

# Best Practices Case Study

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## Mannsville Manor Elementary School

**South Jefferson Central School District, Mannsville, NY**

### School Context

Mannsville Manor is located in Mannsville, NY, a rural community of about 400 residents not far from Watertown and the Fort Drum army base. It is one of two elementary schools in the South Jefferson Central School District.

About 370 students and fourteen teachers attend this K-5 school. The district has recently completed a \$22 million construction project that included renovation of classroom space and a new library at Mannsville Manor. Visitors to the school cannot help but notice the exceptionally clean, well-maintained building, in which student writing and artwork, photographs of students, and certificates of good performance are prominently displayed. A receptacle for Lost and Found items in the hallway conveys an attitude of trust, evident also in the respectful interactions and quiet discipline observed in the hallways.

**Student Demographics 2003-04<sup>2</sup>:** *Mannsville Manor Elementary School serves a student population with a higher percentage of students eligible for free or reduced lunch than both the district and the state.*

	Mannsville Manor	So. Jefferson CSD	New York State
% Eligible for Free Lunch	35.6%	23.3%	37.0%
% Eligible for Reduced Lunch	18.0%	9.2%	7.2%
% Limited English Proficient	0	0	6.8%
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution			
% African-American	1.3%	0.9%	19.9%
% Hispanic/Latino	0	0.3%	19.4%
% White	97.4%	98.2%	53.7%
% Other	1.3%	0.6%	7.0%
% Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards on Grade 4 ELA Assessment	97%	80%	63%
% Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards on Grade 4 Math Assessment	100%	92%	79%

Forty-two percent of the adult residents of Mannsville have attained at least a high school diploma. Many students eat breakfast at school, which offers a full-day kindergarten. School staff are challenged by the transience and high absentee rates of their students: in 2004-05, twelve of the 20 students in one kindergarten class had not begun the year in the school.

Reduced funds are another challenge. Many of the school's textbooks are outdated, and the enrichment opportunities that might help to bring the broader world to students are increasingly limited. Still, "We are accustomed to doing more with less" is a common refrain, and results of interviews with administrators and staff affirm Mannsville's commitment to focusing their straitened resources on the most important object of their attentions: the students.

## **Best Practice Highlights**

Mannsville Manor Elementary School is characterized by:

- ✍ A coherent perspective
- ✍ A culture of caring
- ✍ Service to students.

### **A Coherent Perspective**

*This is a goal-oriented district.*

*Meeting students' needs is a priority; academics are a priority; enjoying learning is a priority.*

*Ever present in our minds is where students are, academically and socially.*

*The things you attend to get better.*

According to the Mission Statement of South Jefferson Central Schools, "Our students, individually and collectively, are the focus of all that we do." This message is evident at Mannsville, where nearly everyone notes the clear connection between the broad goals set by the Board of Education and the goals that are conveyed to students: high expectations for academic achievement; physical, social, and emotional well being; and the promotion of partnerships that nurture those expectations. This common philosophy is seen in the district's struggle to promote more uniformity while respecting individual teaching styles. It is apparent in the school's reliance on human resources more than programs or materials to achieve desired outcomes. It is seen in the care taken to communicate and enable those outcomes with parents and community members. And it is visible in the district's professional development plan that informs and strengthens teachers' capacities to attend to students' needs.

### **A Culture of Caring**

*This is a very caring place.*

*Many of our students come with disadvantages, but here they find stability, consistency, love.*

*The teachers care about the children, and the children know that.*

*There's a sense of family; even new people fit right in.*

*It's like a community center, where people feel welcome to come.*

*This school is amazing! I listen to teachers talking and it's always nice little stories, always positive talk about students rather than complaining.*

The positive climate described by the teachers was immediately apparent to the new principal, whose stated intention is “to learn and foster the culture established by my predecessor.” It is also mentioned by a first-year teacher who was greeted on her first day with cake and punch, a note from a colleague, and others who dropped in with words of welcome. Similarly, the recent restructuring that moved fifth grade teachers from the middle school to Mannsville Manor found the Mannsville teachers embracing their new coworkers with warmth and professionalism. “I don’t know of a single episode of bickering,” says the principal.

