

# **Felicity Franklin Elementary School**

## **Case Study Report**

### **Executive Summary**

The case study provides insights into school improvement at Felicity Franklin Elementary School in Clermont County. In addition to the kindergarten through fourth grade elementary school, the Felicity Franklin Local School District includes a middle school and a high school. All levels of the local school district are contained in one building complex. The elementary school was challenged several years ago with low performance on the state tests.

From 2000 to 2004, the educators at the elementary school worked to improve student achievement, with notable results in reading, math, and science. The case study, which was based on interviews, observations, and document analysis completed in the spring of 2005, identified important contributors to the school's success. The study also identified possible concerns.

#### *Promising Practices*

- School leaders' practice of welcoming and soliciting input from the school and the community
- Partnerships between professional educators and parents—working together for the benefit of the students
- Professional educators' active support of local efforts to sustain the community
- Professional educators' use of inclusive instructional methods that enable students with disabilities to blend successfully into heterogeneous classrooms
- Educators' recognition strengths in the local culture, including the agrarian values of hard work and humility
- Incremental efforts to design curriculum and instructional methods that help students achieve academic success
- A school culture that focuses on respect, care for individual students, and professional collegiality

#### *Possible Concerns*

- The difficulty of reconciling test preparation strategies with the adoption of methods that are more meaningful as well as more closely tied to the local culture
- The difficulty of reconciling traditional instructional strategies with content standards that imply a constructivist approach to learning

#### **School Profile**

Felicity Franklin Elementary School is located at the southern end of the district's one-building complex. Inside the building, the school office is found to the right of the main entrance; classrooms are sorted along intersecting corridors that diverge at right angles from

the office. Hallways link the elementary school to the other schools: the fourth grade classrooms are located on the hallway that communicates with the fifth grade classrooms of the middle school. The elementary school nevertheless maintains its own leadership, identity, and culture. The public library is located across a short diagonal from the elementary school; the school also has its own library, with an inviting collection of children’s literature. The school library hosts Family Reading Night each week, year-round.

The new school (completed in 1997, replacing one reportedly constructed in 1898) is orderly, brightly lit, spotless, quiet, and cheerful, with students’ work displayed along the hallways. Information about the school is provided in Table 1, and information about the district is provided in Table 2.<sup>1</sup>

Table 1: Felicity Franklin Elementary School Profile

School	Average Daily Enrollment	452
	Grade Levels	K-4
	Attendance Rate	94.5%
Students	Percent Minority	1.4%
	Percent Disabilities	11.5%
	Percent Disadvantaged	45.1%
Teachers	Number of Teachers	29
	Percent with at Least a Master’s Degree	62.1%
	Average Years of Experience	15
	Average Salary	\$50,175

Table 2: Felicity Franklin Local School District Profile

ODE District Rating	Effective
District Enrollment	1214
Total Per Pupil Expenditure <sup>2</sup>	\$9,341
Median Family Income <sup>3</sup>	\$39,643

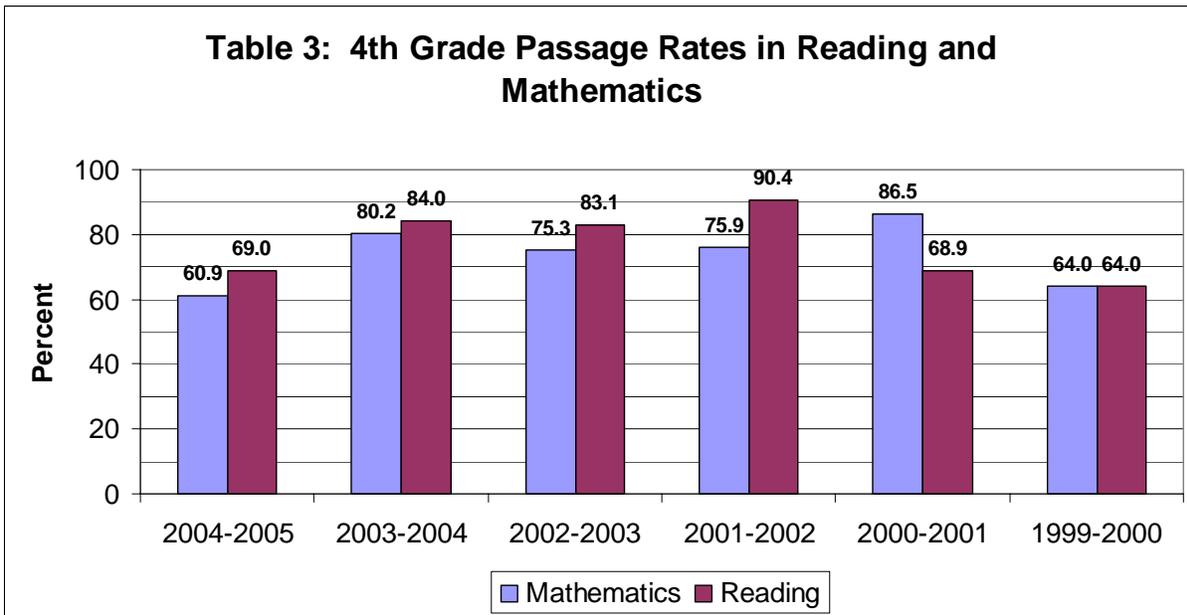
The school demonstrated considerable improvement in academic achievement, with a substantial jump in performance in mathematics between 1999-2000 and 2000-2001 and in reading between 1999-2000 and 2001-2002. Six-year achievement trends for 1999-2000 through 2004-2005 appear in Table 3. As the data show, however, 2004-2005 performance seems to be much lower than performance in the previous year. In fact, it is almost back to 1999-2000 levels. Nothing in the qualitative data collected in this case study offers any suggestion about conditions contributing to this rather dramatic decrease.

