

Gen. MacArthur High School ***Levittown Public Schools***

School Context

The Levittown Public Schools, located in Nassau County, Long Island, serve approximately 8,000 students in six elementary schools, two middle schools, two high schools, and a career and technical center. Levittown was the first planned suburb on Long Island, established 60 years ago at the end of World War II. It remains a middle and working class community with strong ties between community and school district. The staff reports a majority of supportive, involved parents and polite, respectful children as key components to the success of its schools.

Over his 25-year tenure, the superintendent has worked with the community to help raise aspirations for student achievement. Old attitudes of complacency about students receiving “just a high school diploma” (or not) has given way to the expectation that every student graduate with a Regents diploma. Graduation rates in the 60% range have risen to rates in the 90s during his tenure. “Success for every student” appears to be more than just a district motto: One administrator defines success as “every student achieving to their full potential,” and teachers and other administrators echo this definition and talk about working to fulfill it. An administrator characterizes the Levittown School District as “a district on the upswing.”

MacArthur High School is comprised of grades 9 through 12, with approximately 1400 students. Built in 1954, the building has undergone several renovations and additions, which have resulted in an inviting, clean, well-equipped school. The library has ten desk-top and 16 laptop computers with wireless access. A computer lab has 30 computers available for student use. Almost all departments have smart boards as well as ceiling mounted projectors, and some math classes have state-of-the-art calculators. In addition to a mixing studio, the music department has a lab with 16 piano keyboards with software that allows teacher access to all students as they work on their music. The physical education department boasts two gymnasiums and a weight room and will soon enjoy an artificial turf field. The overall atmosphere appears calm, orderly and pleasant. Numerous extra-curricular activities and electives offer students the chance to explore their interests and broaden their horizons.

Student Demographics 2005-2006: Gen. Douglas MacArthur Sr. High School, Levittown UFSDⁱ

	Gen. Douglas MacArthur HS	Levittown UFSD	New York State
% Eligible for Free Lunch	4%	4%	37%
% Eligible for Reduced Lunch	3%	4%	8%
% Limited English Proficient	2%	2%	N/A
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution			
% African-American	1%	1%	20%
% Hispanic/Latino	5%	8%	20%
% White	90%	87%	53%
% Other	4%	5%	7%
% Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards on Secondary Level English Assessments	91%	88%	69%
% Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards on Secondary Level Mathematics	95%	93%	71%
% Students Graduating	95%	89%	67%
Total Enrollment	1,347	7,999	2,772,669

Best Practices Highlights

The school is characterized by high expectations for all students; a strong elective program with many unique offerings; and close ties to the community.

A Closer Look

These characteristics are evident across five broad themes that frame the best practices study of which this case is one partⁱⁱ. The sections that follow discuss specific practices at MacArthur High School within each theme.

Curriculum and Academic Goals

The district’s goals start with the board of education, then the superintendent creates his goals based on the board’s goals, and the process continues through the administration. It is evident that a robust and challenging curriculum is one goal of the district. For the most part, both Levittown high schools offer the same curriculum in an effort to provide equity and consistency across the district. The assistant superintendent for instruction explains that there are plans to make curriculum more consistent in format and to vertically align curriculum across schools. The graduation requirement of 27 credits exceeds New York State’s requirement of 24 credits. The policy of students being ‘fully scheduled’ for the nine-period day requires students to not only take the core curriculum but take electives as well. The elective program offers a rich selection of creative and exciting courses.

The district also runs its own career and technical center and offers ten programs including Computer Animation, Automotive Technology, Cosmetology, and Medical Assisting among its choices. If a student wants a program that is not available at the Gerald R. Claps Career and Technical Center, she or he may go to BOCES for the program. Most of the district's vocational students, however, are educated at the Claps Career and Technical Center.

Advanced Placement Courses

The principal states, "We can never lose sight that academic achievement [is our priority], but we want to present a rich and balanced curriculum and want to provide a range of choices for our students." To achieve this goal, the school now offers 22 Advanced Placement courses and nine college credit courses linked to various colleges. The number of AP exams administered has gone from 260 in 2002 to 669 in 2007. In analyzing how inclusive the Advanced Placement classes are, the principal found that 28% of the student body is taking at least one AP course. He explains this is especially impressive when you consider that no ninth graders take AP classes and there is only one course offered in tenth grade. He sees this as evidence that "students now [come] with a mindset that 'I want to take a course of study that is rigorous and challenging.'"