Teachers appreciate the support they receive from the superintendent and principal, have a voice in setting goals and addressing problems, and feel comfortable expressing their opinions. “We’re concerned, questioning, pushing to go further, and want to always make things better,” indicates one teacher, and they illustrate this drive for excellence by sharing ideas and resources. A kindergarten teacher highlights the productive use of faculty meetings, where they might examine assessment data, report insights gained at conferences, hear updates on curriculum, or discuss a current concern such as the desire to increase instructional time with students.

Frequent occasions for eating contribute to the “warm, family feeling” described by teachers; for example, the monthly pot-luck “café’s” or an invitation to “bring something green to eat” on St. Patrick’s Day. The community spirit extends outward, as evidenced by staff participation in the “Skits and Frenzy Night” in support of the student scholarship fund and their adoption of a military platoon in Iraq.

### **Service to Students**

[Success is] *an awareness of students and what they need.*

*We’re always asking, “What do students need? How can I address those needs?”*

*For the teachers here, school is their life. They want to know what will help children learn and achieve to their full potential.*

*This school has a well-developed support structure for kids.*

“When one person hurts, we all hurt,” says the superintendent. She indicates that the district role is that of a servant, and she encourages that role by “keeping fresh,” modeling, and responding with enthusiasm. Teachers mirror the servant role by continually seeking “what’s best for kids, not what’s easiest.” This search begins early with the FOSPA (Family Oriented Structured Preschool Activity) program for pre-kindergartners and involves multiple avenues and supports, including a full-time school counselor. Analysis of why students may not be performing, ongoing communication with parents, and celebration for successes other than test results provide further evidence that Mannsville’s service to students is focused and intentional.

## A Closer Look

The characteristics described above – a coherent perspective, caring climate, and service to students – reflect “best practices” that shine through and cut across the five dimensions that frame the larger best practices study of which this is a part. After a brief description of supporting factors, the sections below expand on these practices in the context of the five dimensions.

### **Supporting Factors**

When asked to identify factors contributing to the school’s level of success, the majority of respondents credit the staff. Mannsville teachers applaud their colleagues for their professional knowledge, dedication and enthusiasm, willingness to share ideas and materials, and awareness of students and their needs. Open communication and a lack of competition round out the profile.

The superintendent nurtures communication within the district by opening her principals’ meetings with the items principals are “worrying about.” Use of the web tool EDLINE fosters communication among administrators, although it has only recently become available to teachers. Within buildings, principals’ newsletters keep staff informed of district initiatives and events.

The Board of Education “sets the tone” for the work of the district, and their role is described as “very supportive.” Relationships with the teachers’ association are described as warm and collegial. Representatives meet often with the superintendent and (separately) with principals and always receive notices of decisions before public dissemination. The union is currently revising procedures for teachers’ annual performance reviews, and they have recently negotiated a four-year contract without acrimony.

Parent communication is a stated goal of the district and a priority at Mannsville. The attractive waiting area in the district office includes information about community services and adult education offerings. At Mannsville, the FOSPA program presents kindergarten expectations to parents in a series of nine weekly meetings. Monthly events such as Family Literacy Nights introduce parents to the books their second-grade children are reading and strategies they can employ at home. Science and math fairs, Grandparents’ Day, and a wide variety of classroom-to-home communications are designed to help parents see themselves as active partners in their children’s education.

