and analyzing data every year have been helpful. The superintendent reported that the district has been doing well in meeting goals and tracking progress; the strategies are working.

Monitoring of achievement is a constant process at Lawrence Avenue, according to teachers. Teachers “talk about the climate in the building” and are ready to help identify problems and solutions if there is “something happening that is not positive and needs fixing.”

Teachers have doubts about whether state assessments provide the best evaluation of student learning: “I’m not sure that it is truly a fair evaluation in that it’s asking students to respond in exactly the same way. We’ve worked hard to have universal design for learning but then we turn around and say everyone has to do it the same way.” “The parts that we always felt were important are the reading and writing, but the multiple choice is weighted heavier.” “The math assessment for fourth grade this year seemed pretty fair in some respects, but when you are not allowed to use some of the tools that you have to use in daily life, that is not fair.” “State tests play a big part in the whole school report card thing, but they are not the be all and end all of our students or our school in general.”

In addition to the state assessments, Lawrence Avenue uses several other standardized tests to help determine student achievement—for example, early literacy profiles in the primary grades, an in-house math test for kindergarten through grade two, Terra Nova exams in ELA and math for grade three.

Monitoring of individual students’ progress occurs through performance tasks, classroom discussion and participation, tests and quizzes. “I look at the pulse of the classroom and decide if they were successful. I can tell by the way they talk and behave.” Students in kindergarten through fourth grade have quarterly report cards. Parent conferences are held in the fall.

Special education students are evaluated quarterly on their progress toward meeting the goals of their Individual Education Plans or 504 plans. Achievement assessment scores for special education students are updated annually.

### **Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustments**

Teachers described a variety of programs to recognize achievement—end-of-year assemblies, awards for students with perfect scores on exams, certificates for perfect attendance, a music and art program called Artistic Endeavors. However, they stressed that the best recognition “comes not so much in concrete terms like ‘here’s a prize’ but in validation from teachers and principal, personal recognition.” “The principal makes an effort to ensure that everyone in the classroom

gets recognized.” The community also recognizes the accomplishments of students: “We have *Potsdam Courier-Freeman* reporters around here often. There is lots of focus on kids.”

Teachers report that in general, about 75% of students entering a grade level have the skills needed to begin the work at that grade level, but the school provides supportive intervention for anyone who is struggling. Help for students at risk includes home school counseling, a strong Title One staff working closely with teachers, an extended day AIS (Academic Intervention Services) program, and reading and math help before and after school. In the lower grades, early literacy profiles help teachers to assess student needs so that they can receive timely intervention.

The school’s promotion policy is individualized and is based on making the best decision for the individual child. The classroom teacher keeps the parents and principal informed of the student’s progress throughout the year and makes recommendations for promotion or retention. The final decision rests with the parent.

A summer session provides extra support for students. One educator described it: “Teachers of grades 1-3 give lists of six students per classroom. Sometimes more than one teacher at a level helps with summer session. The fourth-grade session is for all students, not just those who are struggling. We put them with the teacher they will have in grade 4 and with the same classmates. It’s a 3-week program, 3 hours per day, plus a planning day for teacher. There are no breaks. It’s very intense—reading, math, and language, including writing workshop. Transportation is provided. Almost all students entering grade 4 attend this intense workshop.”

Teachers routinely make adjustments to the curriculum and to their classroom instruction to be responsive to student needs and learning styles.

*We have a very good staff that is flexible. If we see a group is struggling, we adjust accordingly.*

*I give teachers credit for knowing the kids and being able to adjust to students.*

## **In a Nutshell**

In a nutshell, educators at Lawrence Avenue Elementary take pride in what they do each day—put students first, collaborate to plan and deliver instruction, support each other and all students, and make adjustments to meet individual needs.

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<sup>o</sup> Demographic Data are from the 2003-04 New York State Report Card <http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/reprcd2004/home.shtml>). This case study was conducted in spring 2005.

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