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise specified data come from the 2004-2005 interactive report cards available on the website of the Ohio Department of Education.

<sup>2</sup> This information comes from the 2003-2004 Common Core of Data compiled by the National Center for Education Statistics.

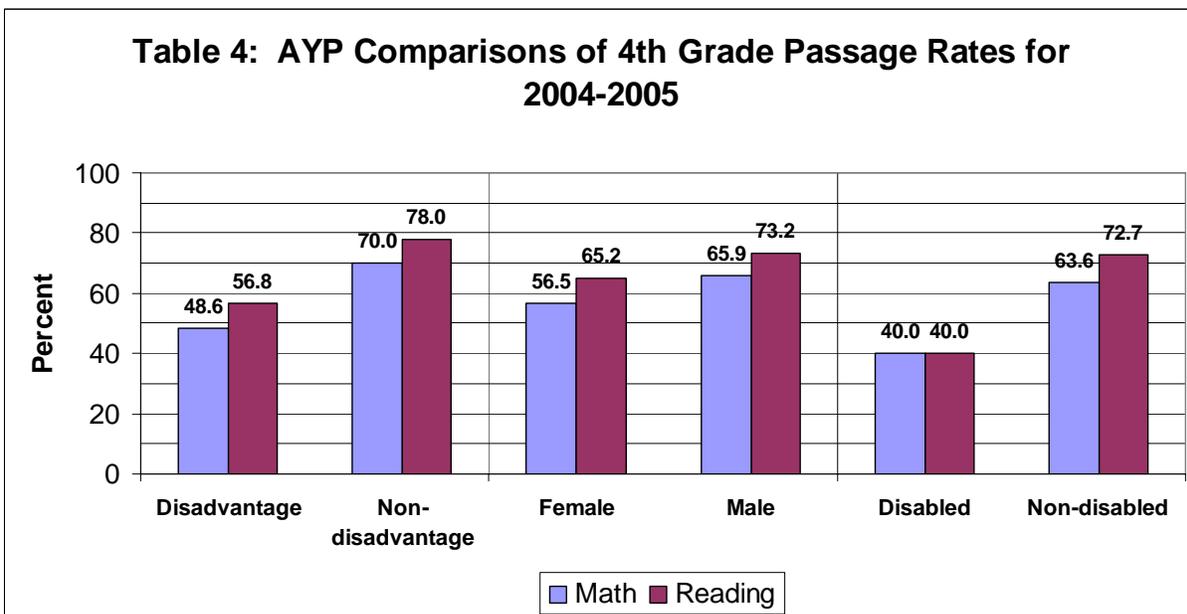
<sup>3</sup> Information from the Census 2000 School District Demographics Project, available through the National Center for Education Statistics.

Table 3: 4<sup>th</sup> Grade Pass Rates in Reading and Mathematics



The implementation of the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB), which requires that separate test scores be reported for key subgroups of students, permits a finer-grained performance summary. Table 4 provides some of the relevant comparisons for 2004-2005. These data reveal some fairly serious differentials in achievement based on the status categories of economic disadvantage and disability.

