

Jacqueline L. Marino, July 2007

Vernon-Verona-Sherrill Middle School *Sherrill City School District*

School Context

Vernon-Verona-Sherrill (V-V-S) Middle School is located in Verona, a small rural community in central New York State. Part of the Sherrill City School District, it is one of five schools in the district and the only middle school. A staff of thirty-two teachers and four other professionals provide academic and emotional support to about 400 students in grades seven and eight.

Ninety-seven per cent of the students are white; 35% are eligible for free or reduced lunch. While under 20% of the adults in the district have earned a Bachelor's Degree or higher, district personnel note with pride that in 2006, 86% of their graduates attended a two-year or four-year college.

The school also boasts a higher-than-average success rate on the state's assessments, with 73% meeting the state's standards on the Grade 8 English Language Arts test and 79% meeting the standards on the Grade 8 math test in 2007.

Called "one of the area's best-kept secrets" by the principal, V-V-S enjoys strong community support. According to the superintendent, a nine-year veteran in that position, the district's voter results reflect an approval rating that has steadily increased from 49% in 1999 to 80% in 2007. Of particular significance is that about 77% of residents do not have children who attend school in the district, so "this is a strong statement from the community." Reflecting on some likely reasons for community satisfaction, the superintendent cites the district's efforts to "make good choices" and to balance educational priorities with the community's capacity to support those priorities. "One without the other becomes very lopsided and dysfunctional very quickly," he warns.

The superintendent also credits the board of education for its role in maintaining equilibrium between providing for educational needs and honoring the community's ability to pay for them. "They see themselves as a board of education, not necessarily as a board of taxation," he says, adding that, "We have well-defined roles. They represent the will of the community; I need to follow that will." He expresses a similar dependence on the teachers' association, saying, "Everything we do involves coordinating with the association" and "I need them; they bring out things I haven't thought of."

According to its Mission Statement, the district's goal is to "educate and prepare every child to be successful in life." The assistant superintendent, in highlighting the seriousness of that work, asserts that, "It should matter that the students were with us. We should make a difference." Interviews with district and school personnel provide an abundance of evidence for their many efforts to make a difference in students' lives.

Student Demographics 2005-06: *Vernon-Verona-Sherrill Middle School, Sherrill City School District¹*

	Vernon-Verona-Sherrill MS	Sherrill City SD	New York State
% Eligible for Free Lunch	25%	19%	37%
% Eligible for Reduced Lunch	10%	11%	8%
% Limited English Proficient	0%	0%	N/A
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution			
% African-American	1%	1%	20%
% Hispanic/Latino	0%	0%	20%
% White	97%	97%	53%
% Other	2%	2%	7%
% Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards on Gr. 8 ELA Test	58%	58%	49%
% Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards on Gr. 8 Math Test	79%	78%	54%
K-12, Total Enrollment	387	2266	2,772,669

Best Practices Highlights

V-V-S Middle School is characterized by:

- A nurturing and collaborative environment
- A clear and focused mission
- A forward-thinking and proactive stance

A Nurturing and Collaborative Environment

It is the culture of the school that makes the biggest difference.

It's a great place to be...a happy place...a productive place...a successful place.

We want to create enough niches to connect with students and parents in many different ways.

You have to have fun. You need to enjoy the youngsters and they [need] to enjoy you.

V-V-S Middle School has been a “work in progress for 25 years” and during that time has grown from being what some called a “muddle school” to a place that “no one wants to leave.” According to the superintendent, the transformation began when an “action research team” of administrators, teachers, parents, and students began to look closely at ways to address the academic and emotional needs of young adolescents. Over time, a program has emerged that focuses on helping students to pursue a coordinated academic program, forge connections with their teachers and each other, and have access to a network of supportive services. Teachers believe that “a lot of what we are doing is very productive for students,” and “There’s a lot of compassion here.”

Undergirding those efforts is the belief that “learning is social before it is cognitive.” Social and emotional development is nurtured through the school’s organization into grade-level teams and a wide range of curricular and extracurricular group activities that provide, according to one teacher, “a lot of places for kids to feel they belong.” In addition, the “long-term contact model” (known elsewhere as “looping”) enables teachers to develop and maintain a relationship with those children during their two years in the school. Says one administrator, “It is important to engage students as individuals and to use that relationship to help them as learners.”

