

Linda Baker, Spring 2007

West Middle School *Binghamton City School District*

School Context

A picturesque setting at the juncture of the Susquehanna and Chenango rivers provides a unique blend of sloping rural landscapes and bustling city culture surrounding the Binghamton City Schools. Once known as a premier location pioneering business technology, Binghamton is now home to a SUNY university, a new center for technological innovation, art galleries, and a film festival, and remains the “Carousel Capital of the World.” With just under 50,000 residents, the City of Binghamton has experienced declining population in recent decades. Just over six thousand students attend Binghamton public schools—seven elementary schools, two middle schools, and a high school.

The student population of Binghamton City School District has more poverty than students in New York State overall, with 66% of students in the city school district eligible for free or reduced-price lunches in 2005-6. Binghamton has a larger percentage of African-American students than New York State overall, but a smaller percentage of Hispanics and Latinos. Four percent of district students have limited English proficiency.

West Middle School has 57% of students eligible for free or reduced lunch but has somewhat less racial and ethnic diversity than either the district in general or the state overall. No students with limited English proficiency attend West Middle School, since all English Language Learners of middle school age are taught at East Middle School.

Student Demographics 2005-2006: *West Middle School, Binghamton City School District*ⁱⁱ

	West MS	Binghamton City SD	New York State
% Eligible for Free Lunch	48%	55%	37%
% Eligible for Reduced Lunch	9%	11%	8%
% Limited English Proficient	0%	4%	N/A
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution			
% African-American	19%	23%	20%
% Hispanic/Latino	5%	7%	20%
% White	72%	66%	53%
% Other	3%	4%	7%
% Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards on Gr. 8 ELA Test	58%	47%	49%
% Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards on Gr. 8 Math Test	54%	54%	54%
K-12, Total Enrollment	790	6235	2,772,669

Once the Junior High School for the city's more affluent neighborhoods, West Middle School has seen increasing levels of poverty and diversity in recent years. However, unlike some other New York cities, Binghamton has not experienced significant numbers of students attending private or religious schools rather than public schools.

West Middle School's New York State School Report Card shows levels of student achievement that equal (mathematics) or exceed (ELA) those of the Binghamton City School District and New York overall. In 2006, 58% of West Middle students met or exceeded state standards on the Grade 8 English Language Arts assessment, compared to 47% in the city schools overall, and 49% statewide. In the same year, 54% of students met or exceeded state standards on the Grade 8 mathematics assessment.

"Providing a Rich Environment for Quality Learning" headlines the district's web site. This site also proclaims that "A community's greatest assets are its children," emphasizes the philosophy that all children can learn, and provides Guiding Principles for the school district in its "quest for continuous improvement."

Best Practice Highlights

We're a very welcoming school.

The success at West Middle School is built upon a combination of affective and academic best practices characterized by interwoven aspects of:

- Emphasis on building positive relationships
- Agency and collaborative planning
- An ethos of hard work and determination

Emphasis on Building Positive Relationships

What we do well is the relationships between teachers and students and from teacher to teacher. ... The whole school is one big family team. Kids see that team spirit and know that we have that kind of relationship with them also.

Our priority is being here for the kids, making sure to give them what they need. They can rely on us and know we're here for them.

There's a paradigm shift: the student is the focus—not the curriculum, not the instruction.

It's like friends and colleagues all at once. I thought maybe I'd like to go to the high school, but I can't leave these people here.

As a school, our collegiality is so important, all getting along, all on the same page, working together and with the students.

My building is a tight, tight group. ... Everyone in the building likes to be around each other.

The people at West Middle School see teaching and learning as a process of building relationships—between faculty members and students, among colleagues, between mentors and new staff, with parents and community. As one teacher put it, “It starts off by how our administrators make us feel we’re doing a good job. Then we relay that sense back to the kids.”

Since the student population has changed, “we need to do some things differently,” teachers emphasize. “We have students who need extra care. We show them ways to be successful, being role models. We do a lot to show them that we are interested in them, to give them that motivation.” Although it is becoming “more difficult to really get the parents on board,” school personnel try to reach out to the parents as much as possible and also try to bring in the community to help support students. In trying to meet the needs of all students in such a diverse population, “we have developed a real cultural competency,” the district superintendent states.