Table 4: AYP Comparisons of 4th Grade Pass Rates for 2004-2005



## Methods

A team of three project researchers conducted individual semi-structured interviews with eight teachers, the principal, the district superintendent, the curriculum director, two parents and three non-parent community members. In addition, they conducted five focus group interviews – each with four or five students from a different grade level. Individual interviews lasted from 30 to 90 minutes each, and focus-group interviews lasted from 20 to 30 minutes each. The researchers also conducted observations in 10 classrooms and reviewed relevant documents such as teacher-made tests, lesson plans, school handbooks, worksheets and continuous improvement plans.

All interviews were transcribed, and transcripts, observation forms and documents were collected in an electronic data base. Data coding and analysis was accomplished through the use of the software program Atlas-TI. Initial coding of data involved classifying the data in relationship to 48 *a priori* codes that identified a wide range of school policies and practices. Conceptually related codes were then combined to create broader categories. The final step involved the review of categorized data in order to identify emergent themes with potential explanatory power.

To develop the case study, the researcher drew on data relating to four salient categories: academic focus, leadership, school structures and culture, and parent and community engagement. Discussion of two emergent themes revealed meaningful linkages across these categories.

### Parent and Community Engagement

The story of parent and community engagement emerges as the most prominent theme in the interviews at Felicity Franklin Elementary School. This story unfolds in four stages. First, there is a community with a long-standing attachment to the school. Second, the school makes efforts to engage the community. Third, the school deepens its engagement. Finally, the community renews efforts to take responsibility for the district.

#### *Attachment*

Like the other schools in the district, Felicity Franklin Elementary School occupies a central location in the minds of faculty and community members. While such attachment is commonplace in rural schools, it does not always translate to engagement. Two teachers at the elementary school described their allegiance this way:

Well, this is my home school.... I taught one year away, and wanted to be back in my own community.

It's a small community, and the school is the main thing in this community. Everything is focused toward this school. Anything that happens in the school, the whole community knows.

A parent said of the school, "It's the backbone of the community."

Despite this solid attachment, many of those interviewed said that the active participation of parents and community members had not been welcomed by school leaders until rather recently. One parent, for instance, said "I don't remember my mom being involved in the school insofar as doing a lot of activities. It just wasn't something that you did back then."

### *Opening the School*

Several accounts suggest that long-standing policy behavior had, until recently, stood in the way of the school's ability to make use of the legacy of community attachment. As one interviewee explained,

The biggest change has been the change in philosophy. For example, when I first came [many years ago] ... I became [involved]. When I suggested ... that it would be good if we had parent volunteers come in and help in the classroom, and I was going to bring it up ... [I was told,] "You don't understand this district; you don't understand the people; you're new here; and we don't have parent volunteers in this school."

Today it certainly seems that attachment *and* participation are common. How did this happen? For many educators and parents, information about the school's low performance represented a "call to arms," reminding them of the importance of joining forces in support of students' learning.

### *Engaging the Community*

Many interviews disclosed a sense of strong embarrassment at the showing of Felicity Franklin schools in the first years of Ohio's accountability rankings. Initially, the ranking was "Academic Watch," and the next year it was even lower – "Academic Emergency." School and community appear to have rallied, working in a more coordinated way than had been the case in the recent past.

Community members, teachers and parents all reported that a sense of urgency prevailed. The implied threat to the district's honor may have helped the school to engage a capacity that was present in the community but that had not been accessed previously by professional educators. One interviewee witnessed that capacity (first passage below), and another (second passage) described its practical character:

Well ... we're a poverty area; we know that – it's brought to the attention of the media all the time. Felicity ... you know people don't realize that we are a tight knit community. We had a student who ... had to have a double-lung transplant, and the community all banded together to get the money to send her to Chapel Hill to have this done. So, we're a good community.

Yes, everybody knows everybody else's business, but at the same time, because it's known, things seem to get tackled and taken care of faster, not only expediently, but properly, through the proper channels.

It may be that this capacity existed across the school and community boundary because so many educators (reportedly about half) live in the district. A sizable proportion of those educators, moreover, are life-long members of the community.

Drawing on this capacity, the district's educators asked the community what it expected of its schools. Possibly, the needs assessment process required as part of continuous improvement planning prompted this approach to the community. Of this approach, one teacher reported,

Actually, first it involved surveying. We surveyed different community people; we surveyed the teachers; we surveyed students; we collected data and then we decided what the community felt about the academics.

