

Best Practices Case Study

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Charles A. Upson Elementary School Lockport City School District, Lockport, NY

School Context

Charles A. Upson Elementary School is one of seven elementary schools in the Lockport City School District. Located on the Erie Barge Canal about 20 miles northeast of Buffalo and 15 miles east of Niagara Falls, the city was once one of the wealthiest in the county and home to many thriving industries. Today, however, several large businesses have downsized or moved out of the area, the city has shrunk by eight per cent, and lost manufacturing jobs have resulted in higher rates of poverty and unemployment. This demographic shift has been accompanied by significant cuts in state aid, resulting in the lowest per pupil expenditure in the county and a loss of 40 school positions in the last three years, including six administrative posts.

About 430 students attend this K-5 school, in addition to four sections of the district pre-kindergarten program. The fifty-year-old building is thoughtfully configured, with children's learning in mind. Custodial services are clearly important: a janitor is on duty during the day, and no dust or litter is visible. Classrooms are large and well equipped, showing a variety of seating arrangements and, in many cases, easy access to an adjacent room. Curtains frame the classroom windows, and displays of student work abound. Outside, an attractive courtyard, gardens, and fishpond provide evidence of hands-on learning.

Student Demographics 2003-04, Charles A. Upson Elementary School²

	Charles A. Upson	Lockport CSD	New York State
% Eligible for Free Lunch	37.1%	24.7%	37.0%
% Eligible for Reduced Lunch	6.8%	8.8%	7.2%
% Limited English Proficient	0	0.8%	6.8%
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution			
% African-American	10.5%	10.6%	19.9%
% Hispanic/Latino	3.2%	2.6%	19.4%
% White	85.2%	85.6%	53.7%
% Other	1.1%	1.2%	7.0%
% Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards on Grade 4 ELA Assessment	67%	74%	63%
% Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards on Grade 4 Math Assessment	95%	94%	79%

According to the school’s Mission Statement, “[T]he community of Charles A. Upson Elementary School promotes a positive atmosphere that encourages self-confidence, respect, and learning for all students.” Results of interviews with school administrators and teachers affirm this statement to be a fitting description of what transpires on a daily basis.

Best Practices Highlights

Charles A. Upson Elementary School is characterized by:

- ✍ A focused mission
- ✍ A caring climate
- ✍ A culture of collaboration.

A Focused Mission

Having to do more with less demanded that we be more focused.

The way this building is: What do we need to do? We need to help these kids.

If we have high expectations, they will. What we model, they learn; it filters down to performance.

We have fewer structures than many schools, but the ones we have are more focused.

Anything that is not relevant to student performance is a distraction. (From a presentation by the Superintendent to the Board of Education)

Although school personnel are challenged by the experiential diversity among their charges, socioeconomic differences are rarely discussed and are, in fact, a “totally unacceptable excuse” for allowing students to achieve less than their full potential. Instead, district personnel have directed staff and resources toward what one administrator describes as a “laser focus” on student achievement. To the principal and teachers, this means encouraging students to attain not only acceptable test scores but also a sense of themselves as learners.

The school’s mission is evident in their ongoing evaluation of individual needs and immediate assignment of services. It is seen in the staff development program that “gives teachers what they feel they need” to meet the range of abilities in their classes. It is visible in their outreach to parents and in their efforts to treat them as partners in the children’s education. It is evident, too, in the touchstone question that is invoked in every discussion of a new strategy or initiative: How will this help our students to be successful?

A Caring Climate

There’s a school wide feeling that these kids belong to all of us.

If students feel good about themselves, they perform better and treat others better.

Students here think, “I can be who I want to be and I CAN achieve and I WILL be supported.”

We're here for the kids. They have to know they can come to anyone in this building.

If kids see us care, they will see school as a place to learn and grow and care about each other.

Teachers describe Upson as a caring place, a home-away-from-home where physical and psychological safety, respect, cooperation, and the development of personal relationships are key. School personnel are intentional about developing this positive climate, and that intentionality is seen in the attention to character development in the curriculum and the outreach to the wider community.

Character education posters appear throughout the building, reminding students to take responsibility for their own actions and to be respectful of others. These concepts are reinforced by the school's emphasis on growing good citizens, consistent reliance on Glasser (Quality Schools) philosophy, and regular use of Help Boxes, which allow for students' anonymous reporting of bullying behavior. These efforts help to send the clear message that "This is your family when you're here. You need to treat each other as you would your family."

