

Best Practices Case Study

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Traphagen Elementary School Mount Vernon (NY) City School District

School Context

The Mount Vernon City School District is “a tale of two cities.” In a suburb of New York City, the northern part of the district is relatively wealthy compared to the southern part. However, there are housing projects in both parts of the city. A teacher says, “There’s a lot of money in this community,” and “the community has changed a lot. It’s more diverse than it used to be.”

Traphagen, one of 11 elementary schools in the district, is in the northeast section of the district and serves approximately 385 students, K-6. According to a teacher, the school community has changed through the years. A long-time resident of the community and current teacher says there have been significant changes in the ethnic and socioeconomic composition of the community and reported “power plays” between different groups. A teacher says that in this context, “Sometimes you feel like you’re struggling to go up stream.”

Student Demographics 2003-04: *Traphagen Elementary School serves a largely African-American student population. It has higher than average state percentages of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch, but, unlike the state and district, has no LEP students. Percentages of students exceeding state standards in Language Arts and Math are higher than both the state and the district.*

	Traphagen	Mt Vernon CSD	New York State
% Eligible for Free Lunch	42.4%	41.0%	37.0%
% Eligible for Reduced Lunch	18.0%	11.0%	7.2%
% Limited English Proficient	0 %	10.2%	6.8%
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution			
% African-American	93.3%	78.5%	19.9%
% Hispanic/Latino	4.8%	13.0%	19.4%
% White	.8%	7.2%	53.7%
% Other	1.1%	1.3%	7.0%
% Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards on Grade 4 ELA Assessment	96%	75%	63%
% Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards on Grade 4 Math Assessment	97%	86%	79%

The district is challenged by high poverty rates, a transient population, and a bad reputation, particularly at the middle and high schools.

There is a misconception about the district. The high school is very large and has had some bad publicity and so some people think the whole district is like that – but it isn't. When I say I work at Traphagen – if they are familiar with Mount Vernon they know what a good school it is.

Despite the challenges at the middle and high school levels, several of the elementary schools are able to consistently perform well on state assessments. Traphagen was selected as a U.S. Department of Education Blue Ribbon School in 2004 and highlighted in national and local media for “excellent results.” A teacher describes the challenges to the school and district:

The main challenge is eliciting parental involvement. In this city of four square miles there are two huge middle schools and one huge high school. Getting the parents involved in their child's school life is a challenge. They are working parents. It is not a high-income neighborhood. There are inner city type issues – drug abuse and violence. It would not be odd for a child to say they “heard gunshots last night – I couldn't do my homework.” Everybody has to be a teacher, counselor, and parent.

The principal meets these challenges with a focus on a “safe,” “calm” learning environment for children. The school climate is like “a small family.” A teacher says,

We have yearly functions with everybody from administration to custodians. The principal is family oriented – he brings that here. It's beyond professional. It's personal. The principal is very focused on academics, fairness, and considers teachers' feelings.

Best Practices Highlights

- **Vision of the School as a Family**

The school's success is due in part to the experienced team of teachers and administrators in the school building who bring a “family” feel to the school. Traphagen's principal of over 16 years, with more than 30 years in the district, is characterized as a “paternal figure.”

I think this environment is because the principal is like a paternal figure. He treats the extended school like it's his family. If something goes wrong – he's there in a way to protect you. That attitude goes down to we want to protect the school and the children. It's not, “I don't care what goes on next door.” We're one team: Everybody working for the same goals.

The school is very much like a family – they really look out for all the children – if you see a problem everybody works together as a team.

Traphagen's teachers characterize the school as having a cooperative environment where they see themselves working together for the common good of children.

- **Willingness to “Go Over and Above”**

With the support of school administration, teachers put the extra effort into creating weekend and summer “homework packets,” meeting within grade level to share ideas, and meeting across grade levels to make sure they are preparing children for the next grade.

We work as a team. We try to bridge the gaps between grade level – to always know what each teacher expects in each grade level.

The willingness, in the words of one teacher, to “go over and above” to help children learn pervades the school. This willingness is accompanied by actions valued and modeled by administration and implemented by teachers, including creating a good rapport with parents, detecting where students need help, sharing good instructional practices, and getting intervention services in place when needed.

- **Special Needs Are Really Special**

The principal takes pride that Special Education teachers and students are not “in the basement” at Traphagen and highlights the importance of special education students to the school:

[Special Ed. students] are part of the building. They are part of everything. We have a monthly assembly on values – each class has a child who gets a certificate to be in this. I’m proud of our special ed. students who are able to get up there and read about this at the assembly and not be laughed at. Some schools will not want to have special ed students – it doesn’t take many special ed students to bring you down.