Similar statements were made by others. Another teacher provided more detail about the school's response to this threat to the community's status:

That's about the time that our curriculum director came on board, administrators got on board with the whole idea and we started thinking about "what do we need to do as a school to change?" And then the continuous improvement started, we started the needs assessment, *surveyed parents that we just randomly selected* [emphasis added].

Apparently, school personnel approached a wide cross-section of parents ("parents that we just randomly selected"), an act of engagement whose significance might be easy to overlook. For a system that had previously discouraged the participation even of committed parents, this move certainly seemed unusual.

### *Owning the Community*

Deepening the initial engagement, "owning the community," may be an ongoing project, but it can be understandably tense at times. The tension may emerge in three realms: (1) hiring, renewal, and community; (2) improving the community; and (3) navigating social class issues.

*Hiring, renewal, and community.* One realm in which this tension can manifest itself is the hiring of staff. The school is one of the largest employers, quite likely the largest, within the township. Local jobs are important—they help families avoid long commutes, which are all too common in the district. A vacant position for elementary school aide reportedly drew 30 applicants.

Although the board of education requires non-certified staff to reside in the district, teachers and administrators need not. The lack of a residence requirement is thought to provide hiring options necessary for faculty renewal and succession. Nonetheless, about half the elementary school teachers do live in the district or a very short distance from it. Several of those interviewed who had been hired from a more distant location have chosen to move to the township. Evidence from the interviews suggests that the school's success in improving its accountability standing over the last several years now represents an advantage in recruiting new educators and possibly other new community members. Because rural areas tend to lose population, this sort of renewal process helps to sustain the community.

### *Improving the community*

Whatever the prevalent ideas may be about sustaining the community, school personnel take an active role in community improvement. One teacher, for instance, reported the work of FINE, the Felicity Initiative for Neighborhood Excellence, as follows:

We have a good working relationship, especially right now with some of our organizations out in the community, such as the FINE committee.... Our philosophy is, "We're here to help and try to better the community by doing certain things." And one of the things, our big thing, is we do the Cool Tools for School, which is the week before school starts, all the students are provided free school supplies.

This group was referenced by a variety of interviewees – parents, teachers, administrators and elementary students. The effort is made for many reasons, according to the interviews.

Because the township and school district are identified as rural and poor, people here are aware of the cultural tendency of outsiders to view this place as deficient. The work of the FINE group, in part, is an answer to this charge, but also reflects the township's pride, which seems to embody the stance that the reputation for deficiency is undeserved. This work of the community is also carried on in the school, as one teacher maintained:

A lot of times the kids say, "We're just from Felicity," but we're trying to get them out of that. We're trying to get them into a new mindset: "Hey, I'm from here. I'm proud of my community and I'm proud of my school, you know, and I didn't do too bad."

Children provided ample evidence that this teacher's assessment was right. One fourth grade student (among several who offered such remarks) observed:

We don't live in a very clean and good area, so people might not think that we are a very good school, but we are.

Teachers also deepen the engagement of the school with the community in personal ways. One elementary school teacher described her participation in community-based youth work:

I'm a Girl Scout leader because at [an earlier] time there were no Girl Scout leaders. I've gone from 29 students my first year to having two additional leaders; now I have 10 in my troop, which is very nice. So it's just the progression of getting parents involved in that too. When Boy Scouts came along, I immediately signed up to try to get my son in it; I go to all the meetings because I want that to continue here. I think they're excellent programs.

*Navigating issues of social class.* The stigma of deficiency laid on any community can be avoided in several ways. One way is to blame a portion of the community itself for the stigma. In Felicity, however, there is ample evidence in the interviews that educators are embracing a quite different option. They work to build on strengths and opportunities, and they see considerable potential in children generally, not just in children from advantaged homes. One teacher, with ample satisfaction, described the work of the elementary school, based on this perspective:

These [children] are people, they have pride, they have self-esteem, they're learning that you need to work to better yourself, and only you can do that. Somebody else can't do it; you have to learn to do that for yourself. But we provide tools for them to be successful that way. That's why we were so proud when our school scored so high on the proficiency. Whoo-hoo!

Educators, of course, are keenly aware that poverty often makes lives difficult and implies educational challenges. Speaking of children from impoverished circumstances, the same teacher observed:

And they all come with a separate set of...I read this someplace...not just baggage, but a whole set of luggage. And I thought, "Oh, how apropos." So that's what we have. *And yet these kids can do as well as anybody else* [emphasis added].

