

Niagara Middle School *Niagara Falls City School District*

School Context

Niagara Middle School is one of three middle schools in Niagara Falls, an urban school district located in the northwestern corner of New York State. Once home to many thriving industries, the city has fallen victim to “rust belt” economics, and lost manufacturing jobs have resulted in higher rates of poverty and unemployment and a school population that is one-third its former size. Yet, as district personnel point out, “We could be a low-scoring or troubled district, but we are not. All of our schools are in good standing for the challenges we face.” Seven Niagara Falls schools have been designated “High Performing” by the state and two of these have been named Blue Ribbon Schools under No Child Left Behind.

Central Office staff describe their relationship with internal and external stakeholders as open and respectful. An elected, nine-member board of education collaborates with school leaders to provide strategic oversight and is credited with helping to maintain stability during times of change. Heavy involvement of staff in all areas of teaching and learning has helped to sustain an “atmosphere of trust” with the teachers’ union. A large Adopt-A-School Partnership strengthens school-community relations and provides needed resources to each school. A close relationship with nearby Niagara University has enabled the district to continue its strong program of professional development and ensured that graduates of the college bring desired skills to the city’s schools.

Niagara Middle School is, according to the principal, “a microcosm of the whole city.” The smallest of the district’s middle schools, it serves approximately 600 students in grades six through eight. About 17% of these are students with disabilities. Nearly 40% of students are Black or Native American, and 60-70% of families are on public assistance. In addition to its regular academic program, the school offers a comprehensive acceleration program in three core subjects, a supplemental after-school program, and a life skills program for trainable mentally retarded students.

Visitors to the attractive, one-story building are greeted by friendly support staff, well-behaved students, and clean and quiet halls. Interviews with the principal and teachers convey an enthusiasm for and commitment to their work, despite the recent announcement that the middle school will be closing at the end of the 2006-7 school year, as the district reconfigures its buildings to best serve its declining population.

The district’s web site declares a commitment to “professional accountability, fiscal responsibility, and learning for all... whatever it takes.” Results of interviews clearly demonstrate the seriousness with which administrators and staff undertake this mission.

Student Demographics 2005-2006: *Niagara Middle School, Niagara Falls City School District¹*

	Niagara MS	Niagara Falls CSD	New York State
% Eligible for Free Lunch	44%	47%	37%
% Eligible for Reduced Lunch	11%	11%	8%
% Limited English Proficient	0%	1%	N/A
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution			
% African-American	32%	38%	20%
% Hispanic/Latino	1%	2%	20%
% White	61%	55%	53%
% Other	6%	5%	7%
% Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards on Gr. 8 ELA Test	50%	43%	49%
% Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards on Gr. 8 Math Test	61%	56%	54%
K-12, Total Enrollment	573	7986	2,772,669

Best Practices Highlights

Niagara Middle School is characterized by:

- A climate of caring and collaboration
- Ongoing instructional support
- A focus on learning and growing

A Climate of Caring and Collaboration

Here teachers feel they can make the decisions; people collaborate with each other.

We're all in it as a family. We all care about each other.

If teachers need anything, it's there for us.

We're constantly sharing what we know.

Parents request that their children come to Niagara Middle School. At least one reason for the school's popularity may be what the principal calls "attention to the human side. It starts with building relationships with people," she says, noting that adults need the same opportunities to make choices, learn in their own ways, and take ownership of the curriculum as do students. Relationship building is at work in the school's outreach to parents: through its newly revived parent group, invitations to workshops and other events, volunteer opportunities, school-based website, and automatic telephone messaging system. It is at work in the school schedule: time is allotted during the school day for teachers to meet and plan together, and teachers are encouraged to visit each other's classrooms. Administrators nurture relationships by inviting teachers to participate in making decisions, solving problems, and sharing successful practices at conferences and meetings.

Teachers value their role in the school, where they are “treated as professionals and given freedom to explore options.” “We have lots of administrative support,” says one teacher. “This district empowers people,” says another. “If you have an idea, they let you run with it. If it’s not going well, they call you back to help.” Teachers especially appreciate the lengths to which their principal has gone to provide team planning time. Virtually every teacher interviewed mentioned the importance of this support, as well as the fear that it might disappear with next year’s restructuring. When asked for evidence that collaboration makes a difference, respondents cited higher achievement results, greater knowledge of individual students and their needs, the positive school culture, and increased cohesiveness among team members.

