

Best Practices Case Study

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Smallwood Drive Elementary School Amherst Central School District, Amherst, NY

School Context

Smallwood Drive is one of two elementary schools in Amherst, NY, a residential suburb of Buffalo. According to district administrators, regardless of socioeconomic level residents encourage high standards: “The pressure from a community that places great value on higher education keeps us on our toes.” At the same time, with no new industry coming into the area, the district is challenged to limit growth in spending while also meeting the needs of a changing community as poorer families and more high-needs children move into the district from the city.

The school serves approximately 670 students, including a full-day kindergarten. More than 90 percent of the students are white; about 8 percent are eligible for free or reduced lunch. In May 2005, Smallwood Drive was named one of 9 best-performing elementary schools in Erie and Niagara Counties by *The Buffalo News*. In the newspaper’s study of fourth-grade state assessment scores and family income, Smallwood was the only suburban school to make the list. In the same year, another area publication, *Business First*, ranked Smallwood number one in its analysis of schools with both high achievement rates and below-average expenditures.

Student Demographics 2003-04, Smallwood Drive Elementary School²

	Smallwood Drive	Amherst CSD	New York State
% Eligible for Free Lunch	4.4%	12.2%	37.0%
% Eligible for Reduced Lunch	3.2%	4.6%	7.2%
% Limited English Proficient	0	0	6.8%
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution			
% African-American	4.7%	14.3	19.9%
% Hispanic/Latino	0.3%	1.4%	19.4%
% White	91.6%	81.3%	53.7%
% Other	3.5%	3.0%	7.0%
% Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards on Grade 4 ELA Assessment	91%	78%	63%
% Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards on Grade 4 Math Assessment	99%	89%	79%

The district's web site declares Smallwood's mission to be always "learning, growing, changing. ... Our belief is that all children can learn and do so differently. Therefore, we are proud to offer contemporary curriculum and instructional strategies, as well as a choice of programming for all. The Smallwood staff is committed to accommodating learning styles in an appropriate learning climate and focusing on academic achievement." Results of interviews with administrators and staff affirm that the school's mission statement is a most apt description of what transpires on a daily basis.

Best Practices Highlights

Smallwood Drive Elementary School is characterized by:

- ✍ Clarity and consistency of purpose
- ✍ Conscious pursuit of excellence
- ✍ A climate of trust and support
- ✍ A balance of rigor and joy
- ✍ Attention to individual needs and accomplishments.

Clarity and Consistency of Purpose

According to one district administrator, "We need a well-communicated, articulate image of what we're doing in schools." At Smallwood, that image is of a principal and teachers with a shared vision in which student success is at the forefront, and every action, event, and expenditure is designed to make learning and teaching happen:

Children come first, as it says in our mission statement.

What's best for kids is our mantra. By extension, that means the single most influential factor is the classroom teacher and the quality of instruction.

We all relate to children on a one-to-one basis, as if they belong to us. Parents know we're a huge group of child advocates.

What goes on in the classroom is by design. Everything we do is deliberate.... Nothing is left to happenstance.

Evidence for these declarations is clear. That teaching and learning are priorities is seen in the high expectations of teachers and students, consistent attention to the elements of good lesson design, substantial commitment to professional growth, and thoughtful use of student outcome measures, diagnosis, and differentiated instruction.

Conscious Pursuit of Excellence

One administrator used the term "a fire from within" to describe the power of using staff expertise to generate interest in a project or program. That expression could just as well describe the spirit of inquiry, enthusiasm for learning, and search for a broad repertoire of effective practices that are revealed in the interviews:

There's an expectation for excellence. We teach that to our teachers, who teach it to their students.

[We] don't just say well, we've taught this before so we'll leave it the way it is; we're constantly trying to make it better.

The three of us plan everything together...It's a good time to reflect, so we can make it better the next time.

Although our students do well ..., we always need to be learning.