Among many of those interviewed, there is a dominant tendency to articulate poverty as a set of threats rather than as an inherent personal deficiency, as parents' remarks may suggest:

There are many families in the community here that face several obstacles: transportation, lack of support, lack of parent knowledge, lack of parenting skills and lack of resources.

A lot of these families are just so transient. This is an area where they stay for a short time. They move because of the continued lack of resources that are going on [in their lives].

I know that they're trying to empower children that might not have the most stable of homes. Letting them know that they can do this on their own if they have to. I think they try really hard to include the community and include the families, but when they don't get a response, they just try to focus on those kids.

The town of Felicity reportedly enjoyed more prosperous times in the 1940s and 1950s – as is the case with many rural towns in America. Nonetheless, where agriculture was once economically strong but is now weak, the agrarian ethos often remains strong. Much of what appears in these interviews reflects agrarian values of modesty and hard work. This ethos is evident in the passages in this section and relates to the school's view of the meaning of hard work for children and families in difficult circumstances. One teacher made the connection explicit:

We're teaching a lot of farming families here. In order to keep the farm alive they work hard. [Children here] get their work sense from home, and they come in and they want to do well in life, because I think a lot of them don't want to settle for an average life or a below-average life. I think they want to do well, and I think they see in us that we think they can do it. We're not trying to blow smoke. To some people it might matter how much the parents make, but I've seen families that don't make a lot of money, but their kids are good students. I have taught six in one family who live in a trailer park [in the township]. Every one is an "A" student. Bright as can be.

### *The Community Renews Responsibility for the District*

The community has in recent years elected three new board members, each reportedly a parent with children in the system. The superintendency also has changed hands. Many interpretations of these simultaneous changes might be possible, of course, but the one offered here is that these changes are partly the result of growing community influence elicited by low accountability rankings and by professional educators' subsequent decision to draw on the attachment and concern of the community. Many interviewees associated with the elementary school observed that change in the board represented a change for the better:

This fall, it's been changed from a "yes" board to a "we're going to be our own" board. We finally got a third person of the five voted in that was not simply letting stand everything that was going on. So, I see that changing and I am very, very glad.

### **Academic Focus**

Felicity Franklin Elementary School exhibits a strong academic focus, with curriculum clearly grounded in the Ohio content standards and with instruction oriented toward obtaining excellent results on the Ohio proficiency tests (and other relevant tests). The overall approach to curriculum seems to fit well with the school's culture and with the community's

expectations. Felicity Franklin Elementary is an engaged, productive, and traditional-community-based school.

Instructional design and delivery might be characterized as incrementalist. One teacher noted, “We don’t go for fads here.” Evidence suggests that teachers throughout the school have, however, developed and remained attached to a set of instructional routines that augments traditional textbook-based lessons. For instance, one teacher served as the school’s Reading Recovery teacher for many years and then began to disseminate the program’s practices more widely in regular classrooms. Several supplementary mathematics programs (*Mountain Math* and *Box It or Bag It*) supplement elementary math instruction. The latter program was reportedly imported about 10 years ago following a week-long training attended by a group of educators. It is still used enthusiastically, and has reportedly been modified over the years to suit local experience and preference.<sup>4</sup>

Educators at Felicity Franklin Elementary School are serious about their work; they reflect and communicate with one another about the challenges and accomplishments of that work, and they exhibit a high level of concern for students and community. An ongoing issue for them can be described as a contest between the “letter of the standards” and the “spirit of the standards.” The following section on curriculum approaches describes how the issue of “letter” versus “spirit” is played out at the elementary school.

### *Curriculum Approaches*

The Ohio content standards are understood to constitute the curriculum by nearly all the teachers interviewed:

Our basic curriculum are the standards. It’s what Ohio has adopted and said, “This is what you will teach.”

We used to send representatives to write the county course of study. Then once the proficiency tests were implemented, and now the achievement tests, we keep it all in house.

And then we just teach the lessons that go [with the standards]—we match up the lessons. I mean, you wouldn’t just teach the whole book. You teach what the standards tell you to teach. And you match it up.

I keep this with me, my grade level indicators, and I color coded them, so that I'm making sure with every lesson plan I write that I am accurate...I have the accurate standard right there for each lesson.

Educators at the elementary school see the standards as having displaced the previous curriculum, which had been created in collaboration with the other districts in Clermont. In general, it seems that the faculty views the change as productive. The Ohio standards are taken very seriously, whereas the county curriculum seems to have enjoyed less acceptance and use. As one teacher put it:

When I first started teaching third grade...the [county] course of studies were all lined up in my room and I can remember saying to my mentor, “How do I approach this?”

