

### **Naples Elementary School** ***Naples (NY) Central School District***

#### **School Context**

Located in the “Grape Country” Finger Lakes Region of upstate New York, the community of Naples prides itself on its support of education and the arts. It views its small size as a definite advantage, “allowing the Naples Schools to have small classes [with] more student-teacher interaction.” The school population has been shrinking over the last few years, with 980 students in the district’s two schools in 2004-2005 (517 in the K-6 elementary school and 463 in the 7-12 middle and high school).

In its mission statement, the Naples Central School District describes itself as “committed to providing an exceptional learning environment which promotes enthusiasm and excellence in education.” The mission statement of Naples Elementary is highlighted in the annual school calendar and in a variety of school handbooks: “Because we believe that all students can learn, we renew our commitment to assume the responsibility for teaching them. Using a collaborative, school-based process and expectations for the success of all students, no matter what their differences, the Naples Elementary School Community commits itself to the belief that we can accomplish together what we cannot do alone.” All those interviewed echoed the ideals of the mission statements.

The school has been recognized for its academic success, particularly on student performance on statewide assessments in 2004, when 92% of fourth-grade students met or exceeded state standards in language arts and 100% did the same in mathematics. The district expends \$11,428 per student compared to a state average of \$12,265.

Both the elementary principal and district superintendent are relatively new, following long-time administrators who left enduring legacies of caring, collaboration, and continuous school improvement.

A welcoming, nurturing atmosphere is evident from the moment one enters Naples Elementary School. Student signs, artwork, and projects reflect the pride that everyone takes in being a part of the Naples success story.

**Student Demographics 2003-04, Naples Elementary School<sup>6</sup>**

	Naples ES	Naples CSD	New York State
% Eligible for Free Lunch	23.2%	22.4%	37.0%
% Eligible for Reduced Lunch	6.6%	5.9%	7.2%
% Limited English Proficient	0	0	6.8%
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution			
% African-American	0	0.2%	19.9%
% Hispanic/Latino	2.1%	1.9%	19.4%
% White	95.9%	96.3%	53.7%
% Other	1.9%	1.5%	7.0%
% Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards on Grade 4 ELA Assessment	92%	92%	63%
% Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards on Grade 4 Math Assessment	100%	100%	79%

**Best Practices Highlights**

“It’s a culture that we have,” is the way one teacher explains the success that Naples has achieved. The superintendent also notes that “We call it our culture.” Teachers and administrators consistently describe the school climate as caring, nurturing, child-centered, collaborative, and always improving.

*We have worked many years to develop the culture. As we hire new people, we make sure that they fit in. The culture is to nurture our students and foster success.*

**A Child-Centered, Caring Community**

Much of the district’s success can be attributed to the community:

*Our small town. Wonderful support from the community. A child-oriented community. The support shows in every possible way.*

*It’s just Naples. It’s a close group of caring people. It’s a beautiful, wonderful community.*

*It takes a village to raise a child. It doesn’t matter whether it’s the doctor’s son or the vineyard worker’s son.*

*Trust throughout the school community.*

### **Shared Priorities and Focus**

Person after person stressed that the students are the number one priority at Naples Elementary School. As one classroom teacher puts it, “My priority is teaching the kids this week. You need to stay focused on your little group.”

*It’s all about caring about kids.*

Literacy is the top academic focus; it is woven through all areas of the curriculum.

### **Small Size of Both School and Classes**

Also significant is the relatively small size of the school, which encourages individual attention to students and collaboration among adults.

*Partly it’s the small class sizes plus aides to work with classes and individual students.*

*The small size of the school makes it easy to be collaborative.*

The small size encourages focus on students as individuals:

*Our goal is that no child will fall through the cracks -- everyone will make a connection with an adult who really cares about them.*

### **Teamwork and Collaborative Ownership**

All staff members emphasize the importance of teamwork. Naples educators take a collaborative approach to all that they do.