Teachers attribute both the success and the longevity of staff members to “working together as teams:” “I love the people I work with.” “The people in this building are here for the same purpose: they want what’s best for kids.” “There is no age discrimination or racial discrimination amongst teachers. It’s fun. Everybody’s invited to everything.” “You can’t ask for a better working environment. It’s such a great team.” “I keep waiting to see a sit com called West Middle. It’s such fun to be here. ... We meet every day at least once to talk about kids, lessons, who’s giving a test, etc.”

The positive relationships and collegiality carry over to many aspects of the school’s best practices. The superintendent emphasizes an excellent relationship with the teachers’ union, for example, pointing out that everyone has worked to develop trust so that “when we face the issues, we can work more as collaborators.”

Agency and Collaborative Planning

You transform through people’s input and involvement.

The Strategic Plan drives everything.

Even if we don’t all agree, what we are arguing over is what the best thing for kids is.

Teamwork is one of the biggest strengths of the school.

As West Middle School’s principal explains, “We try to identify problems and solve problems together. ‘Here’s a problem,’ I say. ‘I don’t have the answer. Let’s sit down and talk it over.’ From the very first faculty meeting, every decision we make is in the best interest of kids. ... We try to get ownership of all stakeholders. More and more teachers are involved in committees. The first day of school I introduced three or four major goals and challenged the faculty to get involved.”

Active, collaborative decision-making groups work for continuous school improvement. The district strategic team includes students, parents, higher education representatives, community members, custodial and clerical staff, teachers, and administrators. The district superintendent sets the tone for collaborative improvement: “It’s got to be full involvement. You can’t go in and say this is what we’re going to do. ... For it to work, it has to be participatory.”

Teachers and administrators also credit the assistant superintendent and school principal with “doing an excellent job” of engaging everyone so that groups and individuals feel empowered to make positive change.

Strategic planning determines all change initiatives, including resource allocation and professional development, notes the assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction. “We’ve always used strategic planning. Now we’re moving into strategic management,” she adds. “We’re trying to get it to the point where it’s not just on the shelf. People need to be involved.” Instead of revising the overall plan every year, stakeholders now work toward fulfilling the steps in the action plans.

All stakeholders, including students, have a voice in planning and implementing improvements. The Board of Education and district leadership see strategic planning as essential for continuous improvement, according to the district superintendent. Teachers stress the importance and value of being actively and collaboratively engaged in improving curriculum, discipline, attendance, and scheduling.

An Ethos of Hard Work and Determination

Success here means getting done what you have to get done and enjoying it while you do it, making sure kids are enjoying themselves.

Binghamton is the frontrunner. ... It’s the kind of district I wanted to work in.

We want to make students successful where they are.

Showing them they can do it no matter what. Don’t stress the disability.

Success is personal success and improvement. ... We try hard to help students see themselves as having the potential to be successful.

We push them hard. We have to. In life, it’s not so easy.

Attributing a large part of the school’s success to the hard work and extra effort of many people, educators at West Middle School have a shared ethos of valuing academic diligence. They have high expectations for themselves and others, and are determined to succeed. “The priority is to help each kid find [his or her] own success.”

“Kids and teachers come in early and stay late. Everyone is very engaged. Our success lies in the fact that we work very hard to meet kids’ needs,” reports the principal. Teachers describe a wide variety of initiatives to give additional help to students, including both formal programs and informal scaffolding experiences. Teachers participate actively in professional development, both formally and informally. Curriculum building and collaborative planning focus on meeting the needs of all students.

For many teachers, the biggest challenge is finding ways to motivate students, “showing all students that education is a part of future success.” Part of the motivational development comes from teachers working to make classes fun, engaging, and relevant. Faculty members also

provide support and inspiration to groups of students through programs such as Club Ophelia, Diversity Café, Sister to Sister, Brother to Brother, and Science Olympia. Another important component is working individually with students in programs like Starfish: Each paper Starfish on the guidance conference room board represents a student who needs extra attention; faculty members come in and pick one or two that they will focus on. “It helps tremendously,” reports a teacher.

Success is built on a school-wide ethos of effort, on educators who give the extra time and attention, and on “students being ready and able, and trying their hardest.”

A Closer Look

The culture developed through these connected factors—the emphasis on building positive relationships, agency and collaborative planning, and an ethos of hard work and determination—produces “best practices” that extend throughout the dimensions of the larger study of which this case is a part. After a brief description of supporting factors, the following sections expand on these effective practices.