"Character builds community" is a commonly expressed theme, and several respondents mention the school's adoption of a platoon in Iraq and the students' delight when one of those soldiers visited the school upon his return home. Says one administrator, "When kids see things bigger than themselves they think, 'For the greater good of the community I need to be a good citizen.'"

A Culture of Collaboration

Staff are here for the right reasons – to help our students learn and to support each other.

We consistently collaborate on best practice for kids.

Our biggest resource is each other.

If anyone needs assistance, someone will help.

If you don't collaborate, it falls apart.

One administrator attributes the district's level of success to "a sense of the whole learning community as a learning family" whose members work together to provide "planned and proactive support to help kids succeed before they have an opportunity not to." This description is played out in the District Literacy Team, across grade levels within the school, and among individual teachers.

Meeting once a month, the District Literacy Team allows literacy specialists and representative classroom teachers to work on literacy initiatives such as revising the skills portion of the district's literacy portfolio, as well as to share best practices and resources. On occasion, group members will read and discuss a professional text, then report on the group's discussion at their school's faculty meeting.

The Site-Based Support Team at Upson meets for two full days in October for a concentrated look at students who have already evidenced needs in particular areas. They continue to meet weekly throughout the year to discuss the needs of individual students and prepare a success plan, to include designated responsibilities for the teacher, the parent, and the child.

Everywhere individual teachers portray delivery of instruction as a team effort. The special education consultant teacher communicates regularly with the classroom teachers of her students to keep informed of instructional plans and modify assignments. The primary (K-2) and intermediate (3-5) reading teachers are “in constant collaboration” and meet to assure a coherent program for those students moving from second to third grade. They describe their relationship with classroom teachers as one of “team teaching,” meeting daily to discuss lesson plans, then taking needed roles in students’ reading or writing instruction. Two fourth-grade teachers team intentionally, know each others’ students, and differentiate instruction using each other’s strengths. Although the principal acknowledges a scarcity of time for collaboration, at least two teachers per grade level are presently allotted common planning periods each week.

In addition, faculty meetings often become occasions for work teams. Recently such a meeting generated ideas for increasing parent involvement and assigning roles and responsibilities for implementing one of the proposed events. Collaboration with parents is a priority in the district and the school, and a variety of events and school-to-home communications are designed to help parents serve as active partners in their children’s education. The effectiveness of these combined efforts is revealed by one teacher who said, “If teachers [elsewhere] did more collaboration, schools would be more successful.”

A Closer Look

The characteristics described above – a focused mission, a caring climate, and a culture of collaboration – 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 these practices in the context of the five dimensions.

Supporting Factors

Teachers attribute a large part of the school’s positive climate to their principal. “She’s there for us,” states one teacher. “She lets us try new things and trusts we know what to do,” says another. Teachers feel supported in their work, noting that she has high expectations for staff but brings out their best -- giving them voice, asking how to help, supporting their professional lives, and allowing for individual ways of working. Her extensive knowledge of curriculum and the children and families in her care, further honed by her previous four years as district staff developer, contributes to her reputation as a skilled instructional leader.

Administrators describe the district’s relationship to the Board of Education as “usually constructive” and “supportive.” That relationship has been strengthened by the teachers’ union, whose representatives at Upson have helped persuade the Board to preserve programs and personnel. “By using data to prove success,” says the principal, “we were able to work together to maintain staffing.”

Various structures enable timely communication across the district and within the school. At the building level, regular online updates come from the principal. All teachers have email addresses and voice mail, and some have developed classroom web sites. Recent changes in the school's report cards and the curriculum "have been confusing to parents," intensifying the need to maintain regular home-school communication. In response, school personnel plan events such as the Spring Fling, which allow students to introduce the new math and reading series at different grade levels while also serving to make parents feel welcome, provide helping strategies, and alleviate fear and mistrust. In addition, the school tries to compensate for different parenting styles by providing assistance when children come to school unprepared or without their homework. Recognizing that some parents are unable to get to school, teachers speak of "lots of phone conferences" aimed at helping parents to see that "together we can make the most progress."