A Closer Look

Curriculum and Academic Goals

Curriculum Mapping

The Mount Vernon City School District “2000-2005 Comprehensive Strategic Plan” includes as one of its goals implementation of districtwide curriculum mapping. For the 2004-2005 school year, the goal was to develop a map in English Language Arts that reflects,

a continuum of learning (complete with key concepts, essential skills, best teaching/learning practices and sample student work) encompassing grades pre-K through 12.

Another of the Plan’s goals for 2004-2005 was “to develop a districtwide curriculum mapping process for Mathematics...” Traphagen teachers say “curriculum mapping is “a work in progress.” Teachers now have a scope and sequence. This scope and sequence articulates what “needs to be done at what point in the school year.” In addition, academic goals for each grade level in each content area are stated in “Exit Outcomes” that are based on the state standards.

Evaluating the Curriculum through Consistent Teacher Feedback

Schools in the Mount Vernon CSD fill out curriculum maps every month. They also comment on the materials they use and how effective they were. This feedback is given to the superintendent of curriculum and instruction.

Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building

Mentoring the New and Retaining the Veteran

New administrators and teachers to the Mount Vernon CSD benefit from formal and informal mentoring programs and a recently increased salary schedule. Informally, new principals meet with veteran principals and also receive mentoring through BOCES and Teacher's College. District administrators say that they take pride in developing leaders from within. The District also recently began offering a "New Teacher Academy" that meets monthly with central office personnel; within the school, grade-level teachers mentor other new grade-level teachers informally. A teacher says that the "school has a lot of seasoned teachers," and the district is attempting to give these more seasoned teachers "more input" and more of a feeling that "they're part of the solution" through districtwide committee participation.

Building from Within through Staff Development

The district offers 4 days of staff development that pertain to curriculum every year and 3-4 half days of professional development at the school level. A teacher says, "We have a lot of experts in our building," and these teachers conduct workshops meant to share such insights as how to "dissect the 4th grade ELA" or provide "skills and strategies to have students become successful on state tests." At the building level, teachers say staff development has also focused on Balanced Literacy and Best Practices. Sometimes outside trainers and representatives from textbook publishers are brought in to do presentations.

Collaborating in Monthly Curriculum Meetings and Grade-Level Meetings

Districtwide committees in Math, Science, and Reading meet after school and sometimes on Saturdays. Each school sends one representative to each of the committees. A committee member says they collaborate on a variety of things in their meetings:

In math, if we are adopting a new text, it's the job of the committee to do that. We are developing the exit outcomes, curriculum mapping K-6, sample lesson plans K-6, pacing guide K-6, and then this is shared back at the school.

Grade-level meetings within the school also are scheduled regularly with fourth grade teachers meeting every Tuesday and 3rd, 2nd, 1st, and kindergarten twice a month.

January Grade Level Meetings 2004-2005

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
	4 th grade	3 rd grade	2 nd grade	
	4 th grade	1 st grade	Kindergarten	
	4 th grade	3 rd grade	2 nd grade	
	4 th grade	1 st grade	Kindergarten	

In addition to grade-level meetings, all teachers are required to attend one faculty and one curriculum meeting per month.

Instructional Programs, Practices and Arrangements

Consensus Building and Flexibility in Program and Materials Adoption

Instructional program decisions are made in committees. Typically publishers present their materials to committees, which then come to a consensus about instructional program and material adoptions. A teacher explains the process,

We selected our math and science this year. We met and gave feedback in a grade-level district meeting and then sent it to a math and science committee.

Although many programs are adopted districtwide, teachers also have input directly into what programs and materials they use in their classrooms. A teacher describes how some Traphagen teachers supplemented the Balanced Literacy program:

We found that some teachers weren't doing guided reading and working out of the basal – heat came down on principals – they made sure every school is doing Balanced Literacy. We felt we still needed to use phonics and grammar workbooks, too. Balanced Literacy is a lot of work. The principal is flexible about this.

Even though the district provided training in Balanced Literacy, it was “difficult for some teachers to get used to,” “some needed black and white.” Therefore, at the school level a basal was adopted.

Meeting Students Where They Are

Traphagen teachers are encouraged to “meet the students where they are.” They say they focus on excellence, and excellence in their school is not just about preparing for state assessments. The principal explains,

My philosophy is I know what you're doing well – I'm concentrating on state standards and not just the state tests.

Teachers at Traphagen do prepare their students for the state assessments through “replica” tests made in-house and other publisher-prepared materials, but the focus is on meeting children’s needs, including those with special needs. Traphagen Elementary School serves 65 Special Education students. According to a teacher,

Some people were concerned about the severely handicapped at this school. But then they see we are a complement to the school. Traphagen has all of the severely handicapped at the Elementary School level in the district. We have 5 special ed. classes in a fairly small school.