A powerful example of teachers’ attention to relationships is the story of the “Opportunities Classroom.” Concerned that a number of their students were struggling, two seventh-grade teachers applied for a grant that would extend these students’ in-class experiences in English language arts to out-of-class opportunities for learning, character-building, and service, such as visiting a museum or restaurant and taking poems to nursing home residents. “Sometimes non-academic needs have to come first,” asserts one of the teachers. The principal concurs, adding that when the grant was approved, the whole school celebrated the event with a special breakfast.

Caring and collaboration are seen as critical dimensions from central office staff on down. Says the deputy superintendent, “The more open you are and the more involved the stakeholders, the more successful will be the transformation.” Aiding cross-site communication is the District Literacy Consultant, a former principal in the district who describes her new role as a “coordinator” and “encourager.” At Niagara MS, the principal insists, “It’s hard for teachers if they feel they don’t have a voice in the system,” and “I am adamant about making teachers and students feel comfortable.” Teachers talk about working to foster an atmosphere of respect in their classrooms, sitting with their students to be sure they understand a task, and providing opportunities for personal choice, group problem solving, and independent decision-making. Underlying these actions, according to respondents, is a philosophy that addresses the unique needs of each child and middle school children, in particular. According to one sixth-grade teacher, “Staff and administrators really understand middle school students. If you don’t understand how a middle school child works, you won’t be able to help.”

Ongoing Instructional Support

[The model we chose] expects teachers to make professional choices and provides strong job-embedded professional development.

[Professional development] has to be integral. If it’s just a course, teachers use very little of it.

Professional development and the literacy coach have made a big difference.

It’s really helpful to have support along the way.

It is huge when you have someone to work with.

In 2003, a committee of central office staff, principals, and teachers examined several schoolwide programs in use in the district, seeking a single model that would add coherence and consistency to the district curriculum. Although the model they chose was selected in part for its

instructional features, teachers assert that its most valued distinction is the ongoing assistance they receive in implementing the model. “We could not do this without job-embedded professional development,” is a common theme. One teacher’s comment that “it seems as if we are always doing professional development” illustrates the district’s long-term commitment to the program, which includes funding for professional libraries in language arts and mathematics.

At Niagara, professional development is facilitated by a) the use of teacher coaches in language arts and mathematics, b) a team structure that enables teachers to rely on and learn from each other, and c) a common planning time for each grade-level team to meet.

“The coaches are awesome!” declares a seventh-grade teacher, echoing many others who appreciate the workshops, modeling, and non-judgmental one-on-one assistance the coaches provide. Others comment on the value of knowing they are not struggling alone: “The good thing is having time to meet with the literacy coach and the discussion. You can feel very isolated when you don’t have that.”

At each grade level, a special education teacher and the core subject area teachers plan together to provide instruction for a common group of students. One day a week a coach will join them to address a requested topic, share any new training, or work through a lesson.

“You can’t stop working with teachers, and you have to do it during the course of the day.” Putting this belief into practice, the principal provides duty-free planning periods so that English language arts teachers and math teachers can meet with their subject-area colleagues, grade-level teams can meet together, and coaches can meet with both groups, as well as with individual teachers. “Planning isn’t easy; managing students... isn’t easy,” asserts one of the coaches. “Providing time during the day makes a big difference.”

A Focus on Learning and Growing

Ours is a student-oriented faculty working for the success of kids.

[Our priorities are] a safe and secure school, where learning is taking place.

If students don’t know something, they didn’t really learn it. You don’t forget how to ride a bicycle.

Students understand it’s not enough just to do the work, they have to connect to something in the real world.

You never arrive, you are always becoming.

Niagara’s vision of success is revealed in their school goals, attention to deep understanding, and recognition of learning as a process. When asked about priorities, administrators and teachers talk not about test scores but about ensuring “that students can and will achieve,” acquire “a solid background for the future,” and work to capacity. To that end, the principal tries to be in classrooms several hours a day, to see that “students achieve the most that they can,” adding that “the staff is very caring and cognizant when a child is not working at peak.”