Electives

The extensive array of electives, many unique to Levittown, is impressive. The school is proud that the electives appeal to a variety of interests. For example, students may elect Digital Photography, Three Dimensional Graphic Design, or Studio in Advanced Ceramics; Trial Law, Wall Street, or Business Ownership and Marketing; Interior Design, Dance, Guitar, or American Film and Literature as History, to name a few.

The science and social studies research electives encourage students to enter local and national competitions, including the Intel Science Research Competition. The research course description asserts, "Students are expected to learn essential research skills that will help to ensure success as they further their academic careers at the collegiate level." One teacher explains that some students take the course for several years, refining their skills as they progress. The course accepts students of different abilities, and teachers encourage a range of individual research projects.

The 12th-grade government class has a 10-hour community service requirement. Consequently, many students participate in activities such as Habitat for Humanity and in food and toy drives. The principal says these types of electives and community service opportunities help students find their niche so they feel like they belong somewhere; he believes this helps eliminate the feeling of disenfranchisement some young people feel in high school.

Several teachers voice their enthusiasm for high expectations, Advanced Placement courses, and the elective program:

One of the things [that makes us successful] is opportunities for students. At Levittown they have a lot more opportunities than other students. We're giving them opportunities to succeed.

We do a lot of things that aren't based on test scores—preparing them for what lies ahead, whether its college or the job scene. We make sure kids leave here with a good head on their shoulders for whatever [they plan to do].

[A school challenge] is motivating the student to continue to do well, to challenge themselves by taking AP classes.

Ten years ago [the goal was] simply an 85 on the Regents; now we're pushing for 90. We've made big improvements in setting and meeting and making new goals.

They encourage students to get involved in a wide range of activities. A lot of students this year attended school board meetings as part of their AP government class.

State Standards and Assessments

The teachers interviewed report that the state standards are a guideline or framework for their course curriculum, and the state assessments are a reality of life that must be acknowledged.

We all want the students to succeed on the standardized tests. Ultimately that is what is looked at.

The tests [state assessments] hold us accountable.

Many voice the concern that there is a temptation to teach to the test or put too much emphasis on it. A district administrator agrees, “As much as we encourage teachers that our standards are higher than New York State standards, as long as that test exists, teachers will teach to the test. It takes a certain amount of creativity to encourage teachers to not teach to the test.”

Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building

Hiring Practices

The administrators interviewed confirm the importance of hiring competent staff who are a good match with the district. When expanding the electives program, the principal says he looks for teachers who are dynamic, creative, and appeal to young people. He also looks for teachers who are willing to get involved in extra-curricular activities because he wants teachers to become part of the culture of the school. When looking for new staff, he exchanges staffing needs with members of professional organizations as well as using OLAS (On-Line Application System) and ads in newspapers.

Hiring starts at the building level with a committee comprised of parents, teachers, and administrators. The committee's recommendation goes to the director/assistant superintendent level from which a recommendation is made to the superintendent and board of education. The principal believes the key to a school's success lies in the hiring process. “Hire kind, smart, compassionate people who are going to work hard and reach out to students so everybody is on the same track. A principal's best legacy is the staff he leaves behind.”

New Teachers

Several programs support new teachers. The teachers' association runs a mentor program through the Teacher Center. Veteran teachers trained as mentors and matched with beginning teachers help orient them to the school and the profession. Teachers also report informal mentoring:

In my department there's always someone there to help them out.

This is a very teacher friendly school and we really do take care of our own. We take new teachers under our wing."

The district administration also provides support for new teachers. They hold a three-day orientation in August, and MacArthur High School has a building orientation as well. When the school year starts, new teachers and administrators meet twice the first week, then once a week. As the teachers get more comfortable, the meetings become less frequent. The administration invites speakers such as a guidance counselor, social worker, or the special education director to answer questions and provide important information. Administrators may discuss class management issues or dealing with parents or lesson planning. At the end of the year, they hold a celebratory social evening for the administrators and new teachers.