### **Curriculum and Academic Goals**

*Curriculum development is arduous and never-ending but worthwhile.*

*I am passionate about curriculum! I don’t know nearly enough and want to learn more.*

*Teachers feel valued and heard, and when they get to be heard, there’s buy-in.*

*We can address the standards and still do the things that kids enjoy.*

Curriculum development at Mannsville is ongoing and includes a cyclical review of all content areas within a 4-5 year span. The heart of the review is CAP (Curriculum Alignment and Prioritization), a process for identifying and organizing curriculum content that principals learned first and now support across the district. Grounded in the state standards, the process

requires teachers to identify for each content area the relevant units of instruction, key ideas and vocabulary to be learned, and helpful resources. Teachers are given time to work together as a department (e.g., art) or by grade level. Teachers design their maps by the month; some teachers prepare brief summaries of these to make them even more useful on a daily basis. Used in conjunction with results of benchmark assessments, knowledge of students' reading levels, and ideas acquired in regular grade-level meetings, the curriculum maps ensure consistency while also allowing for variations in instructional approach.

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

*When we hire professional staff we check to make sure they know the state standards and can teach to them.*

*We try to grow our own.*

*The district has given us the freedom to develop [professional opportunities] we feel are appropriate and needed.*

Mannsville has very few teacher openings; a recent announcement for one position resulted in over 300 applications. Interviews are conducted by a team of teachers and the building principal, who have already met to identify needs, desired qualifications, and interview questions. Candidates, who must have solid literacy experience, come to the interview prepared to share a lesson that addresses the state standards. The committee recommends at least three candidates to the superintendent, who conducts a second interview and makes her recommendation to the Board for approval.

The process for selecting principals is similar, with parents and students also represented on the interview committee. District staff members who aspire to administrative positions are encouraged with opportunities to serve in internships and on hiring committees. The superintendent often asks such individuals to respond "as though you were the one in charge" to issues under discussion in the district. "This purpose-driven activity is so important," says the superintendent.

Professional development in the district is home-grown, reflecting the philosophy that "professional development is not a workshop; it is the work place" (DuFour and Eaker, 1999, cited in the district's Professional Development Plan). According to the plan, opportunities for growth are designed in response to the analysis of a wide range of data and include working with a mentor, Superintendent's Conference Days, time for instructional planning, visitation days, peer observations, and reflective dialogue. Training sessions include those offered by the district computer coordinator and the teachers' union.

### **Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements**

*I like to see kids involved and active, with the teacher enjoying what she is doing. I think we have a lot of that in this building.*

*Kids who are productive doing and enjoying school work don't need to get into trouble.*

*If done right, then assignment [to test grades] should be easier. It's not just that teacher's job but all our jobs.*

*You could describe our practice as traditional, but we're always willing to try something that's been proven to be successful.*

*I don't need to mandate; the teachers address their children's needs so well.*

The portrayal of high-quality instruction at Mannsville is student-centered but focused. Teachers strive to know their students and their curriculum and to find the best match between the two. They follow their curriculum maps but feel free to supplement the basal series and math text with activities of their own. “We have activities in common, but we do it differently,” says one teacher. “We adjust, adapt, add materials; that’s what teachers do,” adds another.

All six teachers in grades three and four are enthusiastic about “looping,” the school’s eight-year-long practice of assigning students to the same teacher for two consecutive years. According to the teachers, they know their students and parents better, can take advantage of the flexibility in grouping that comes with greater diversity, and use the opening weeks of grade four more productively. In addition, the teachers support one another, share materials, and are always thinking about ways to make connections between and among curricular areas and grade levels.

Administrators and teachers acknowledge the potential for stress that accompanies the state accountability system but are working to make test performance everyone’s responsibility. Teachers are aware of the knowledge required by the state assessments and incorporate that in their standards-based instruction. Some teachers note a positive effect of the assessments: “Whatever children can do, why not push them to their highest potential?”

Support services are mobilized to be used to their full advantage. A full-time counselor works with teachers and parents to “improve the quality of education for our students.” Her role includes working with individual students, parents, the Pupil Services Team, and other service providers to address academic and behavioral concerns “before there’s a crisis,” and serving as “a sounding board” for teachers.