Supporting Factors

“A busy, energetic, caring school with a lot of issues” is the way West Middle School’s principal describes the culture. “But we’re up front about them [the issues], and we don’t try to hide anything,” he goes on to say. This openness and frankness about problems—and the attitude of working together to face and solve the problems—are among the strengths of West Middle School.

“Diversity is both the challenge and the success,” as one teacher puts it. Faculty members realize that students may have “completely different schema” since they come from widely varied environments, socioeconomic circumstances, and educational backgrounds. “The child dropped off in the Mercedes,” the principal notes, “is in the same classroom as the student who doesn’t know if food will be on the table.” “We are very diverse and isolated within the cultures,” says another teacher, who stresses efforts to help students learn about each other’s cultures and develop their own sense of belonging to the wider school community.

“In terms of achievement, the main challenge is not about ethnicity; it’s about poverty,” the superintendent states. The impact of poverty extends to all aspects of student life. Teachers see particular connections between poverty and academically disadvantaged home environments, noting, for example, that some students enter middle school reading at a first grade level. “We have such a diverse population,” said one teacher, that “it’s a challenge to bring up the low ones while still challenging the upper level kids.”

Developing a sense of belonging and an awareness of personal agency, despite (or perhaps because of) the variety in individual experience, is part of the philosophy throughout the district. The idea that everyone has a voice begins with the superintendent, who stresses the importance of facilitating: “We need to guide and coach. ... I don’t care how good an idea you have, you can’t force it on somebody.” “I want everybody to voice concerns,” the principal emphasizes. Teachers credit administrators with listening to and supporting their ideas. A sense of shared “ownership” and shared responsibility permeates West Middle School.

The district has a long history of Shared Decision Making, dating back to the Effective Schools era, but “now people feel some empowerment,” asserts the principal. “We used to call SDM the Some Day Maybe because we didn’t have much hope and nobody wanted to be on [the team]. If possible, I want everybody to be involved. I see it as an action group. When we sit down, I’m just one member of the group. ... If we get critical mass in any one decision, I’m OK with going in that direction.” As the superintendent explains, “It’s hard to get to the tipping point where you have critical mass moving in the right direction,” but West Middle School feels a sense of pride in its consensus decision-making and collaborative agency.

“You can’t ask for a better working environment,” one teacher declares. “It’s such a great team. It’s a new adventure every day. ... It’s a really special working environment.”

Curriculum and Academic Goals

Annual academic goals at West Middle School are set in the fall by the Shared Decision Making team representing teachers, teaching assistants, administrators, and parents, with a consultant serving as facilitator. As the superintendent explains, “the big goal is to close the academic achievement gap.”

Data-driven decisions set specific goals for students who are not succeeding as desired. Academic goals at West Middle School mean student achievement as defined by individual growth, “not necessarily as defined by NCLB or state standards,” the superintendent points out. “The priority is to increase the performance of every student and subgroup. ... It’s not about the standard. It’s about higher expectations,” the assistant superintendent adds. Teams look specifically at the data performance index and test scores, analyzing and breaking down the components, but they also look at the successes, seeking to identify “best practices within our own school” and extend those practices.

West Middle School was once among several Binghamton schools on the state’s SINI list—Schools In Need of Improvement. “We focused so much on the wrong kind of data—how do we get out of SINI. It ends up being a numbers game,” laments the assistant superintendent. In a middle school student focus group, she reports, “One of the main things kids say is, ‘No one ever talks to me about my own score on the test.’ They hear about the school, etc., not about their own test scores. ‘Could we just have water when we take the test?’ they said. ‘We would just like to go to the bathroom.’ There [are] the hidden messages. We’re sending a message that we do what we do just so kids will do well on scores. There’s so much pressure on schools that have gone through this. ... I love the data. It helps us to make better decisions. But I find it hard to be on lists. It’s destructive to what we’re trying to achieve. Saying a school that doesn’t do well on a math test is a bad school is like saying a student who doesn’t do well is a bad student.”

High expectations for all students are an important part of West Middle School’s academic culture, not so much because of state standards but because of the desire to help each child succeed. More than one faculty member talked of “raising the bar” for everyone. “Kids can do more than we give them credit for. If you don’t ask for much, they are not going to give you much.”