I never feel that I've gotten there. I always feel like I'm still on the way – a sign of the Smallwood teacher.

In college classes we learned one way; here we learn lots of ways to do things.

The atmosphere is one of changes. We need to be flexible and adjust, anticipate and respond.

Evidence for Smallwood's search for excellence is clear from their unwillingness to settle for present levels of success. It is clear in the district's forward-thinking approach to problems, as seen in its mentor program and the study of changing family structures, and in teachers' attention to document-based questions, mathematical thinking, and editing skills – all of which were developed in response to anticipated needs. And it is clear from the many efforts to encourage depth and breadth of learning, for both students and teachers.

A Climate of Trust and Support

A climate of respect is visible at Smallwood. Relationships with the Board of Education and the teachers' union are characterized as "collegial." Connections to parents are seen as essential and are nurtured by a variety of events and home-school communications. District administrators and the principal encourage teachers to explore options, invite them to participate in decision making, and provide whatever supports are needed for implementation:

From the superintendent on down, we have the support to initiate and implement programs we believe in, that are philosophically sound.

The union is very collegial and professional; we have a long-standing and supportive relationship.

We have a close connection with the parents.... We all know that what's important to the parent affects the child.

As a new teacher, my team has totally taken me under their wing and embraced me. I have total support from them.

Teachers rely on each other as professionals and aren't afraid to ask for help. We know we can accomplish more together than separately.

We do team planning, so I feel comfortable if one of us represents the others [on a committee].

There's no big competitiveness here. We leave that at the door for the benefit of the children and their success.

Trust and support are revealed to some extent at every level. What began as the superintendent's mentor program is now largely taught by the mentors themselves. Professional development, while often inspired by experts beyond the school, is nourished by invitations for teachers to share what works in their classrooms. Program and materials adoption occur only after intense study and approval by teachers. And instruction that encourages problem solving, decision making, and self-reflection suggests that students are the beneficiaries of Smallwood's "permission-giving" environment.

A Balance of Rigor and Joy

When asked about key priorities, respondents convey an image of Smallwood as a place where both children and teachers are challenged to be the best that they can be and have a good time doing so. Student learning is designed to be "fun," with many opportunities for hands-on activities and engagement in solving meaningful and complex problems. Teachers describe the school as an enjoyable and stimulating place to work, where their contributions are valued and association with colleagues extends beyond the school day:

We spend many hours putting things together so children will see that it all makes sense and get excited about learning.

[Our principal] encourages us to be our best, sometimes knows better than we do how to build our confidence and skills. My last ten years here, under her leadership, have been my greatest period of growth.

We all work hard, each at our own level, but we can play hard, too. I don't think anyone really feels left out of anything.

This is a fun place to work. We have social events like Fat Fridays and the Welcome Back Party.... The staff development is great; I know I would not have come so far as a teacher had I not been here.

Rigor and joy are part of the culture at Smallwood. They are seen in the district's commitment to building teacher knowledge and capacity, the spirit of innovation that spurs teachers to seek out new programs and to "go with it" when they are enthusiastic, the modeling and encouragement to reward good works, and the longevity of many district and school personnel.

Attention to Individual Needs and Accomplishments

For Smallwood staff, "Children come first" is not just a slogan. They speak of meeting "all the time" with other professionals in the building to share information about individual children, look at data, monitor progress, plan interventions, or evaluate results. Teachers refer to their own efforts to observe students and their work and to use those observations to design appropriate instructional activities. When they talk about doing "what's best for children," it is clear they are referring to THIS child:

Our first priority is being child advocates, success for every individual child.

We see unbelievable progress when we take children from where they are.

[We address] many different learning styles. Parents and children have choices – multi-age, looping, traditional – to help children learn best.

We need to first develop relationships that make learning possible, then let children know they are accepted for who they are.

We take an eclectic approach – pull what’s best for children, then keep the rest until we see a need for a particular child.