Teachers credit their principal with setting the “friendly” and “supportive” tone in the building and with generating a “feeling of involvement and pride and ownership.” In turn, the principal celebrates the dedication and hard work of his faculty, who “continually reach out and look for support among ourselves and with others and go the extra mile in a tough situation with a kid struggling.” He evokes the image of his own close-knit family to describe his vision for the school, adding that it is important that he be “a person first and a principal second.”

Contributing to the nurturing environment is the ready access to a variety of services, enabling staff to “take care of business in a quick and expedient fashion.” The Committee on Special Education, School Partnership for Youth, county social services, school psychologist, and district staff all have offices in the building. In addition, the school has its own guidance counselor and recently fulfilled its long-awaited goal of hiring its own social worker. “One of the nice things about this place,” says the latter, “is that it focuses strongly on the fact that kids have an outside life, which they cannot leave behind when they come to school.” When that life presents barriers to learning, the social worker steps in to provide individual or group counseling, assist teachers, work with families, or enlist the help of another social agency. Noting that her role is to provide mental health services in the building, she adds that much of her work is designed to help kids feel connected to school and to other people.

Asked to identify positive practices in the school, many teachers put collaboration at the top of the list. They applaud the opportunities they have to communicate with their peers: as members of a teaching team, within disciplines, and across grades and buildings. A science teacher stresses the significance of these opportunities for doing their jobs: “Communication and collaboration, working together, knowing what others are doing and what you can do to support that – that’s crucial in knowing students and how they learn.” Accompanying this advice is a clear attitude of respect and collegiality. In discussing the importance of working together, an experienced math teacher advises, “Share what you know. Don’t be selfish or competitive.” An English teacher indicates it is important to “respect the teachers in the grades below. They ARE teaching.” And a new teacher highlights the importance of patience in the face of change: “Be open-minded and try to contribute in any way you can to help the transition be successful.”

Administrators and teachers are quick to note the benefits of a nurturing environment. A social studies teacher, echoing others, says, “When you have set that culture and have clear expectations in terms of behavior and academic success, students generally meet those expectations.” A math teacher refers to increases in test scores and low staff turnover as signs of success. In addition, she says, “Our building generally has the highest attendance rate in the district, so kids must like coming here.”

A Clear and Focused Mission

Have a vision of where you want to be and go, and have a plan to get there.

Get your plan and work at the plan. The results will speak for themselves.

Our philosophy is to get all kids to the point where they can succeed.

It's not just about the tests, but about how well-rounded our children are, how comfortable they are.

According to the school superintendent, it is not enough to set a goal; it is necessary to “develop a plan to move that goal to reality.” In this district, the process begins with extensive discussion with the board of education around three questions: “What do we say we value? What do we show we value? How do we allocate our resources?” Applauding the planning process, the assistant superintendent notes that, “the practice of collaboration and agreement” that occurs along the way “allows you to do a lot of good things.” Eventually, the process grows to include “the work of about 400 people,” says the superintendent. Asked for suggestions he would give to other schools, he advises them to ensure shared responsibility by putting “your arms around as big a group as possible.”

At V-V-S, the middle school team works to align board and district goals with those of the building and the teachers. According to the principal: “We really set ourselves a vision to have student success,” adding that, “We set that vision and then work to make it happen.” Similarly, a math teacher indicates, “Our main focus is getting students through school successfully.” The media specialist concurs, saying, “Our main focus is making sure that every student is given the same opportunity to achieve success.” Asked to define success, respondents are clear that the definition goes beyond test scores. A social studies teacher points to “social and emotional growth, the ability to work in a group, be a member of a team, and be a good citizen.” A special education teacher states her students will be successful if they are “emotionally happy, safe, secure, and have a well-rounded experience here – academically, socially, and emotionally.”