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<sup>4</sup> *Box it or Bag It*, for grades K-2, is still available commercially from its Oregon publisher (see [http://www.mlc.pdx.edu/CM\\_BU.html](http://www.mlc.pdx.edu/CM_BU.html))

The reply was, "I've never opened one of those. You just start in the math book and you start teaching."

Because the state standards exercise normative force, however, *doing what one is supposed to do* as a teacher is articulated as a value by many:

We're all supposed to be doing the Ohio content standards.

We teach what we're supposed to teach.... Everything that's on the test is on the standards.

Anyone coming to my classroom – parent, superintendent or anyone – would see that what I am covering actually reflects the standards.

This conception of standards as the enforced curriculum is nonetheless subject to some negotiation among teachers and administrators:

If we're allowed, we will sit down and pull together from all of the materials that we have what we're going to use and put together a pacing for the year, and how we're going to teach each thing that we're required to teach.

Well, we've met as a grade level to make sure we're covering the curriculum. *We've rewritten...* benchmarks and what we can do, the order that we should teach it in, *what kinds of places* we can get our instruction from [emphasis added].

When you make changes real fast, it was not perceived as a good thing... it was not a happy time, let's put it that way. It was resented, there was rebellion, and it practically doubled our workload without any compensation.

The negotiation over curricular matters, as the preceding passages suggest, begins with instruction. One teacher's comment hints at this circumstance:

Everybody kind of knows what's expected, and we are continually working to make improvements in the system. And I firmly believe that just because we've been here... even 20 years, that doesn't mean that what we were doing was the best thing for the kids. And so we're continually looking for new ways to reach them and to teach them.

### *Instructional Design and Delivery*

The Ohio content standards influence instructional design and delivery, as they do curricular content. Instructional routines are well-established at the elementary school, and they are of long-standing. Some teachers were quite forthright:

And most of us say that we did not change our teaching methods. We did not change a lot about what we did. To be honest, for example, proficiency-wise, we had to do a lot more teaching to the test, which I disagree with, but that's how you pass the test to get report card grading.

The same teacher, however, made a seemingly contradictory observation:

There's been a whole change in philosophy. Yes, we've changed materials, yes curriculum, yes, I've switched materials and all of those things that are part of a school system.

Data from classroom observations helps to resolve the contradiction. The tenor of the discussion and activity that the team observed centered on the common view of learning as definitive and certain, although we saw extended interactions between teachers and students, demonstrations and “hands-on” activities. All of these, however, were engaged in a direct instruction format and not in an inductive fashion. The team saw very little inductive teaching. Some practices have changed and are changing, others have not changed at all, and still others are quite unlikely to change because professional consensus deems change inappropriate.

How, then, have the standards influenced instruction? Four influences seem prominent.

First, the standards require that students not merely know, but understand, apply and analyze. Students—even quite young students—are asked to explain and analyze. Although teachers handled this requirement in different ways, most of them seem to be working to cultivate habits of cognitive thoughtfulness. “Thoughtfulness” also applies to the value of mutual respect that the principal and teachers cultivate; this value was articulated by most interviewees, and observations confirmed it as universal practice (see the section on school culture for further discussion).

Second, the scope and sequence of the standards push “higher-order thinking” explicitly into elementary grades, and one parent expressed concern with this influence:

When [my son] was in first grade they were sending home math papers where they had to complete the math problem and then write the explanation as to how they came up with that answer. And that overwhelmed me... I thought, surely they don't want me doing this with him. This is what they want them to come up with using the [correct] answers. But ... we had a conference with the teacher, it was conference time. I talked to Miss Shinkle, and I said, “I'm just really concerned with this math. Don't you think this is too much for first graders?” And she said that ...when she first started teaching, she was teaching seventh and eighth grade, and she was teaching them the same math that she's teaching her first graders now. And that's probably why I was thinking, “Gosh, I think I was much older when I did this math,” but she...everything now is geared to being able to explain your answers, explain your results.

Third, instruction involves a combination of textbook work and supplementary materials. Use of the text and other materials, however, is guided by the standards, as the following excerpts suggest:

Well, what I did was I went back into my book and I took chapter one and—because these are all mixed up. Even decimals can be here and here under different titles. And so therefore I've matched it all up.

I do a lot of demonstration. I live for my overhead. My kids love the overhead. So we do a lot of demonstrating on the overhead with a lot of manipulatives.