Special needs children at Traphagen get resource room services or are in self-contained classes. Teachers who work with special needs children say they “consult with teachers daily” concerning their students’ needs. A teacher explains how Special Ed. teachers meet their students’ needs,

In Special Ed we take the curriculum and modify it to children's needs and levels. We monitor and remediate whatever they need. Some children are currently test exempt – but most have to take the state test – we do our best to bring them up to their potential.

In addition to collaboration between classroom and Special Ed. teachers, Special Ed. students also reap the benefits of inclusion in a variety of activities at the school. Classroom teachers at Traphagen are...

...very accepting of special education. They include us in everything. [The students] have a very strong feeling of being included in everything from K to 6th. We are invited into shows

and the principal will carry wheelchairs down to the stage. They try to accommodate our needs. In [another school in district] we were in the corner.

Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data

The “Superintendent’s Report”

One of the ways district administrators monitor teaching and learning is through the “Superintendent’s Report.” Every month schools compile a summary, organized by grade level on an assigned topic such as “parental involvement,” or “evidence of student learning and achievement.” These reports are given to the Superintendent and presented to the Board. They are also given to parents who attend board meetings.

Test Item Analysis

State assessments along with other standardized tests are given across the district to new and continuing students. The district employs a Director of Assessment who uses computer item analysis to see how certain standards are being met or not. Weaknesses are shared with principals who in turn share this information with teachers. The Director of Assessment also meets with teachers to explain assessment scores. The Director explains the process,

There is a data warehouse where question by question item analysis, by teacher, by school is done. We also cluster questions based on the standards then go back and look at the standard that questions deal with and focus on these standards. I also run regular training in the district. The most important thing is to train principals on how to analyze results and take it back to school. Every 3-4 months I go to grade-level meetings and talk to teachers about if they understand the information from the data warehouse.

Classroom Assessments

In addition to state and standardized assessments, teachers use a variety of other assessments to monitor student performance. For example, to evaluate students’ success in Language Arts teachers use running records and the Development Reading Assessments (DRA), which provide for consistent monitoring (3 times a year) in small groups and centers. In 4th grade, teachers monitor students’ weekend homework packets and may provide interventions based on “what is coming home on these homework assignments.” Teachers also administer “replicas” (practice exams) for the state assessments at the beginning, middle, and end of the school year.

Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustments

After School and Tutoring Programs

Traphagen has a Math and Language Arts after school program. This is funded and mandated at the district level. The programs run two days a week for two hours. Teachers create a list of 25-30 fourth-grade children who would benefit the most from this intervention. ESL students also qualify for this program. In addition, tutoring occurs either during the school day or in a district tutoring program.

Academic Interventions

Any Traphagen child who fails the state ELA assessment in 4th-grade receives Academic Intervention Services in 5th and any 5th grader who fails the state Social Studies assessment receives services in 6th. Traphagen also employs CSTs (Child Study Teams) of “teachers, parents, a reading specialist, social worker, 5-7 people depending on the need.” This team meets, shows proof of difficulties, and makes recommendations for more diagnostics. Sometimes interventions are for social, not physical issues.

Recognitions

The Traphagen PTA and Chamber of Commerce sponsor a “Staff Recognition Day” every year including a luncheon. At this event, two staff members are chosen for the “Jenkins Award,” named after a community member who “had done a lot of work with students.” School and district administration also give letters of appreciation and employee awards yearly. Students’ work is recognized in monthly assemblies, after which awarded students receive juice and cookies in the principal’s office, and “Honor Roll” breakfasts that include a breakfast with the principal and PTA members.

Other Factors

Communicating with Parents

In a district where many parents work during the day, getting parents in the school is a challenge, but one that Traphagen has focused on in its “Objectives and Strategies on Raising Achievement.” Traphagen teachers have parent meetings about the state ELA assessment and present grades from students’ practice tests. According to one teacher, “Not everybody comes, but they’re pretty successful.” The school provides dinner and holds a makeup day where breakfast is served. A teacher says,

Here at this school – it’s a 50-50 thing. Some parents are involved. Some aren’t. At ‘Meet and Greet’ I get a big turn out. But then for other events we don’t get such a great turn out. Unfortunately not all the parents show up. We have a parent involvement day where parents can spend a day in the classroom. Sometimes not as many parents show up as I would like.

In a Nutshell

One of the distinguishing features of Traphagen is its inclusion of Special Education students in all parts of the program. This is consistent with the schools’ characterization of itself as a “family” in which everyone – from principal to custodial staff – looks out for the interests of the students.

° ° Demographic Data are from the 2003-04 New York State Report Card (<http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/reprcrd2004/home.shtml>). This case study was conducted in spring 2005.

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