It is apparent that achieving success for every child at V-V-S requires looking beyond the school to the alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment; coordination among disciplines; and articulation across grades. Facilitating this process is the assistant superintendent for instruction, who sees her role as one of making and strengthening connections: between student needs and instruction, areas of the curriculum, regular and special education programming, needs and resources. “Part of my job,” she says, “is to listen carefully to teachers, clarify what it is I think I’m hearing so I can support it, and provide what they need – encouragement, data, professional development, or whatever.” In addition, she feels it is important to challenge the staff to ensure that they prepare students for the next level of education, to “move kids on to the high school with a certain set of skills and dispositions, where it is high stakes.”

Whenever necessary, resources are mobilized and focused to enable what school leaders call “persistent and pervasive” practice. Invoking the image of a child who is constantly moved from one home to another, one administrator argues that however good those homes are, without some consistency the results can be ineffective and confusing. “The more we can be persistent and pervasive in our practices, the better. If we can find something that is good and can grow it and use it across the district, the kids benefit from that.”

A Forward-Thinking and Proactive Stance

My job is to be thinking 3-5 years out.

We take care of everything immediately.

We're proactive about student success.

There is a lot of planning for the future at the district level and at V-V-S Middle School. It is apparent from the district's practice of soliciting input from graduates, parents, business people, and college deans. It is seen in the superintendent's enthusiasm for the planning process, which ensures having systems in place so that "we are not running hither and yon putting out brush fires." It is evident in his concern for the "gray-haired leadership" and the lack of incentives for young talented educators to move into administrative positions. And it is clear from his description of the district's efforts as "a continuity of initiatives," with some work in the planning stages, some growing, some yielding positive results, and some needing enlivenment.

"Succession planning" helps to address the need for new school leadership. In an intentional move for the gradual replacement of retiring staff while maintaining momentum, the district uses a creative hiring plan. About one third of new teachers are veterans from other places, one third have chosen teaching as a second career, and one third are new to teaching. Experience is also a criterion when assigning teachers to teams. "We try to help new teachers become master teachers while enacting change," says the assistant superintendent. In addition, teachers who demonstrate leadership in their classrooms are invited to apply their skills in other settings, at the school or district level.

At V-V-S Middle School, planning for students' transition to and from the school is a prime example of their proactive stance. Recognizing that students have only two years to "see themselves as middle school students," school leaders arrange for spring visits to the three elementary schools by the principal, social worker, and guidance counselor. In addition, sixth graders and their parents tour the middle school and meet the teachers. When school opens in the fall, a school-wide field trip, a ropes course, and community-service activities help to "blend the social with the academic" and enable kids "to get to know each other." To ease the transition from eighth to ninth grade, high school guidance counselors meet with eighth graders to explain course offerings and assist with scheduling, and the school hosts an open house for students and their parents.

In both situations, teachers and professional staff share any information that will help administrators and teachers to anticipate difficulties and best meet the needs of in-coming students, including those struggling academically, those with home issues, high achievers, and potential leaders. Here, too, the focus is on building relationships: with a counselor, a teacher mentor or student tutor, a sports team, a musical group, or community volunteers. "We are lucky that we are a small district so we can do these things," says the school counselor. "The better we can find a connection and continue it, the better chance we have to keep students in school."

A Closer Look

The characteristics described above – a nurturing and collaborative environment, a clear and focused mission, and a forward-thinking and proactive stance – 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

I don’t care how old you are, you can always grow and learn more about curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

There’s so much that kids need to learn and know, it’s important to prioritize.

District and school leaders often convey their priorities to audiences with a graphic aid that displays three intersecting circles within a larger outside circle. The inner figures represent curriculum, instruction, and assessment; the outer ones represent personal and emotional safety and well-being, the “buffer of protection that allows parents and students to focus on learning.” This framework forms the basis for the curriculum and academic goals that are generated first by the board of education and ultimately are re-interpreted as school and teacher goals at V-V-S. Drawing on business management literature, the process calls for goals to be specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and timely (SMART), and it includes a very specific plan of action for attaining them.

All teachers acknowledge their reliance on the state standards for their discipline, which the assistant superintendent describes as “not bad,” but “We just have to make sure that all the kids get there.” One concern, however, is the “incredible amount of material” to be addressed, leaving less time, according to one teacher, for students to discover ideas for themselves.