Fourth, the selection of materials and methods seems to be encouraged further by the school's inclusive treatment of children with disabilities, a policy choice rather recently adopted. Inclusion apparently prompts teachers to find ways to represent the same, or very similar, content to all students, but with whatever adaptations are needed. Adaptations are made with and to materials, as well as to instructional processes, and, often, according to interviews, to time constraints.

The presence of, and serious attention accorded to, children with disabilities probably helps teachers extend their instructional repertoire toward greater fluency and flexibility. Some teachers are aware of this influence and value it. One bemoaned the fact that she had too few such children in her room; she felt their presence helped sharpen her pedagogy.

Children with disabilities appear to be blended quite successfully into their classrooms. It was difficult for team members observing classes, for example, to identify which children had been given a special education label and which had not. An excerpt from the transcript of one of the special education teachers attests to the schools' success in keeping children from feeling singled out:

When I go into a room I don't just [say to a student], "you're mine," you know, "okay, let's sit over here; we don't interact with them ['regular' students]," [Instead,] I'll go around and I'll help the other kids, whether they're slow [or] advanced, whatever their level.... I'll go around and see what they're doing and answer questions for them, and I think the real trick is when kids will come up... and say, "How do I get into your group? You're helping them and I need some help, too." They didn't even realize that they were [already] "identified," they just knew they were getting some extra help and they needed some extra help and [wanted to know] "when's my turn?" I think when you have that, you can say that's a success.

Finally, it should be mentioned here that throughout the district, the central administration has adopted a set of instructional routines to encourage diverse teaching methods. These are in use at the elementary school, and all the teachers talk about and make use of the strategies. The strategies were reportedly adopted from the Portage-LaPrairie Division in Manitoba. A brochure describing very similar strategies is available on that system's webpage. Titled *Differentiated Strategies for Teaching and Learning*, it is a short compendium, according to which "the consistent use of these strategies in all schools and from grade to grade was seen as the best way to enhance the learning of all students within the division" (Portage-LaPrairie School Division, 1997, p. 2).

### **School Structure and Culture**

With a culture that focuses on respect, care for individual students and professional collegiality, Felicity Franklin Elementary School is a place that invites the engagement of children, parents and teachers. Visitors to the school would, for example, see even the smallest children negotiating the brightly lit hallways with peaceful assurance. And they would observe teachers meeting together to share lesson ideas or to consider ways to help children who have special needs.

The elementary school runs smoothly and efficiently, reflecting efforts by administrators and teachers to structure the environment in ways that enable students, teachers and other staff to perform their work with calm attentiveness. Classroom rules are posted prominently in all classrooms, and practices associated with "assertive discipline" are used in most classrooms. Teachers expect students to comply with classroom rules, to interact courteously with one another, and to respect adults' authority. The principal expects teachers to engage in individual and collaborative planning, to submit lesson plans weekly and to cultivate their professional competence.

## *Respect*

Many of the people whom we interviewed commented on the attitude of respect shown by teachers and fostered among students. One teacher stated quite emphatically: "I wouldn't keep teaching here if I didn't have respect from the students or if I didn't have respect from other teachers or the administration." According to another teacher, "There's very much an attitude of respect for other people." A third commented, "One thing I can say is that I believe every adult in this school is respected by the students."

## *Compliance*

Rules are important at Felicity Franklin Elementary School, and members of the school community see a connection between respect and compliance with rules. In a discussion of the mutual respect between teachers and the administration, one teacher commented: "I do as my principal says, and most of the things that have ever been asked of me have been reasonable."

Most discussion about rules, however, concerns students, and the approach typically involves making rules explicit, getting students and parents to consent to the rules, and invoking sanctions when children break the rules. One teacher explained the general procedure for communicating and enforcing rules:

We have [school] policies and the goals that are in the front of their assignment books.... At the very beginning of the year, they go over them with their parents and sign that they have done that. Plus I have my own rules that we make up at the beginning of the year—what I expect, and then consequences if they break those rules. They know what they are.

Although rules and sanctions dominate behavior policies and disciplinary practices at Felicity Franklin Elementary, the spirit with which they are deployed is positive. Rules are treated as expectations for good behavior, punishments as fair consequences for occasional misbehavior. One teacher's stance characterizes this attitude:

Each teacher is required to turn in a discipline plan at the beginning of the school year. We are to have them posted. Mine, as you see, are across the [top of the blackboard.] I have the rules large and tried to have most of them start out with the positive, instead of saying "don't do this, don't do that." .... We all try to word them in positive tones, and then we have the consequences. Now I have the consequences smaller because I tell them, "I don't want to use them." That's kind of my theory on that. I really don't want to have to implement those. But you know that these are here for you to see any time and you know that this is what will be done.