Curriculum and Academic Goals

The district's Strategic Plan for Continuous Improvement calls for the attainment of four distinct goals: higher academic achievement, fiscal responsibility, meaningful partnerships with businesses and the community, and a district culture in which individuals are respected, continuously learning, and focused on results. At Upson, these goals then become the focus of discussion at several faculty meetings. Teachers use flip charts and Post-It notes to identify building-level goals, including specific objectives, activities, and evaluations. These are discussed and refined, then sent home for parent feedback, because, "If we don't have buy-in, we won't be successful." Eventually, everyone signs off, indicating their support and intention to follow through on such activities as "Continue to use math exemplars" and "Seek out grants that support district/building initiatives."

The curriculum in Lockport was developed by central office staff and refined by teachers. Based on the state's standards documents but "made more specific and user-friendly," its development began with districtwide conversation addressing the language and philosophy of a standards-based curriculum. Guided by the Director of Elementary Education (who is also an elementary principal), committees discussed the nature of standards-based instruction and examined their own practice for alignment with the standards. According to the Director, the standards "changed the look of what children should be doing in the classroom. What children and teachers were doing had to change, and the evidence became important."

Finally, for each subject area, every teacher was given the list of performance indicators for each standard on a computer disk and asked to indicate the degree of proficiency that was expected of students at that grade level (Developing, Proficient, or Application). Consensus expectations were added to the chart and became the Common Set of Learning Objectives to be used for planning and instruction throughout the district. The objectives, which are periodically revisited and revised, are supplemented by suggested activities and lists of resources.

At Upson, the principal ensures that teachers have the curriculum documents and use them. During her observation conferences, she asks teachers to identify the performance indicators addressed in the lesson and the means for assessing them. In addition, grade-level teams work together to develop learning experiences that incorporate the standards, for example, recent efforts to integrate social studies and technology.

Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building

According to the superintendent, the pressure for accountability has meant a new role for building principals. Where previously they might have advocated for any funding and initiatives under their control, principals are now expected to identify those activities that drive positive results and then work to strengthen them. In addition, they are encouraged to think of school as a “service-based organization” and to “covenant with teachers and parents to uphold the standards of both the state and the community.” As one school leader indicates, “Expectation is a key word and we hire administrators with that in mind.”

District staff members who aspire to administrative positions are given opportunities to sharpen their skills; for example, to chair a committee, direct summer school, or take part in district discussions such as rethinking the middle school concept. Applicants for new positions are given a task in advance to present to the interview committee, a representative group of administrators, teachers, parents, and students. In addition, they are asked to respond to an essay question upon arrival, to “get a sense of how they write and their philosophical stance.” The selection process goes through several stages, ending with phone calls to those who provided references, interviews with the superintendent and assistant superintendent, and a final interview with the Board of Education.

Of Lockport’s eleven schools, ten have new building principals, who are supported by retired principals hired as mentors, a retreat or “day of new learning” in the summer, the Niagara County Principal Alliance, and “open door” access to the district administrators, including superintendent, and assistant superintendent. “We really want them to be successful,” says the latter.

“Hiring the most qualified staff makes your job a lot easier,” the superintendent tells his principals. With that in mind, he and his staff seek out candidates with knowledge of teaching, interpersonal skills, classroom management, New York State standards and assessments, and the district’s mission and characteristics. Teacher recruitment is “a strict process” involving a first screening by the principals and first and second interviews with committees of teachers and parents. Selected candidates are asked to demonstrate a prepared lesson on a common topic, after which finalists are interviewed by the assistant superintendent and, finally, the superintendent.

Once hired, new teachers attend a week-long orientation and are assigned a mentor for their first year. Professional development is ongoing within the district and “based on what teachers say they need” to be successful. For example, when district data showed that over 30% of second graders were not meeting the district benchmark, the Professional Development Team designed a staff development plan focusing on “balanced literacy,” including workshops on guided reading and learning centers. “We can already see teachers talking in consistent ways about reading and writing,” notes one administrator.

Like other aspects of Lockport’s program, staff development is guided by the vision of improved academic achievement, but building principals are encouraged to pursue their own avenues to that end. Constrained by limited funds, Upson’s School Improvement Team applied for, and was awarded, two mini-grants to support study groups and a series of workshops on constructivist teaching. “Our administrator is good about getting us books and speakers,” says one teacher. And, “Most teachers here take summer courses through the district or at college.”

Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements

Respondents' descriptions of high quality instruction reflect Upson's focus on curriculum, constructivism, and differentiation. "What are you learning?" the principal asks students when she visits a classroom. And, "How do you know the students are learning?" she asks the teachers. Good teachers know the curriculum and their students, design meaningful activities around student needs and the learning standards, make learning challenging and fun, and use a variety of ongoing assessments to refine their instruction. In addition, they know the state assessments and "keep them in their heads," but avoid teaching to the assessments. Instead, "the students are ready for the [test] because they're so involved in learning they've mastered [the material]," says one teacher. Also, "Our standards are so high anyway we don't drive our teaching by the accountability system," says another.

According to the superintendent, the climate surrounding increased accountability has meant a corresponding movement toward more standardized curriculum and away from "innovation at different buildings" in order to provide a more coherent program for students moving within the district. One result is the selection of a districtwide reading series, a process that involved 50 teachers piloting two programs selected by the central office. Following piloting, teachers spent three afternoons hearing reactions of the piloting teachers, examining the materials, and responding in writing to such questions as "How well is the series aligned with the state standards?" and "How much would you want to use from this series?" Upson teachers are pleased with the final selection, and some note the contrast with the math series that was selected earlier with less teacher involvement and less satisfaction. Teachers are also quick to note that though both series are "strongly encouraged," they are free to supplement with additional materials, literature circles, and study groups – "so students learn from each other." "Otherwise," says one teacher, "You may get to the point that it's the textbook that drives the program, and we don't want that."

Fiscal restraints have forced a closer look at services to struggling students, with the result that attention is focused on "differentiation, not remediation," according to the superintendent. Intervention begins in the classroom, where additional time, computer-aided instruction, tutors from Niagara County Community College, flexible grouping, and Reading Buddies are employed as needed to enable success. Two reading specialists provide in-class and pull-out assistance as needed to the primary and intermediate grades. Individual teachers volunteer for after-hours tutoring, and a before-school "Power Hour" provides extra experience with nonfiction, writing, and hands-on math activities for students in grades three and four.

Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data

A second-grade teacher summarizes the school's approach to monitoring by saying, "What we do is constantly evaluate the kids individually." The district concentrates its intervention resources at the K-2 levels, keeping class sizes at 18-20 students and using information from the district's Early Literacy Profile, running records, and teacher observation to determine needs and follow-up. School Improvement Teams look at the data (as well as any other building issues) and identify problems for the faculty, while Site-Based Support Teams address student needs. "We have our first SBST meeting in October," notes the teacher, so services begin within the first weeks of school.

Assessments in higher grades include those that accompany the reading and math series, the Tests of New York State Standards for reading and math administered in grades 3 and 5, knowledge of students' reading levels, student literacy portfolios, and diagnostic tests when

needed. The Technology and Assessment Office “can provide any kind of data we request,” indicates the principal, who reviews assessment results on a regular basis, often organizing it differently for provocative discussion. Teachers also take advantage of scoring sessions to examine response patterns. For example, in a recent analysis of ELA items, they found that “white, male, economically disadvantaged students seem to need our attention most in ELA.”

Teachers also use data for their own purposes. For two fourth-grade teachers, that process begins even before school starts, when they examine available information, identify students at risk, and develop tentative goals for those students. Once confirmed in the early weeks of school, the goals are shared with each child’s parents. “What’s nice is to see the students’ progress,” says one of the teachers.

It is worth noting that in Lockport data are valued at both the macro and micro levels. On the one hand, the superintendent pays close attention to district trends, cautioning against focusing on individual schools, where circumstances can fluctuate from year to year. On the other hand, data are used widely for identifying strengths and needs in individual students. “In the end,” says the principal, “names get attached to the information. Who or what will help these students?”

Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustments

Special recognition just reinforces the 70 % who will make it anyway. We want all students to make it, so we find other ways to recognize success.

“Traditional” forms of recognition do occur at Upson. Individual classrooms have their Perfect Attendance, Student of the Month, and Parents as Reading Partners winners. Daily announcements and awards assemblies honor student achievement. Displays of student work decorate the classrooms and hallways.

Good work is expected, but “it shouldn’t be a competition,” declares one administrator. Instead, students receive individual feedback, often in the form of a personal note from the Director of Elementary Education, a compliment added to the report card by the principal, or a phone call to a parent when things are going well. Most importantly, recognition is part of the ethos at Upson, where teachers know they are valued and strive – through their “commitment to curriculum, collaboration, and caring” – to engender that same sense of self-worth in their students.

In a Nutshell

As the school has faced declining resources, it has increased its focus on its mission of meeting individual student needs within a caring and collaborative culture.

[?] 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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