It was this concern for coverage that led to the development of the “50-30-20 curriculum.” For each of the four core subjects, teacher teams from grades five through eight – under the leadership of the assistant superintendent of instruction – have analyzed the state’s syllabi and assessments to identify the 50% of the procedural and declarative knowledge that “everyone must know,” the 30% “most students need to know,” and the 20% that “advanced students should know.” The results are used to focus and differentiate instruction, with the 50% material seen as “the most essential learning” for special education students. Teachers can access the curriculum, along with newly developed quarterly assessments and other related materials, from electronic folders on the district’s web site.

Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building

I think they’ve done a great job staffing this middle school.

I love teaming. I would never go back to teaching without it.

Committees here are a huge thing.

We work really hard on relationships We’re a very professional group.

We have a lot of input as to what happens. We are empowered.

According to the principal and his staff, hiring at V-V-S is all about finding someone who fits the school culture, who “cares about kids” and who is comfortable with “the V-V-S model of student learning.” Says one of the newest staff members, “The concern in hiring is: Can you stick to a tough decision but also recognize when a kid really needs help and show compassion and get that help?” But while building personnel affirm the importance of matching a candidate to their school, the superintendent, in anticipation of potential transfers, cautions that he only hires teachers who have the approval of all three elementary principals.

Once hired, new teachers participate in a three-day orientation. That event, according to one teacher, includes a bus tour of the district and, according to another, “has all the basic information you need to be ready for your first day.” For the first year, each new teacher works with an experienced mentor, a “nice person to be able to go to with questions” and who “can help the new teacher navigate the curriculum.” In addition, the novices meet monthly as a group, and they are encouraged to join committees “and get involved in areas that help them to be successful.” Teachers also maintain that the principal, assistant superintendent, and superintendent are also “very accessible.”

Professional development is described as “intensive” and “generous.” The district offers quarterly Superintendent’s Conference Days, organized by the district’s professional development committee. The assistant superintendent facilitates this group, which includes teacher representatives from each of the five buildings. “We have maybe three reps from this building,” notes a science teacher. “They really try to include as many people as possible.” Attendance at outside conferences is encouraged, “as long as it supports the curriculum,” and attendees are expected to “come back and share their experience.”

For most teachers, however, the main stimulus to professional growth is the complex web of opportunities for communication within the school and across the district and region. Teachers from the four core curriculum areas plus a special education teacher work together as either a seventh- or eighth-grade team. Teachers of technology, home and careers, music, art, and library media comprise the Unified Arts team. Each of these teams meets daily – to “brainstorm ideas to help a student,” meet with a parent, shape curriculum, or plan a lesson or field trip. In addition, seventh- and eighth-grade teachers from the same discipline share planning periods – “so we can be consistent,” says a science teacher.

Each team also meets every other week as a Student Support Group (SSG), with the addition of the school psychologist, social worker, guidance counselor, and nurse to discuss high-risk students. “With the teaming concept, I can depend on my colleagues for help,” says one teacher. Another states, “It’s hard for a student teacher to go elsewhere after being here... because of the teams.”

Teachers also applaud the positive effects of their “congruency meetings.” Released from class one day each year, teachers in grades five through eight from the same discipline meet “to share goals and practices,” according to a special education teacher who is grateful for her involvement. “Special ed is involved in each of those teams and decisions so we know what [classroom] teachers feel is most important.” According to one teacher, the achievement of

incoming students has improved since these meetings began. Other teachers report more respectful conversations, familiarity with a broader range of content, and a greater investment in assessment results. Development of the “50-30-20 curriculum” began with these meetings.

For math teachers, their grade 7-8 regional meetings provide “a very comfortable learning experience.” Initiated by the principal several years ago, the group has grown to include math teachers from nine area schools who meet twice a year to “look at data or problems or share teaching strategies or resources.” For this group, the “50-30-20 curriculum” in math became a regional project. According to one teacher, “Having nine schools gives us clout.” Another says, “We feel it’s the most valuable day we ever do.”