“Raising the bar” at West Middle School includes becoming part of multi-national school initiatives such as the Middle Years and the International Baccalaureate programs. Teacher groups visited Savannah (GA) and Toronto this year to study implementation of the Middle Years Program. “By the end of next year, we should be in a good position to be authorized to be an MYP.” The International Baccalaureate program will be extended from the high school, a full IB school. The principal explains that joining such initiatives cannot be a “top down” decision. “I talked with key movers and shakers in the building. I asked what we should do, and from there we put it to a vote. Of the 80 or so people who voted on IB, about 70 wanted it.”

It seems especially appropriate for West Middle School to join the high school in the IB program since part of the middle school’s mission is “to prepare kids to have success in high school, to help them to value education.” “Every child is an individual,” the principal notes, but the goal is high school graduation for everybody. Realizing that not everyone will reach the graduation goal, West Middle School nevertheless helps each child to find “success, defined by the child’s growth and learning.”

Although it has been on the state’s SINI list, Binghamton’s high school takes pride in being one of a select group of schools worldwide to offer a full International Baccalaureate diploma program. In June 2003 BHS was ranked in the top 4% of U.S. high schools for its high quality IB/AP program and was included in the Challenge Index Directory of Best Performing International Baccalaureate/Advanced Placement high schools, as published in *Newsweek* magazine. The superintendent finds irony in the fact that the same year that the high school was in the middle of a mandated restructuring plan (because of low scores for special education students), it was named to *Newsweek*’s 100 best high schools in the United States.

Educators in the Binghamton district all agree that the NCLB standards have had a significant impact, and teachers report that state tests have helped to shape the priorities. “All of us are expected to include as much reading and math instruction as we can even though that’s not what we teach.” District curricula, designed collaboratively by teachers, align the academic program with state standards. Binghamton uses a commercial technology product to accomplish the initial alignment and then works to define the core concepts and skills at each grade level, to “chunk it down to see what’s important,” and to determine differentiation, according to the assistant superintendent. A teacher explains that he and his colleagues use state guidelines, the core curriculum for grades 6 through 8, district curriculum maps, and various web sites to guide instruction. The district’s on-line curricula are in the process of revision.

Carefully chosen initiatives support academic planning and changes. The district offers summer workshops and superintendent’s conference days for development of curriculum and supporting activities. Teachers credit the SDM team with leadership in developing cohesive academic intervention. Teams are in the process of developing curriculum guidebooks. Teachers stress the focus on literacy and use of the pedagogy of Teaching for Understanding, a Harvard-based program to enhance reading and performance skills across subject areas. “We’re still testing what’s really working,” the superintendent explains. “We’re always revising,” teachers indicate.

Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building

Binghamton schools have had particularly effective leadership in recent years, in the view of several educators. The district's superintendent and assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction use a facilitative style of leadership that supports teachers and principals in making school improvements. West Middle School's principal and teachers feel that they have a balance of site-based autonomy and district-wide support. Teachers and administrators report that everyone works together to enhance student learning.

Although the district superintendent was brought in from California, many of the educational leaders have deep roots in the community. The assistant superintendent was a kindergarten teacher in Binghamton and eventually director of personnel before assuming her role overseeing curriculum and instruction. Several other educators attended Binghamton schools or began their teaching careers there.

Also particularly aware of school and community changes is West Middle School's principal, who is following in the footsteps of his parents, a school principal (his father) and an elementary teacher (his mother). A graduate of Binghamton schools, he "never thought of going anywhere but here" for his career. His first job was as a recreation attendant at the high school pool. After serving as a teaching assistant running the in-school suspension program at the high school while pursuing his degree, he taught high school Social Studies for seven years before becoming assistant principal at East Middle School and then principal of West Middle School. Now in his second year at West Middle School, he receives rave reviews from teachers and district administrators: "[He's] wonderful." "Our principal's very supportive." "At faculty meetings [he] tells us we're doing a good job."

As West Middle School educators discuss their own recruitment and selection, a pattern emerges of seeking teachers and administrators who value collegial and student relationships, have high expectations for themselves and others, and are determined to work hard for student success. An eighth grade teacher's "best advice" is to "hire people who love children, or at least like them a whole lot, and people who like the subject they're teaching."

Recruitment of new staff members is a district-wide process, beginning with development of promotional materials (including a CD about the school system) and electronic networking, but West Middle School personnel play an active role. "I want people that I can work with around me," the principal states. Accordingly, he attends teacher recruitment fairs at nearby colleges and is "a standard member of the interviewing committee." Teachers assist in personal recruitment efforts: "I send announcements to friends and former student teachers." "I just got an email asking if we know anyone good." "Our own teachers and staff are our best recruiters," the superintendent observes.