When talking about their instruction, Niagara teachers mention looking closely at student work to “be sure they get it” and to inform their own instruction. Teachers highlight the importance of helping students to understand assignments, make connections, and demonstrate their learning. They also attend to the conditions for learning, such as being mindful of students’ transitions from one class to the next. A seventh-grade special education teacher refers to her team’s discussion of this topic: “Will they be ready for sustained silent reading if they just came from reading or writing workshop where they were encouraged to talk?”

“This is a process,” acknowledged several respondents. This understanding is reflected in their desire to see progress along a continuum of growth: “A lot of kids, even if they’re not meeting the benchmark, if they have growth that’s success for them.” It is also seen in the comparisons of teacher learning to student learning. As stated by one of the coaches, “It’s hard when teachers are working hard; they want to see instant results. It’s a change for kids, too. They have to think more. It’s a change for them that is not instant either.” In applauding the school’s professional development program another coach stresses, “It’s good for teachers to be learners; it helps us realize what students are going through, how hard it is to learn something you are not familiar with.”

A Closer Look

The characteristics described above -- a climate of caring and collaboration, ongoing instructional support, and a focus on learning and growing – reflect best practices that shine through and cut across the five dimensions that frame the best practices study of which this case is one part. The sections below expand on the characteristics in the context of the study’s framework.

Curriculum and Academic Goals

We match everything we do to [the standards].

Language arts is pervasive.

[The curriculum] is not too rigid, yet not a free-for-all.

Every language arts teacher has a well-developed resource library.

As we evolved, we saw the need to work [on curriculum] every single year.

The Comprehensive School Improvement Plan for Niagara Falls conveys its strategic goals: a safe and orderly environment, a climate of high expectations for success, instructional leadership, a clear and focused mission, and the highest level of partnership with the community. At Niagara Middle School, the principal and her Leadership Team “look at data from the district and the big picture” and create specific short-term goals. Many of these reveal the school’s ongoing efforts to apply learning from teachers’ professional development to their classroom practice; for example, “to establish standards-based classrooms in math” and “to implement workstations in language arts classrooms.”

The search for a districtwide curriculum model was grounded in a desire for students to meet or exceed the state’s learning standards. The chosen model is “well aligned” with those standards, and both documents guide the continuing development and revision of grade-level pacing guides, supplementary resources, and benchmark tests. A particular point of pride is the Curriculum Snapshot, which displays at a glance the key topics to be addressed, in ten-week segments. A January-to-January structure encourages coordination across grade levels, and on-line access to the documents fosters communication among content area teachers and between teachers and parents.

Just as the principal at Niagara Middle School serves as coordinator of mathematics across the three middle schools, a principal at another school coordinates the middle school English language arts curriculum. Staff members are currently reviewing the language arts documents, following a formal process that includes input from coaches, classroom teachers, special education teachers, and technology teachers from each middle school. The committee is examining the documents not only to revise them in light of the planned restructuring but to address important pedagogical questions such as “Do the reading strategies that we teach provide enough scaffolding for the writing we require of students, especially in nonfiction?”

Teachers appear to value both the clear direction the documents provide and their flexibility. According to one administrator, “We thought teachers might need more [explicitness], but we hear it is just right.” Echoing this sentiment, a classroom teacher says, “We follow the curriculum but we can adapt it for what our kids need,” adding that she teaches “a unit on *The Outsiders*, but not all the teachers on the team do that.”

Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building

Teachers need time, resources, and knowledge to do it right.

The mentoring program is wonderful!

We can never complain about professional development...If you don't do it, it's your own fault.

[The coaches] make us successful and make the kids successful as well.

Although assignment of teachers to buildings is made at the district level, new and experienced teachers who come to Niagara Middle School have several avenues of support.

A mentoring program organized through the district Teacher Center provides each new teacher with a mentor, who may be chosen by the teacher or assigned and who is available to the teacher for three years. The mentor is compensated with clock hours that can be applied toward movement on the salary scale. According to the principal, the mentor program is “very strong” in the building, and several teachers speak highly of their own mentors, adding that all their colleagues are very generous with their time and suggestions. In talking about her first year in the school, one teacher mentions the help she received from both her mentor and an experienced co-worker: “One helper was assigned; one was just a very giving person.” Another teacher indicates that, even though she had been tenured at an elementary school before coming to

Niagara, “I got a year of mentoring, with lots of back up and lots of positive people to work with.”