*Working together, supporting each other at grade levels and across grade levels.*

*Everyone will go beyond for you and know people will go beyond for them. We work together as a team.*

*Sharing and interdisciplinary collaboration. We work together as a team.*

*A cooperative spirit pervades all programs. We see ourselves as a team.*

Teachers’ strong sense of ownership and involvement makes them feel personal responsibility for the academic environment and the achievement of the students. They feel passionately about the need to be personally involved in making changes to help students.

*Yes, we have to write our curriculum. Yes, we get to write our own curriculum.*

*Everyone helps to make decisions. It is not top down decision making.*

The district superintendent attributes much of the feeling of ownership and collaboration to the school’s involvement with the Effective Schools program for the last fifteen years.

## A Closer Look

The culture developed through the child-centered community, shared priorities, small size, teamwork and sense of ownership produces “best practices” that extend throughout the five dimensions that frame the larger study of which this is a part. After a brief description of supporting factors, the sections below expand on these practices in the context of the five dimensions.

### **Supporting Factors**

Educators at Naples credit the school’s success to outstanding support from all stakeholders in the school community, with stakeholder involvement processes benefiting greatly from the Effective Schools framework. As the superintendent explains, “Effective Schools put us all on the same page.”

Parents have formed a number of support groups such as band boosters, sports boosters, and PTSA. “Parents are very involved and feel very welcome.” The Board of Education is “very understanding” and “very involved” but “not micromanaging.” The teachers’ association is positive and active, supporting school improvement.

Communication is crucial, and flows in all directions. Formal processes include monthly district newsletters and classroom newsletters, weekly principal memos, and a structure of weekly meetings—faculty meetings the first week, followed by grade-level, department, and then principal/department head meetings. Informal discussion is even more important at Naples, with several teachers noting “wonderful lines of communication” and an “open door” atmosphere.

Change, in the form of continuous school improvement, is part of the culture at Naples. Educators agree that decision making cannot be merely “top down.” “The people closest to effecting change need to be a major part of change.”

### **Curriculum and Academic Goals**

Educators at Naples see the state standards as promoting positive academic growth in their students as well as the professional development of teachers and administrators. The district’s superintendent, elementary principal, and elementary teachers all point to New York State standards and assessments as providing impetus and reference points for improvement. The director of curriculum and instruction reflects the prevailing attitude at Naples when she describes the state standards as “excellent” and notes that “performance indicators are very specific.”

The elementary principal credits much of Naples Elementary’s academic success to his immediate predecessor, who empowered teachers to work toward success and feel in control of their students’ learning. The superintendent gives much of the credit to the director of curriculum and instruction. Administrators and teachers praise each other for their efforts.

All agree that Naples teachers work collaboratively to develop curriculum. “They create and embrace it themselves.” Their “ownership” of the curriculum “means that they will be diligent in implementing it,” as one administrator sees it. There is a great deal of “trust and confidence that curriculum developed collaboratively will be used and will work.” Teachers develop curriculum every summer and meet frequently by grade level and academic area to fine tune and adjust the written curriculum. No districtwide curriculum is imposed, but the director of curriculum and

instruction coordinates curriculum development processes. Teachers are encouraged to attend workshops and receive help from consultants and other resources. Every teacher is involved in building the curriculum. Teachers “have the autonomy to do what we need to do” and to “use creativity collaboratively.” “The beauty of teaching here is that you are allowed to teach in what fits your style as long as you are meeting the standards.” While administrators occasionally worry that autonomy may mean widely differing classroom experiences, they note that recent efforts have resulted in more consistency at each grade level and continue to emphasize the importance of teacher ownership and creativity.

The curriculum development process begins with aligning programs with state curriculum guides. Educators use a combination of resources and disaggregated data to help make decisions. A collaborative process identifies core and essential elements. Components include pacing guides, curriculum maps, model lessons, instructional resources, and benchmark assessments. Teachers have released time during the day to work on alignment and reading across the grade levels. Recent emphasis has been on primary reading and moving from concrete to abstract concepts so that students can become successful independent readers. Literacy is the top priority. Two new reading series have been selected to provide a framework for consistency of skills.