Faculty selection is based on defining needs, posting and advertising positions, screening applications (by the director of personnel), and interviewing candidates. All interviews are conducted at the district level. While teachers are generally not involved with interviewing prospective faculty members, they do have a voice in the selection of administrators. The superintendent, who is not directly involved until the end, describes the process as "excellent," noting that the procedure usually includes interview panels composed of stakeholder groups, a written response from the candidate related to how to close the achievement gap, and a second-

round interview with the superintendent and two assistant superintendents. “If we have someone from outside, we do a site visit of the person’s school and talk to kids, parents, staff to do a double check.” The superintendent makes the final decision and sends the recommendation to the Board of Education for approval.

An extensive mentoring program for all new teachers (even those with experience elsewhere) helps to build capacity at West Middle School. Mentoring includes evening programs and released time (with substitutes provided) during the school day so that mentors in the same building and subject area can support new teachers. Stipends are provided. Teachers are enthusiastic about the value of the mentoring experience: “The mentoring program is absolutely phenomenal. I had time to plan, time to meet with my mentor. We could observe each other in class. It was two years of help. I could have used even more. It was a great experience.” “I have mentored in the past. The district provides one day a month when the mentor and the new teacher can get together and collaborate, discussing issues and ideas and providing encouragement. [There are] dinners for mentors and mentees with discussion and guest speakers. ... A lot of the teachers who had the formal mentoring program found it so helpful. They have an ally, someone to go to who is not an administrator.”

“A lot of professional development” is a frequently heard capacity-building theme among faculty members: “We go to many different conferences.” “We just had a conference here—one of the good ones.” “The Teacher Center is great.” “We use superintendent conference days.” “The district offers the teachers a lot of extra help. I did Six Traits Writing, which they paid for us to take, and also Teaching for Understanding [in a summer seminar].” “[Consultants working with departments and providing books and other materials] have offered a lot of suggestions that I’ve implemented.” “Blackboard training has been very helpful.” “Whatever is best for us, they find the funding.”

Administrators see professional development as the school reform effort that is “really beginning to make a difference,” as the superintendent asserts. “The Strategic Plan is making us focus on professional development in a way we hadn’t before,” says the assistant superintendent. “Teaching for Understanding is a great model,” she adds, “presented in different ways—online, workshops, reflective discussion groups.” West Middle School’s principal reports that one of the most successful components of professional development has been having teachers lead presentations. He notes also that the school’s professional development model was developed collaboratively with teachers in keeping with New York State’s mandate. He considers it important that teachers choose programs they wish to attend.

Strong faculty retention accompanies the facilitative leadership and capacity building: “Teachers stay.” “Once people come here, it’s a pretty engaging place.” “There’s not much opportunity to be a mentor teacher because teachers stay here. We don’t have many new teachers.” “As a product of this system, I always felt that whatever I wanted to do as a teacher was supported, especially through SDM. It’s a great retention factor.” “It’s a great place to work. ... The people who work here are great people.” “We try to provide any training anyone requests. It’s one of the biggest reasons people stay.” “When I first started, I was scared to death to work for a city school district, but now I don’t want to go anywhere else.”

Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements

Meaningful student engagement in the learning process characterizes teachers' descriptions of effective instruction:

They'll remember [the lesson] if it touched them somehow.

Realize the significance of the 'Aha!' moments.

Just because they can't read doesn't mean they can't think.

It's hands-on, with opportunity for discussion.

Students are actively involved in what they are doing.

Teachers see classroom instruction as a series of inter-related opportunities— to “make learning relevant to all students,” to “show students that education is an important part of future success,” to “build excitement” for the subject. They envision classrooms in which students are “on task and enthusiastic,” “rush into projects with a lot of energy,” “talk excitedly” and “ask questions.” They advocate “a mix of different activities and different approaches to teaching”—“with some direct instruction but also group interaction, then coming back together as a class,” to exchange ideas and reflect.

Faculty teams develop the instructional program collaboratively, with emphasis on building lessons using curriculum maps aligned with state standards. Middle school faculty members point with pride to the intensive work they have done to build the instructional program: “quite frequently we are together with both buildings all summer long.” One teacher describes a series of five-hour workshops to develop lesson plans for different topics in cooperation with area college personnel and the Teacher Leadership Quality program. Collaboration for instruction is accomplished both departmentally and by grade level. “We never feel isolated.”