We spend a lot of time in placement of our children and try to match up teachers with students to open the door for individual success.

Concern for each child’s unique needs and gifts is seen in the district’s attention to educating the whole child, through, for example, the wellness and enrichment programs and rich involvement in cultural activities. It is seen in the principal’s encouragement of teachers’ own research to support use of particular strategies or programs. It is seen as well in the thoughtful examination of data and in teachers’ habitual use of a wide range of formal and informal measures to obtain a full picture of each child’s achievement.

A Closer Look

The characteristics described above – clarity and consistency of purpose, conscious pursuit of excellence, climate of trust and support, balance of rigor and joy, and attention to individual needs and accomplishments – 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. After a brief description of supporting factors, the sections below expand on the characteristics in the context of the study’s framework.

Supporting Factors

When asked to identify factors contributing to the school’s level of success, respondents are quick to identify each other. District administrators credit a dynamic principal with “an intense focus on kids.” The principal celebrates her dedicated staff, who share a vision, work hard, and collaborate “all the time.” Teachers affirm their principal as a strong leader who “believes in the strength of her teachers,” but they also describe their peers as being committed to improving their craft and to the success of each child. They are equally appreciative of the support available to them from other professional staff in the building: psychologist, reading specialist, and social worker.

A common vision unites school efforts. High achievement is emphasized, but within the context of a supportive community. “There’s an expectation for success, but with a safety net so if they don’t reach those high expectations they don’t fall with a thump. Our children... are happy to be here; that’s where learning begins.” The principal likens an effective school to a well-designed emergency room, in which a plan is in place but everyone is ready if the unexpected occurs.

Communication with stakeholders is a priority at the district, school, and classroom levels. Representatives of the teachers’ association take active roles in designing the Professional Development Plan, determining the criteria for the portfolios required of non-tenured teachers, and hiring new administrators and staff. Parents, while not in decision-making roles, come out in large numbers for school events and are kept informed of their children’s progress and school initiatives through Welcome Back Day, open houses, curriculum fairs, a fourth-grade Reading Night, portfolio conferences, class newsletters, and a general open door policy. “When parents know what we’re doing and why, there’s buy-in,” notes one administrator.

Curriculum and Academic Goals

Smallwood teachers view state standards and district expectations as opportunities to examine and improve teaching and learning. When asked about the impact of the state accountability system, respondents were unanimous in stressing the positive. “It has made us look inward, to ask what to add, what to throw out, and what to change,” noted one administrator. Few teachers use test prep materials, yet everyone is mindful of the kinds of thinking required by the tests. “We do math journals, said one first-grade teacher, “so students will know that how they did it is as important as the answer.” And when a teaching assistant asked how to best use her time as a “Special Friend” (to a student), the reading specialist suggested reading poetry together. “Perhaps the model of rhythm and language will help him with the literature section on the Grade 4 test,” she stated.

When considering adoption of new programs and materials, teachers begin by examining the degree of alignment with state standards. A district charge to develop essential questions for each social studies theme prompted teachers to examine their instructional activities for continuity from grade to grade. Even before document-based questions appeared on the state social studies assessment, staff members were anticipating their arrival. “We just knew it was coming and had to get our kids thinking that way and writing that way and researching in the library that way.” Similarly, upon hearing about possible changes to the state ELA assessment, teachers began to discuss the use of common editing symbols across the grades. The standards are reinforced by the wellness teacher, who integrates those of her health and fitness curriculum with those of other content areas, and the enrichment teacher, who highlights relevant standards when proposing any all-school projects to her colleagues.

The district cycles through the curriculum areas; this year the focus is on mathematics, as well as alignment with the new requirements for No Child Left Behind. Curriculum decisions begin with a volunteer core group of teachers representing each grade level – the math team, the science team, etc. Results of their deliberations are taken back to the grade-level teams, and any new initiatives are followed up with appropriate training. Along the way, the focus of discussion is always “How will this help us to do better what we do now?” and “What do we need to help us be successful?”

Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building

Capacity building at Smallwood begins with hiring the best; that is, “people with a focus on children.” Recruitment is far-reaching, and the process is an extended one. Screening committees include parents, teachers, and administrators. In the case of principal selection, one committee formulates questions and a second committee interviews the candidates. For teaching candidates, a team of mentor teachers observes each candidate conduct “a teaching episode,” scripts the lesson, and requests a written reflection on the lesson by the teacher before selecting those to be interviewed by another team.

Undergirding the strong support for staff development is the mentor program, which begins with a two-and-a-half year training period in elements of instruction and clinical supervision for volunteers and provides the foundation for all learning, teaching, and teacher evaluation in the district. “It gives you the language, a way of thinking about and analyzing your own teaching,” says one teacher. “I know I’m better at what I do as a result,” says another. “It’s the leadership taking instruction as a priority and putting authority and support behind it.”

Teachers note that elements of instruction used to be taught by administrators, but now that component is taught almost entirely by the mentor teachers. This practice has given new teachers a head start on establishing rapport with their colleagues. Mentor teachers are enthusiastic about their leadership role: “Interaction with our peers is unusual in the U.S. We talk about the parents, the kids, but not our teaching. Here, it’s easy for us to talk about our teaching.”

The district’s commitment to professional growth is noted within the school community for its scope, intensity, and influence. Every Monday, time after the regular school day is dedicated to planning; in addition, teachers are given common planning periods and participate in professional book clubs and workshops in the summer. “We strive to put the major focus inside the four walls of the classroom,” states the superintendent, and teachers’ comments show this attention is not misplaced. Elements of instruction, mathematical thinking, classroom management, children of poverty, and word study were specifically mentioned as areas of staff development that made teachers think about their practice in new and helpful ways. “When I look back on my first year said one teacher, “I can hardly recognize myself!” Teachers express gratitude for the quality and relevance of the ideas they encounter and the valuing of in-house expertise. “It honors and respects each of us and makes us ask questions of each other.”

Collaboration is ongoing, especially between those who “loop” with another grade and who teach the multi-age classes. Teachers report having the freedom and encouragement to observe each other, and several credit their colleagues for improvements to their own practice.

Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements

The picture of high-quality instruction conveyed at Smallwood reflects teachers’ staff development experience. They strive for a warm, safe environment; lessons that include an anticipatory set, modeling, guided and independent practice, and closure; lots of reading and writing; active engagement in learning; a balance of large- and small-group instruction; and frequent checks for understanding. Nothing is mandated, although it is expected that everyone will address the Essential Questions in science and social studies, the main topics in the math series, and the use of the Early Literacy Profile as a diagnostic tool.

Effective practice is ensured in several ways. “Once something is in place, it is expected,” and the principal monitors instruction by making regular visits to classrooms and collecting lesson plans, always responding to them in writing. Once a month, teachers prepare written reflections on a lesson, then come together to discuss their reflections. When notable practices are observed, teachers are asked to share their work at staff meetings.

Special education, remedial, and enrichment services are available to qualified students, but the focus is not so much on placing children in programs as it is on providing appropriate instruction. The district has invested time and money in building knowledge about differentiation, and it shows. In the primary grades, learning centers are planned with students’ differing needs in mind. Teachers are evaluated for their ability to address the diversity in the classroom. Curriculum revisions and new materials are selected in part for their potential to help teachers make appropriate adaptations.

Teachers continually seek better ways to reach all their students. One example was described by a fifth-grade teacher who was discouraged by his efforts to differentiate math instruction for advanced and struggling students. He and a colleague met over the summer “to solve the problem.” Their plans resulted in a reconfiguration of each math unit to include a list of

component objectives, a pretest, a self-assessment chart, targeted lessons, and a related extension activity – each to be used in the interest of whether or not individual students “Need It –Have It – [or] Got It.”