As indicated earlier, math and literacy coaches supplement the mentor program. In addition to leading workshops and helping teachers to implement strategies that are central to the curriculum model, coaches also coordinate classroom visitations. Because language arts has been the focus of attention the longest in the school, those teachers and the coach have provided valuable assistance in the other subject areas. Sometimes the principal and assistant principal feel an urgency to “bring new teachers up to speed” so they may keep pace with their colleagues: “They have to know this stuff yesterday!”

Evaluation of both tenured and non-tenured teachers is ongoing, following union-negotiated procedures and working in tandem with expectations that are built into the curriculum model. Says the principal, “I know what they’ve been taught... so we look to see if the teachers are doing that, if the students are engaged. We talk with kids: What are you learning? What if you don’t understand?” Procedures include meeting with the teacher before and after an observation, with the understanding that “teachers can always bring a union representative to a meeting if they feel they need to.” In addition to formal assessment of teachers, “focus walks” by the principal or assistant principal provide regular opportunities to monitor program implementation. The principal acknowledges these walks were met with some resistance the first year, “but this year, the teachers have been great. They dialogue with us and invite us to see ‘how I’m putting this to use.’”

Administrators are evaluated according to various leadership and management criteria in the district-developed protocols. Current administrators attend monthly dinner meetings for professional development. Those who aspire to administrative positions are invited to join a team to learn the administrative roles and procedures in the district.

One teacher’s comments capture the positive feelings many expressed about opportunities at Niagara. “Before you put people into leadership roles, you have to know they are capable. This district knows how to find leaders – not just administrative but teacher leaders. There is a lot of professional development and other opportunities. If you want to get involved, it’s there for you.”

Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements

We differentiate instruction as much as we can.

The students know what to expect in every class; there are no surprises.

I really like the workshop model. It’s more like best practice.

Students do well because you’re not telling; you’re modeling and showing.

There’s lots of activity and discussion in my classroom; it’s not a quiet classroom.

We don’t stop instruction for test practice.

Although teachers at Niagara are at different stages of implementing the adopted model, the principal is pleased that “it’s been a great transition over the last five years, a whole-building effort.” An important part of the process was its gradual phase-in of one component at a time. According to a sixth-grade teacher, “Our literacy coach would bring in a layer and we would get used to that, then add another layer.”

Instruction at Niagara Middle School is organized around “classes within classes,” with students of all ability levels working on the same curricular topics but differentiating their approach to those topics through workstations. Teachers follow a workshop model, which one teacher describes as “focused teaching with a mini-lesson, work time as the largest segment, allowing students to work through things and express themselves, then bring it back to closing to share and reflect. You have to keep it really tight and not go on until they have it.” Adds another, “We look at students perform, and form smaller groups based on who needs what.”

Author and genre study are the focus of instruction in language arts, with test structure and language embedded as a distinct genre. Workstations invite students to engage in guided reading, research, vocabulary study, book talks, and other language and learning activities. Outside reading is encouraged through the “Book of the Month” and “25 Books” programs.

In mathematics, the “process strands” are emphasized. Says a seventh-grade math teacher, “Explain and justify, multiple representations – they have to be incorporated into everything we do,” and “Writing is really important.” She has taken seriously the lessons from the math coach, who advises, “Stop telling and encourage more thinking...Kids need a good problem to think about and solve...They need to see what it looks like and need time to figure it out, explain it, explore it.”

An important aspect of all classes is “Rituals and Routines,” a list of specific procedures, behaviors, and attitudes students are expected to follow in that class. Displayed prominently in each classroom, these lists are seen as helpful in providing consistent expectations from class to class and especially effective with special education students. Echoing many of her colleagues, one teacher insists, “I couldn’t teach without them.”

Technology is integrated with English language arts and content area instruction. Says the technology teacher, “We set up our classroom as though we were preparing students for the workforce. We tell them they’re punching into school as though punching into a job. They have work to do, people to work with; they can rely on one another. I walk around the room, monitoring.” She also encourages reflection through daily journal writing. “It keeps students on task, gets them thinking about the previous day’s class and connecting to something they know.”