Because West Middle School educators provide instruction for diverse learners, grouped in heterogeneous classes, teachers must be innovative in presenting differentiated learning, tailored to individual student needs. They incorporate ways for different students to learn the same content in different ways for differing learning styles. They also adjust lessons to “what is happening beyond the classroom”—in the news, in the community, in students' personal lives. “We have to be very perceptive. The students we try to help most are those where we need to consider their life outside of school.” Teams work together to determine student needs and how best to teach individuals and sub-groups. “Sharing information about a shared group of 120 students, we are never alone.”

In describing an array of initiatives developed to improve instruction, teachers stress their efforts to follow through in their own classrooms and the help they receive from colleagues. Wherever possible, instructional programs are designed to complement each other. For example, among the innovations is an integrated math and reading course for seventh and eighth grades. Designed so that students see the connection between the two courses, the two teachers purposely plan, for example, to teach problem solving at the same time. It is looped so that teachers have the same students both years.

The teachers' contract ensures a limit of 120 full-time students per teacher. This limit as well as provisions for classroom aides built into the contract are considered very helpful to both students and faculty. "We all know that students in smaller classes get more help and do better, with fewer discipline problems."

Student discipline is a constant challenge, but, once again, the team approach is helpful. "We have a shared discipline philosophy. We share the way we do everything. Every one of my colleagues helps. Everyone knows the expectations for behavior [as well as] academics."

Revised class scheduling is among the topics currently being considered by the Shared Decision Making team. "We have very short periods of time to teach (38 minutes). ... I would love to see kids on block scheduling. You can get more in-depth. SDM can make that happen." "The schedule is going to be re-looked at to see if we have the best, the optimum. ... We don't know that we have the best schedule yet." Although teachers might prefer changes to student schedules, there is agreement that the current schedule supports collaborative instruction by providing for a common grade-level planning period for core teachers each day. Departmental colleagues also meet regularly, sometimes with a half-day of released time. The most difficult professional scheduling challenges are for some special education and support teachers such as reading or AIS (Academic Intervention Services) who must meet with more than one team. At present, student scheduling can also be adapted somewhat to meet particular demands, for example, if a team wants to schedule their academic block time a little differently from others or if a team wants to hold a special program. As one teacher explains, "We use creative time management."

The instructional program makes good use of school resources such as the library and technology as well as traditional classroom materials. Teachers speak of taking classes to the library for weeks at a time to conduct research. Six carts of laptop computers, acquired through a grant, are available to use in classrooms. Departments choose textbooks through a lengthy process of presentations and study.

Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data

Binghamton administrators believe that their district was the first in the state to look at frequent student assessment, district-developed instruments administered every ten weeks from grade two through grade ten, to help with instructional planning. Results are given to teachers so that they can see where students did well and where extra help is needed. Results also help administrators to determine professional development needs.

With the rich information now available from yearly state tests and ten-week local assessments, educators have frequent "data huddles" in which the directors of curriculum and instruction meet with departments or teams to analyze the data. An agreement with the teachers' union specifies that the results be used to improve instruction, not to evaluate or critique teachers. Now that teachers no longer worry about data being a professional "issue," they are requesting more and more information to use for planning, the assistant superintendent tells us. "We have systems in place to provide enormous amounts of data. Now we have to work on the data protocol to help us use it as effectively as possible."

“The people who understand how to use the data and use it well are seeing the results,” the superintendent notes, explaining that the district is still in the process of restructuring how it will use the sophisticated data system. She says that she is seeing “huge changes in teacher attitudes and instruction” because of the availability and analysis of data.

“I like the accountability part because I think we all need to be accountable,” West Middle School’s principal comments. “But I think sometimes it’s a stressor on classroom teachers because they get so focused on tests.” Teachers tell us that they use the test data to make instructional improvements but try to focus on student success in their subject areas rather than overemphasize test scores. “My first half of the year is gearing them toward the stress test. ... The second half there is less anxiety for me as well as the students.” As another teacher explains, “Unfortunately I think it puts a lot of pressure on the kids and on the teachers. ... We tell kids, ‘It’s an evaluation for us, not you.’ Kids handle it well. I haven’t seen too many meltdowns and breakdowns.”