“We can easily assume too much about students’ level of knowledge and miss those who have needs,” states one of the teachers. Later, they were invited to present their strategy at a series of staff meetings, and now at least one of their colleagues is using it in her own classroom.

A focus on instruction that is appropriate to students’ needs is especially evident in the enrichment program. Although mini-courses for advanced students are the heart of the program, courses are always open to students whom teachers feel would especially benefit from the topic under study. All-school projects, author visits, and a wide range of cultural experiences provide additional opportunities for students at various levels of ability to discover and nurture their unique gifts.

Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis and Use of Data

In addition to the state tests, teachers administer published tests that parallel the state assessments “to anticipate needs for students of concern.” Results are stored in Data Warehouse, a computerized data base that school personnel use to monitor achievement over time or when considering changes in the curriculum. For example, current plans to adopt a particular math series grew out of their analysis of students’ math performance over the past five years. But data management is not so much a system at Smallwood as it is part of the ethos. When teachers mention the assessments they give, they talk about their benefits in the same breath: “It gives a lot of good information about pre-reading skills.” “It really shows where they are as spellers.” “It’s great for showing parents what they can do as writers.” Teachers speak highly of the Early Literacy Profile, which the district adapted from the state’s version and continues to improve upon. This year, for example, they added the Reading Interview: “We ask about attitudes toward reading...each year the questions get more involved so they have to think more seriously about themselves as readers.

Teachers speak about doing hands-on science assessments, collecting writing samples, recording oral reading errors, giving pre-tests, using checklists and rubrics, asking kids to rate themselves – not because they are required but because teachers see their value. “We’re supposed to do two running records a year,” says one teacher. “I do about five, to make sure I’m challenging students appropriately – on their level and what skills they need.”

“We have a lot of meetings,” report the teachers, who consider assessment data, daily work, and observations from other professionals in the building when planning interventions. Sometimes teachers will plan or report on their own research. One such study analyzed the assessment scores of students assigned to a “Special Friend” (an adult in the building – other than the child’s classroom teacher – who meets with the child one day a week before or after school just to talk about what is going on in the child’s life). They found that the students who had both Academic Intervention Services AND a “Special Friend” attained the highest scores. The extra adult becomes “a warm blanket, a security place” that makes learning possible, notes the reading specialist.

Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustments

Recognition for good works is subtle but significant at Smallwood. It serves as an integral part of the caring environment and appears in several forms.

It comes in the form of time and resources – time to plan and reflect and resources for use in the classroom and in program development. When the physical education teacher was awarded a national grant to establish wellness centers in each school, the district supported her by providing a substitute for a half-day a week so she could work on implementation. Staff development that is clearly tied to the school’s priorities is readily available. According to one teacher, “When it comes to professional development, I haven’t been denied anything,” either as a participant or as a presenter.

Recognition also comes in the form of encouragement to share successful practices. A recent series of workshops on a word study program, for example, was prompted by its successful use by several teachers and the principal’s encouragement to share their experience “so others can learn from you.” Sharing information is ubiquitous in the building. People speak of ideas “spreading outward like a web” and “teachers from models becoming models.” It’s easier for change to happen, says the principal, “when the experts are already in the building.”

Recognition also comes in the form of small but symbolic gifts from the principal: a thank you note in the mailbox, a Thousand Grand candy bar to say “You’re one in a million,” an “Orchid Award” certificate for a job well done. Teachers respond with parties or flowers for their peers, as the occasion demands, and students nominate each other for an “Orchid Award” as well. Achievement is expected, but it is also celebrated.

In a Nutshell

Administrators are the first to admit that the high socio-economic status of the community is one factor in Smallwood’s success. The district responds to the challenge conferred by that position by putting its resources where they most matter – in the people who teach their children. They hire the best teachers they can, invite those teachers to share in a common vision, and give them the space and the means to keep that vision alive and growing. Then those in authority stay around long enough to ensure that it happens.

² 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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