Two reading specialists, each with an assigned aide, provide in-class and pull-out assistance as needed to either the primary or intermediate grades. “We look at what students need, pick appropriate materials, and model activities.” Parent volunteers assist teachers in the primary grades. Responsible students with particular strengths give up study hall time to tutor their peers, a role that is recognized in a year-end assembly. Spartan Helpers – high school students - also meet once a week with assigned students in need of a role model and emotional support.

For students needing “an extra boost” on state assessments, teachers provide after-school help twice a week, additional prep sessions once a week beginning the month before the test administration, and a (noncompulsory) summer program. The majority of students with special educational needs are served in the other elementary building where the special education staff is concentrated, although the principal is advocating a change so that students who end up needing services won’t have to be uprooted. The school currently has no English language learners.

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

*[FOSPA] gives us a sense of where the children are starting and where we have to take them.*

*We take the [State] test, evaluate it, pick it apart, identify things we missed, and revise our teaching accordingly.*

*We're treated as professionals here. We should know best in which areas [of teaching] we want to see improvement.*

*Good practice produces good data.*

Close observation of students begins before students enter school, with the FOSPA program. Every Tuesday for nine weeks, parents are invited to spend 90 minutes at the school with their pre-kindergarten children, first guiding their child through structured activities and then, while the children engage in further learning experiences, attending presentations about the curriculum, transportation, food service and other aspects of the kindergarten program. The series is followed by formal kindergarten screening and registration, but by then school staff and new entrants have become comfortable with each other, staff have formulated some initial observations, and the children have gotten a head start on the learning expected of them in kindergarten. "Nine weeks can make a big difference for some children," says one teacher.

The principal and staff use a variety of data to monitor progress toward their goals. Information from state assessments; the teacher-developed Benchmark Literacy Assessments; students' literacy folders; the computer-assisted Accelerated Reader and Josten's skills programs; teacher observations; and parent communications all contribute to teachers' and parents' understanding of the children and their academic strengths and needs.

Tenured teachers have the option of doing a self-selected project, an opportunity that led one teacher to initiate a monthly newsletter to parents and another to compile a collection of resources for a social studies unit. Teacher evaluation includes goal-setting and self-reflection, opportunities that are enabled by new-teacher mentors and frequent principal visits to classrooms, where he observes instruction, teacher-student interactions, and student work. "By the end of the week, I've been in every classroom," notes the principal.

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

*We're big on awards.*

*We're very proactive. We don't wait until things are so bad. We'll raise the flag and say we have a problem.*

Achievement is expected at Mannsville, but it is also rewarded. Strategically scheduled events such as river tubing, a pajama party, or a Ponderosa lunch with the principal follow each state assessment. An Effort Roll for students in grades one through five celebrates success as "one's best effort"; names of students who make the list appear in the local newspaper and on a school poster. Awards are given for the Good Citizen of the Month, Most Improved Student, and perfect attendance. Individual teachers offer ice cream and pizza parties, birthday books, and redeemable coupons for points earned for "good thinking or acts of kindness." Although prizes are often paid for by the teachers themselves, local businesses are also generous with their contributions.

At the same time, the school's focus on early and ongoing intervention is the most obvious recognition of students' individual needs. A combination of Academic Intervention Services,

reading and counseling support, assistance from parents and peer tutors, and teachers' willingness to provide extra help beyond the school day sends the clear message that "when it comes to adjustments, teachers do what is necessary."

## **In a Nutshell**

The teachers and administrators of Mannsville Manor Elementary School strive to maintain a focus on serving each student well and communicating with parents. With limited funding the school and district rely on human resources to provide a coherent program to all within a caring and inclusive community.

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<sup>?</sup> Demographic Data are from the 2003-04 New York State Report Card (<http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/reprcrd2004/home.shtml>). This case study was conducted in spring 2005.

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