Additional monitoring of student progress takes place throughout the year in a variety of ways— one-on-one conferences with children, class discussion, student writing, diagnostic comprehension tests, weekly quizzes in some subjects, homework and projects, teacher-developed unit tests. Teachers change and expand lessons based on classroom monitoring and interpret the daily interaction within the context of the data provided through the district’s more formal ten-week assessments and the state’s high stakes assessment program.

Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustments

As students strive for success at West Middle School, they receive continuous recognition for their efforts and accomplishments as well as consistent intervention to help bridge achievement gaps in meeting academic goals.

Although there are formal awards ceremonies and a chapter of the National Junior Honor Society at the school, much of the recognition is less formal and more frequent. The concept of “earned recognition” provides special privileges such as field trips or pizza parties to students who are working hard and trying to do their best. Character education is reinforced by “catching students doing good.” Each faculty team plans recognition events and incentives while putting the main focus on day-to-day encouragement of students, supported by phone calls home to report to parents on “the positives” each student has accomplished.

Instructional differentiation includes acceleration provided through enrichment activities in classrooms but focuses more heavily on providing extra help to needy students. As much as possible, teachers try to make adjustments a normal, expected part of instruction.

Academic interventions are an integral part of the school day—during regular classes, during newly instituted AIS classes, in pull-out and push-in programs, at lunch time, during academic block—as well as after school. Teachers applaud the school’s “great instructional support program,” which provides particular help to close the skill gaps some students are experiencing. “Kids who have scored lower on state exams have lunch and after school programs helping with math and ELA. We make it as much fun as possible. Every homeroom has 15 minutes of sustained silent reading twice a week. The Patriot Reader Challenge Program provides incentives

for books they've read. We have a read-in once a quarter where everyone reads at the same time." A program called Gear Up has had college students come in to work with students needing extra help during the academic block: "Kids enjoy working with university students."

West Middle's building principal sees creating a better AIS program as one of the school's priorities. Moving from "an almost non-existent" intervention system to one that is strong and purposeful required hiring personnel specifically for AIS. An English and a math teacher are now shared between the two middle schools. Regular classroom teachers also give additional tutorials, especially for students scoring at below proficient on state assessments. "We're making it a much better experience for our kids, creating a systematic approach [using] a skill-based curriculum for AIS. If I'm coming at lunchtime on Thursday, I know what to expect. The next lesson will be consistent. ... Fifteen to twenty kids at a time are working with AIS five periods a day hoping to build long-term improvement. We'll try to reduce those numbers to ten to twelve per class. We have eight to ten in the tutorials in the [academic] blocks."

Recognition, intervention, and additional support also go to students through programs such as Starfish, Diversity Café, Club Ophelia, and Sister to Sister/Brother to Brother.

Every effort is made to avoid retaining students at a grade level. "We want to make students successful where they are." Students who "fail" are expected to go to summer school. Those who don't attend summer school are usually passed on through "social promotion," teachers tell us. "We don't see as many kids held back. Either promoting or retaining doesn't work. We need to do more."

This idea of needing "to do more" is a constant theme at West Middle School, not only representing intervention efforts but also permeating every aspect of the school culture.

In a Nutshell

West Middle School faces its challenges openly and works hard to achieve success for all students. Building positive inter-personal relationships, collaboratively developing improvement, and showing relentless determination to meet every student's needs are among the interwoven aspects of the West Middle School culture that represent best practices.

West Middle School
Binghamton City School District
West Middle Avenue, Binghamton, New York 13905
http://www.binghamtonschools.org/school_about.cfm

ⁱ This case study is one of 10 produced as part of a larger study of middle schools conducted during the 2006-07 school year. Research teams investigated 10 consistently higher-performing and six average-performing middle schools based on student performance on New York State Assessments of 8th-grade English Language Arts and Mathematics. Researchers used site-based interviews of teachers and administrators, as well as the analysis of supportive documentation, to determine differences in practices between higher- and average-performing schools in the sample. In half the higher-performing schools, poverty levels meet or exceed the state average (as measured by the percent of students receiving free or reduced lunch). Average-performing schools were matched as closely as possible to the higher performers in terms of student poverty levels, geographic location, size, and student ethnicity. Results were organized along five broad themes that form the framework of the national Just for the Kids Study of which the New York study is part. The national study is sponsored by the National Center for Educational Accountability (NCEA).

ⁱⁱ 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.