Although a workshop approach to instruction has not been without some resistance, the majority of teachers are quick to point out its benefits. Says one teacher, “I’ve seen growth: the kids are involved, they participate more, learn by trial and error and discussion with classmates, and they see what others have done through presentations.” Others add, “I see my students working more with each other,” “Our scores are better,” “Kids are reading more,” and “We know the students better.” The math coach agrees, adding that, “If a student in the group understands and can explain it clearly that person really understands it, and the student on the receiving end also benefits.”

Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data

Everyday we analyze plans, modify, do lots of reevaluating.

I am always stepping back and assessing what kids are doing.

I do a lot of monitoring as students are working.

We talk a lot about it and decide what to do with only those students who need a specific strategy.

A sixth-grade language arts teacher summarizes the philosophy underlying the school's approach to monitoring: "We're here to teach kids, and if we are not looking at their needs and making that our focus, we're not accomplishing anything." The district assessment office distributes quarterly reports to principals, who share the data with their leadership teams. At the middle school, the team and teachers "pore over the results and look for ways to improve. The coaches might provide inservice, and we'll come up with a long-range plan" that the teachers help to develop. Another source of district information is the Data Mentor website, which, according to the Middle School Language Arts Coordinator, was used recently to identify language arts weaknesses "so we can build in opportunities to address those skills." Adds a seventh-grade teacher, "The website shows historical trends so we know what skills and weaknesses to emphasize."

Teacher interviews reveal a thoughtful use of multiple measures: "We use the results of the state ELA test... We give the Gates/MacGinitie to identify students below level, then we'll follow up with the DRA for those students to determine additional treatment. We also use students' journal entries and class observation on a daily basis." She adds, "Teachers keep an assessment notebook to monitor student progress."

Teachers' indicate their main source of information is students' daily work. One teacher sees her use of workstations as a real aid to monitoring. "I love centers," she declares. "You're walking around, observing, and assessing all the time. You know where you need to do more work, know students' strengths and weaknesses, and know the kids better." Other teachers agree: "I'm constantly refining the unit as student needs appear," and "I do a lot of monitoring as students are working. Then I'll meet with the group to talk about what I saw." In fact, one teacher argues, "The teacher who doesn't know how to look for what students need will struggle."

"We make it a point to get together and talk," says the principal, as evidenced by the seventh-grade team that noticed a decline in achievement and developed a plan to work together. "Achievement results are now soaring," she says with pride.

Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustments

We have a ton of intervention programs.

Celebration is part of the whole concept.

Teacher interviews echo the principal's declaration that "systems are in place for children who need help." Several software programs are available to struggling readers, and for students qualifying for Academic Intervention Services (AIS), a math class provides academic intervention twice a week in ten-week periods by students' own teachers. A Booster Club helps students to prepare for state assessments. The 21st Century After-School program is a grant-funded, extended-day program overseen by teachers that offers help with homework and supplemental enrichment activities. About the latter program, one teacher says, "A lot of kids stay for the first hour so they can do the second."

But the main approach to intervention comes in the form of differentiated instruction, as incorporated in the school's adopted curriculum and instruction model. In this approach, students who need them are taught specific procedural lessons that will enable them to be more successful at assigned tasks. The plan also includes a cross-age tutoring component, which enables middle school students to learn and practice particular reading strategies in order to tutor first graders.

Although traditional forms of recognition are seen at Niagara, what stands out is the principal's obvious message that her staff members are professionals whose ideas matter. Teachers know they are valued because they are consulted on decisions, encouraged to share what they know, and given time and resources to strengthen their skills. When change occurs, they celebrate, sometimes with kids – who might have their picture in the school paper or be given a book or certificate for ice cream – and sometimes with a personal note or a morning meeting, called just for the purpose of saying, "Thank you."

In a Nutshell

Niagara Middle School's success story seems to have begun with the adoption of a particular curriculum and instruction model, but what is distinctive is the *mindfulness* of the implementation. It is clear that school personnel are not just *doing the program*, but rather are focused and intentional about using its features to improve teaching and learning. Although teachers are in different stages of growth, those interviewed agree that they are "working together on what's best for kids." Their journey is supported by a principal who is persuasive about the need for change and a climate and resources that enable thoughtful performance.

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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.