Where congruency meetings help to coordinate the elementary and middle school programs in the district, monthly department meetings in each discipline enable articulation between the middle school and high school. These meetings are led by the Teacher Leaders, who serve as instructional leaders in their discipline for grades pre-K through 12 and provide resources for their departments.

An English teacher echoes the feelings of her colleagues when she says, “Communication is huge” in the district, and “The administration is supportive of everything teachers are doing to better their skills.” As evidence of her statement, she reports that when the results of last year’s state language arts test were disappointing, “Rather than reprimanding or finger pointing, the assistant superintendent asked what more the administration could do to help us be more successful.... As a result, we have some new materials, and we worked more on prioritizing and focusing.” A science teacher, as well, praises the administration for soliciting teacher input. “We are given the power to produce what we think is good for kids,” she says. “I think that’s important.”

Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements

We use every moment throughout the day for instructional time.

We service the whole child and do it well through the teaming that we have.

I use differentiated instruction as much as I can.

Repetition, practice, consistency are the three key factors in getting students to be successful.

We want [students] to be prepared and on an even playing field when they reach ninth grade.

Asked to describe high quality teaching, the superintendent refers to both the art and science required to do it well. “The art is recognizing a teachable moment and drawing from kids a deeper understanding,” he says. “The science part is powerful; it means using instructional strategies that help kids make sense of, and bring meaning to, their learning.” There is always a tension between the two, he adds. “Sometimes we need to focus on the art, sometimes on the science.”

The assistant superintendent looks especially for the *effects* of teaching. “High quality teaching results in high levels of learning,” she says. She encourages teachers to consider those effects by asking what they expect students to learn from a lesson or unit, how they will know if learning happens, and how they will take students “from where they are to where you want them to be?” “When I observe a classroom,” she says, “I watch the kids. I want to see how they are responding.”

The long-term contact model (the practice of assigning groups of students to the same teacher teams for both middle school years) provides a structure for engaging students as fully as possible. Teachers cite the positive impact of the extended time with youngsters, pointing to the advantages of knowing them better, “so we can build on strengths, ameliorate weaknesses, and deal with outside factors” and of knowing what they had been taught so, according to a social studies teacher, “we can hit the ground running in grade eight.”

Within the model, classes rotate weekly so “we don’t see the same kids at the same time every day.” In addition, students are with their team during two or three back-to-back periods during the day so teachers can alter the length of periods within the block, enabling them to, for example, work together on interdisciplinary projects or show a video once to all students on a team. “When we first started rotations,” says one teacher, “the only ones who were confused were the parents and teachers!” Now they worry that, despite their benefits, next year’s anticipated reduction in the number of teams may mean the need to share faculty with the high school and the loss of rotations.

The team structure at V-V-S makes interdisciplinary communication a simple matter. The adoption of a new K-12 writing and comprehension program became a shared responsibility when each department chose the mode of writing on which they would focus instruction: for example, descriptive writing in art, the process essay in math, comparison and contrast in science. According to the technology teacher, discussions with English teachers about how to use writing in content area classrooms are ongoing, supplemented by “the binders they put together for us with examples and rubrics – a great resource.” He adds, “If I had any questions, I would just go and ask one of the English teachers.”

The technology teacher also consults with his math and science colleagues “to incorporate what students are learning in those subjects” to address real-life issues, such as bridge design or career choice. The library media specialist speaks of working with the social studies teacher on a World War II museum and with the English teachers on research skills and use of online resources. A science teacher is grateful for the opportunity to co-teach with a special education teacher. To align what they are doing with classroom instruction, special education teachers use “Week at a Glance” forms to record topics and homework assignments in each content area. They draw on this information in the resource room so that “students are more successful and have background information when they go to the class.”

Except for Honors English, there is no “tracking” at V-V-S. Rather, the “50-30-20 plan” helps to address the range in achievement levels, and a “pervasive” focus on repetition, modeling, and practice helps to ensure success for every child. The school’s homework policy is a case in point. When given homework, students are encouraged to begin it in school (where they can get help from the teacher) and later to correct it and make changes before handing it in. In addition, cross-grade consistency in the use of graphic organizers, vocabulary study, and a common notebook

for recording homework aim to establish a “safe and comfortable environment” in which all students have an equal opportunity to learn.