There is a sense of continuous improvement at Naples. “We don’t want to rest on our laurels.” Achievement has remained high as educators have worked to stay current and identify best practices both within their school and in the broader educational community.

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

Naples Central School District attracts good educators and experiences little staff turnover. Previous administrators were in place for 15 to 25 years, and most teachers have many years of experience at Naples. “People who want to be in Naples come and stay.”

Educators join the Naples team because they are interested in working at Naples: “It’s a place people want to be.” They are attracted by the team spirit, culture, and feeling of success rather than by salary. Many current faculty members served as pre-service teachers at Naples; some taught in other area schools but always wanted to teach in Naples. Administrators have usually been promoted from within the district: The current elementary principal was an elementary teacher who completed an administrative internship with the previous principal; the current superintendent was a high school secretary and then a school business official before becoming district administrator.

A strong relationship with area colleges is very helpful to Naples’ recruitment efforts. The recruitment/selection process also includes the typical elements: developing and posting the job description, screening candidates, conducting initial collaborative interviews and final administrative interviews, and administrative recommendations to the Board of Education. During the process of selecting a new elementary principal, the final three candidates came and spent a full day with each administrator on the selection team and then met with the Board.

Teachers are glad to have a chance to serve on interview teams for administrators and fellow teachers. One teacher described the recruitment/selection process as “fantastic,” and another called it “a great experience.” One member of the principal selection committee two years ago called it “awesome” and expressed great pride in helping to select the current principal—“the best.”

Naples prides itself on its development of internal candidates for administrative positions, particularly its recognition of talent and its offering of administrative internships. The support for new administrators is also strong—through team-building workshops, weekly administrative team meetings, and a general culture of collaboration.

Capacity building takes place through the shared culture and, more specifically, through mentoring and professional development. Informal mentoring for new staff was in place long before New York State began its mentoring mandate. Because Naples has had so few new teachers recently, most teachers have not participated in formal mentoring, although everyone stresses informal support for all teachers, whether new or continuing.

Professional development is very important to Naples faculty and administrators. Naples is “not a place where you are meeting to death” but a place where meaningful professional discussion is ongoing. Teachers enjoy the opportunity to attend conferences and workshops as well as to have consultants visit Naples to serve as resources. The value of the training presented by Mel Levine (cofounder of All Kinds of Minds) was mentioned often. Many faculty members have helped to plan professional conferences through participation in the staff development committee. They also appreciate the opportunity to visit other classrooms both at Naples and in districts piloting interesting innovations.

Teachers are also supported through districtwide monitoring of student progress—for example, disaggregating of data and providing feedback to teachers, broken down by student.

### **Instructional Program, Practices, and Arrangements**

High-quality classroom instruction, as defined by Naples educators, means

- *A person who not only has the knowledge but also loves kids*
- *Organized and teacher-directed but with children’s input*
- *Instruction adapted to the styles of the students in the class*
- *All the kids smiling and saying, “I get it.”*
- *Explicit teaching with step-by-step modeling, including the mind-mapping of strategies*
- *Good classroom management*
- *Engagement of students*
- *Mel Levine metacognitive approaches*

Teachers select all of their own materials, sometimes as individuals, sometimes by department or grade level, and sometimes through school wide decision making (for example, the two new reading series). There are no district mandates but there is an unwritten “expectation that materials and instruction line up with standards.”

Materials and programs are evaluated “by seeing if we’ve met the benchmarks.” Teachers use both pre- and post- assessments. At the end of each year a cooperatively developed survey is used to determine concerns about programs and set a framework for continued improvement.

A new daily schedule blocks out uninterrupted time for core subjects. The new schedule began with a consensus concerning needs. After the principal developed the framework, other faculty members helped to spot potential problems and to make adjustments. Teachers and

administrators are happy with the way the new schedule is working. “My schedule is delightful.” “This year it’s been wonderful.”