Teacher Evaluation

Non-tenured teachers are observed three or four times each year. The chairs do two observations and the principal or assistant principals do the other(s). This year the principal was able to conduct walk-through observations for every teacher in the building. He says he follows up with a comment about what he saw and this has opened up many good conversations with teachers. Any first-year teacher who will not be invited to return is notified by March 1st; a tenure-year teacher is notified in January.

Peer-Coaching Model for Tenured Teacher Evaluation

A relatively new program for tenured teachers combines collaboration, observation, and evaluation. A tenured teacher may choose to have an observation done by a peer rather than an administrator. The teacher observing can focus on any aspect of the lesson, write up the observation on the district form, and discuss it with the colleague. A teacher who opted for this peer coaching observation states, "I found it helpful. I took a lot of her strategies and now use them in my classroom." Another teacher explains, "We [the two teachers involved in the observation] picked something we were both interested in. I observed and saw how it was done, how I might fit it into what I do." The principal reports that the number of teachers involved in the peer coaching model is growing.

Leadership

The department chairs provide a great deal of school leadership. This is confirmed by both teachers and administrators. Several teachers commend their department chairs for their work and support:

My chair person is great. He allows you a lot of freedom, doesn't micromanage, encourages you to take a chance, but he'll be honest with you if he thinks something you're using isn't good.

You can go to our department chair with anything.

The principal states, “The chair people are extremely good at finding the right match [when screening candidates].” In addition, the assistant superintendent says, “I depend on my chair people. I meet with them once every other month and discuss curriculum...things come up and we know that’s an area we need to work on.” All in all, it is evident that the chairs provide a backbone of leadership and support to both teachers and administrators.

Professional Development

Most of the professional development this year was through the departments, either at their meetings or on the Superintendent’s Conference Days. Next year, contractually, teachers will work on professional development during one of their two prep periods. The district has brought in experts, for example an expert on autism, to confer with the staff. Teachers are also encouraged to go to professional conferences; after attending, they write an evaluation of the conference and may be asked to do a ‘turnkey’ presentation for their department or the faculty. Teachers also take in-service courses and workshops offered by the Teacher Center.

Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements

Administrators and faculty agree that there are no mandated instructional programs. They also agree that a student-centered classroom is highly desirable. One administrator says when observing she looks for “active involvement of teachers and students engaged [in the lesson]. I also look for higher-level thinking and questions.” Teachers say the administration encourages them to use group work, open-ended questions, and warm-up activities such as ‘aims’ and ‘do now.’

Teachers cite collaborating on common mid-term and final exams. They also report collaborating informally, often by sharing ideas and materials and observing classes. Inclusion teachers collaborate with the general education teachers to modify material or co-teach.

Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis and Use of Data

Teachers describe monitoring their students’ progress in traditional ways: homework, discussions, quizzes, tests, essays, and projects. Parents receive five-week progress reports and report cards every ten weeks. The guidance department monitors students’ graduation requirements using a four-year plan that maps out the courses taken and the students’ grades. Guidance counselors meet with students and their parents every year to plan for the next year. They are available six evenings a year to accommodate parents’ schedules. The counselors use an interest profile to help students think about career and college choices. In addition, the guidance department offers programs for parents to help with the college application and financial aid process.

Data

Levittown Public Schools use a data warehouse for analysis of state assessments. A district administrator states, “We have a good system in place for data analysis. The chair people meet with each teacher for an action plan based on the results of the data.” The principal describes the

high school administration as “immersing ourselves in learning how to analyze the data [from the data warehouse]. Now we’re training teachers. We’ve always done item analysis, but there is so much more in-depth information you can get.” He also asserts that a characteristic of a great teacher is the ability to reflect and set goals based on data and constructive criticism.

In the past, the district tended to compare its state assessment results to the New York State average. This year, an administrator reports they are comparing themselves to Nassau County, which is a higher standard of comparison. The new focus is on mastery rather than proficiency on the state assessments.

Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustments

Recognition

MacArthur High School recognizes student achievement in traditional ways: National Honor Society, honor roll, Senior Awards Night, student of the month, and on the school web site and newsletter. A unique recognition program is the Renaissance Card. Every semester, students who pass all their classes receive a Renaissance Card and a recognition breakfast. The card gives students discounts on school events, and they are eligible for year-end raffles on such perks as tickets to the prom, a free tuxedo, free cap and gown, and a free yearbook. Teachers report students love the program: “It rewards those students who otherwise are left out. It rewards the average student.” The general feeling is that it promotes positive peer pressure to succeed.

Interventions

Levittown is supportive of keeping its special needs students in the district. Of the 1300 identified special education students, only 100 are not served by the district. The special education department strives to have students with special needs accepted and included in the general education population. The inclusion program is undergoing a major change next year. General education courses with 7-8 or more special education students will have a special education co-teacher every day. This year the special education teachers were only in the class every other day. The change should bring consistency and coordination of services.

For some inclusion students an extra academic support class is necessary for English and social studies. It meets five times a week, has grade integrity, and is taught by a special education teacher. The teacher knows what is going on in the general education classes and pre-teaches or remediates depending on student needs. According to the principal, “This program has helped some of the students make the move from self-contained to the inclusion model.”

A self-contained class serves severely disabled students and the LEAP Program is a modified high school program for students who are expected to take longer than four years to graduate with a local diploma. Rx classes and stretch classes offer students a double period in the courses for which they need extra academic support. It is clear that MacArthur High School is working to help its special education population succeed.

The school offers a Regents Re-take Program for students who pass a course but fail the Regents exam. Additional help before and after school is available to prepare them to re-take the Regents exam. A teacher can require that a student go for extra help after school. Attendance is taken and if the student does not show up, parents are notified. An extensive review program in January for

mid-terms and most of May for Regents exams helps students prepare for these assessments. Teachers are available after school at least one day a week and report their willingness to help anytime when a student asks.

In addition, anyone can refer students to the Pupil Personnel Team for any reason—from academic failure to suspicion of drug use to a death in the family. The team meets weekly to discuss appropriate interventions for the referred students. The team may include a guidance counselor, drug and alcohol counselor, psychologist, nurse, and administrator.

Peer mediators are trained to intervene and help students resolve problems. The program is run by the students themselves. Peer leaders help ninth graders adjust to high school life. Each peer leader ‘adopts’ a group of ninth graders, gives them a tour of the building, helps them with their schedules and lockers, and looks out for them during the year.

The principal believes the strong elective program, the vocational program, and the early intervention of the Pupil Personnel Team all contribute to the low drop out rate. For those students who aren’t succeeding at MacArthur High School, the district offers an alternate school. The school is held in the late afternoon and evening and offers small classes with longer periods. Placement is handled case by case through an application process. A guidance counselor estimates only seven or eight seniors attend the alternate school.

In a Nutshell

MacArthur High School’s combination of high expectations, rigorous courses, and engaging electives encourages students of various abilities, talents and interests to take advantage of the many opportunities the school offers. Strong community ties to the school and a caring staff contribute to an environment in which students work, play, and flourish.

General Douglas MacArthur High School
John Bifulco, Principal
3369 Old Jerusalem Road
Levittown NY 11756
<http://www.levittownschoools.com/macarthur/>

ⁱ Demographic data are of students in the 2002 entering cohort and are from the 2005-06 New York State Report Card (<https://www.nystart.gov/publicweb/AllDistrict.do>). This case study was conducted in spring, 2008.

ⁱⁱ This case study is one of 10 produced as part of a larger study of high schools conducted during the 2007-08 school year. Research teams investigated 10 consistently higher-performing and five average-performing high schools based on student performance on New York State Assessments of English, mathematics, science, and history. Researchers used site-based interviews of teachers and administrators, as well as analyses of supportive documentation, to determine differences in practices between higher- and average-performing schools in the sample. In half the higher-performing schools, from one-third to three-quarters of students qualify for 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 has been sponsored by the National Center for Educational Achievement (NCEA).