Monitoring; Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data

[The state assessment system] has given us a good reason for making sure we are consistent, and it has helped us focus.

We need to know what the issue is to focus on the right thing.

We try to get the best picture of sixth graders that we can without meeting them all face to face.

Data analysis begins at the board level, with the use of multiple indicators to assess progress and determine success. In addition to looking at traditional sources of information such as test scores and attendance and graduation rates, the district also invites students back after a semester or two at college and asks them what was most and least helpful to the transition. The adoption of the new writing program grew out of this inquiry after returning graduates indicated a need for technical writing skills.

At V-V-S, according to the assistant superintendent, teachers set specific targets for their students based on their analysis of student responses and scoring patterns from the state assessments. She acknowledges “students come into school with all kinds of background and challenges,” but cautions that those “should not be used as excuses, but to help us... help kids.”

Teachers indicate they draw on available data whenever decisions are made: about students coming from elementary school or moving to high school, interventions, textbook selection, professional development needs, or curriculum revision. According to the assistant superintendent, part of her role is to “provide any information teachers can use. For example, when working on the prioritized curriculum, I would be sure they had student achievement data needed or the opportunity to review best practices.”

The principal highlights the use of both formal and informal sources of information in evaluating teachers: classroom visits, student work, benchmark assessments. “We take that stuff very seriously,” he says.

Asked for suggestions for ways to reform other schools, a math teacher honors the school’s decision-making routines when she advises, “Look at the data, including those from other schools, and ask why results are weak. That’s where to put your best instructional practices.” Similarly, the assistant superintendent conveys the potential of thoughtful use of data when describing the district’s new data management program. “It provides easy, quick information that can help you change what you are doing or go back and look deeper.”

Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustments

Fair may not mean equal. Youngsters get what they need.

Teachers make a real effort to change instruction to meet student needs.

I think we work very hard to provide AIS and special education.

School personnel attend to the personal and academic needs of their charges in a wide variety of ways. According to a social studies teacher, “We try to look at the whole child,” to consider their family situation and accept them where they are, but to “move them forward as quickly and as developmentally appropriate as possible.” Approaches vary but may include keeping a log of students at risk, family conferencing, arranging for AIS (Academic Intervention Services) or after-school help, or developing an intervention plan with the Student Support Group. A social studies teacher mentions one such plan in which each team member makes a point of providing “special coaching” for targeted students. “It’s a preemptive strike,” she explains. “The teacher with some rapport with particular students takes those kids to coach,” adding that, “We also check faces in the morning, trying to ward off trouble.”

The school social worker and guidance counselor serve as “a nice bridge for everybody,” according to the latter. In addition to providing individual counseling, attending team meetings, and facilitating parent contact, they teach lessons to seventh and eighth graders about being productive and respectful members of a team. “That’s a great way to know all the kids, and not just the ones who show up in my office,” says the guidance counselor.

Three special education teachers work with four teams, in an inclusion environment with the classroom teacher or in a resource room. Inclusion students also receive an extra period of reading or math, a practice one math teacher sees as “most successful.” Because she pre-teaches vocabulary or concepts, “kids feel confident about entering math class...It has totally changed their perception of themselves and math,” she says.

The school celebrates student success with various awards, including a student of the month, homework certificates for academic honors, and a Junior National Honor Society. Teacher recognition comes in the form of opportunities to participate in school decisions and assume leadership positions, and the principal affirms the significance of their role. “This faculty, with the things we have done, is performing at a great level. We don’t say thank you enough.”

In a Nutshell

According to one teacher at V-V-S, their success is “all about the team.” Conversations with other district and school personnel echo this theme as they applaud the teamwork between the district and the community, district leaders and the schools, the principal and his staff, teachers and their colleagues, and teachers and their students. The result, according to the principal, is “a true middle school... with a clearly established mission, shared responsibility, and a strong student advocate approach.” Those results, he adds, require “a commitment to never being satisfied, always knowing you can do a little bit better.”

Vernon-Verona-Sherrill Middle School
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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 July, 2007.