Most special education students are served through pull-outs, with some push-ins in grades five and six. Four special education teachers work with elementary students; one of these teachers delivers direct instruction to about ten students. There is a great deal of communication between regular and special education teachers.

Struggling students are identified by classroom teachers and/or by scores on standardized assessments. A child study team determines needs and makes recommendations. A lot of one-on-one instruction is provided for struggling students. Classroom aides are viewed as a tremendous asset in helping students who need extra time and attention.

There is no formal gifted and talented program, but enrichment is offered to all students. “Every kid is gifted and talented.” However, some teachers see a need for a specific program for high-performing students.

Naples Elementary has no English language learners.

**Monitoring: Gathering, Analysis, and Use of Data**

The Effective Schools process is used for establishing and monitoring district and school goals. An Effective Schools survey every spring notes successes and areas needing improvement. A team analyzes the survey results and shares the information in the fall so that continued improvement can be made. The shared decision making team has been in place for about fourteen years and has been an important factor in school success.

Naples educators are unanimous in crediting New York State standards and assessments for encouraging high quality instruction and emphasis on student achievement.

The director of curriculum and instruction coordinates data analysis and distribution. She describes “the critical piece” as providing the disaggregated data to individual teachers, so that they can use the information in their teaching. It’s “the human element in a small district” that makes the statistics meaningful so that they drive instructional improvement.

The district uses TONYSS (Tests of New York State Standards) in third-, fifth-, and sixth-grade ELA and math plus fourth-grade science and math and fifth-grade writing to identify needs. Teachers also use assessments from textbook series such as Harcourt Brace to monitor student progress. Small classes enable teachers to monitor the progress of individual students.

Electronic systems are in place for monitoring progress of special education students, but the district uses paper files for regular education.

Monitoring of teacher performance is both formal and informal. Tenured teachers are evaluated once a year, while non-tenured teachers have formal evaluations three times a year. The principal visits classrooms informally every day and consults with teachers on a continuing basis. Mutual respect between teachers and principal is evident in the many positive comments about the evaluation process.

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

Teachers describe a strong recognition process for students, highlighted by a monthly award program. Evidence of student recognition lines the hallways, with certificates and bulletin board displays celebrating student achievement, attitude, and effort. Teachers and administrators make frequent contact with parents to note student accomplishments and improvements.

The Naples community provides helpful, continuing support for anyone who is struggling, whether staff or student. The 2004-5 school year, for example, was a challenging one for kindergarten, and everyone in the school community helped to address the issues and provide assistance. Resources have always been available for both staff and student interventions, whether the need is for additional professional development or for classroom aides.

As in most districts, the student promotion policy is a continuing issue. The philosophy on retention and promotion is that it needs to be considered on a case-by-case basis, with teacher, principal, psychologist, and parent involved. School policy requires that parents agree to any retention. Teachers feel that the primary grades are the best time to retain students if children need extra time, but there is some concern that students in upper grades feel that they will be promoted regardless of the quality of their performance. Last year, two students were retained—both in grade one.

Ever caring, teachers at Naples Elementary are constantly adjusting curriculum to be sure that everything is aligned and that specific student needs are met. Curriculum adjustment happens collaboratively by grade level and department as well as individually by teacher. Administrators recognize and celebrate the professionalism of faculty members.

In general, it is this attitude of high expectations and respect and concern for each other that makes the Naples school community such a high performance team. Supporting this attitude are the skills and resources that put the foundations under the shared vision. Naples Elementary School is proud of its students and staff.

### **In a Nutshell**

Naples Elementary School takes advantage of its small size to offer students a child-centered, caring community, which is itself closely linked to the larger community. Teamwork and collaboration characterize both the school and the district.

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<sup>o o</sup> Demographic Data are from the 2003-04 New York State Report Card (<http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/reprcd2004/home.shtml>). This case study was conducted in spring 2005.

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