In most classes, teachers seem to use a progressive system that first alerts students to the fact that they have broken a rule and then imposes increasingly more severe sanctions as incidents of misbehavior accumulate. Students from kindergarten onward were able to explain the system in ways that matched our observations and teachers' descriptions of it. For example, one first grade student gave us this explanation:

We have these little charts with our names on it, and green means you're being good, yellow means you have a warning, and red means you have to miss half of your recess. And black means you have to call your parents and [have] after school detention.

### *Care for Individual Students*

Although educators at Felicity Franklin Elementary School work to hold students to high standards of behavior and academic performance, they also attend to children's unique circumstances. One veteran teacher explained the ethic of care that many others mentioned and exhibited: "Kids need to have their physical needs and – I'm very big on – their emotional needs taken care of or they're not going to learn."

In some cases, teachers talk about families who, in their judgment, struggle to provide adequate care to their children. To these teachers the care provided by educators makes up for something that is lacking:

The kids have more appreciation for your taking one-on-one time with them. If you even just take a minute's time out of your day for a child.... I take care of duty in the morning by the front door, too. Just opening the door and saying "hi" to them. They really respect that, they really like that, because they're not given a whole lot in life.

Nevertheless, teachers work hard to keep from singling out children in ways that might embarrass them. Combining equal treatment with individual attention is the way that one teacher negotiates this approach to care giving:

You treat them all fairly. I mean, I can only focus for myself on that, but they're all treated equally. They don't know who has or who hasn't because they all get treated the same. That little girl that doesn't have her homework—she might not have it but it's not like they're going to turn around and go "Oh." You just know that her environment really doesn't let her have the opportunity to do homework. I mean, you can tell it when she comes in every day. So, you just go over and you help her and ... you just make her feel okay with what she can do. So you just treat them equally and you wait at your door every morning and you give them a compliment every morning and just make them feel good about themselves, every single one of them.

Children seem to pick up on the message that they are cared for by their teachers and principal. As one fourth grader explained,

I like this school because all the teachers are nice and ... they help someone if they're troubled. Like, at another school somebody might have trouble, but they didn't want to stop and take time to help them out when they could help just the whole class, but here our teachers stop and help if somebody needs help and is not doing well.

### *Professional Collegiality*

As principal Betsy Foreman explains, teachers at Felicity Franklin Elementary School are dedicated to their work: "The dedication of the staff as a whole is just tremendous." An important corollary of their dedication is their willingness to do what it takes to foster instructional improvement. For example, teachers meet in grade level teams to discuss assessment results and talk about ways to improve. Teachers also collaborate in deciding which professional development activities would be most helpful. In 2003-2004, for example, the teachers decided that writing was an important focus, and many of them attended professional development sessions preparing them to become more effective as teachers of writing.

Participation in a shared mission at Felicity Franklin Elementary School brings teachers together as friendly colleagues. One teacher described the collegial relationships at the

school: "Everyone's willing to share. I mean it's for the students, and so if we make something up then we share with someone else and back and forth." Another teacher elaborated:

Oh, it's very friendly and a nice place to come every day. We have a genuine enthusiasm for teaching that I think...this staff collectively is eager to reach...we set goals, we reach goals, we're always making new ones -- making it exciting for the kids.

## **Leadership**

Leadership at Felicity Franklin Elementary School combines "top-down" and "bottom-up" approaches. With a veteran staff, distributed leadership has enabled the school to operate effectively even in the face of principal turnover. One teacher explained how the staff functioned during a short period of instability in leadership: "We ran on auto-pilot." Other teachers described the roles they play in the school improvement process. Their involvement in this process not only requires them to take responsibility for what happens in their classrooms and grade-level teams, it expands the scope of their responsibility to the school as a whole, and, in some cases, to the entire district.

### *Top-down Leadership*

The school improvement strategy in the Felicity Franklin district is coherent and tightly-coupled, with improvement goals grounded in the district's Continuous Improvement Plan. Direct monitoring takes place periodically (once per quarter at this point). In addition, district leaders require teachers routinely to make use of a set of research-based instructional strategies. Principal Betsy Foreman explained:

There are some specific techniques that are required for teachers to use in their classrooms at certain grade levels.... I think that's one thing that makes Felicity-Franklin unique. There are some specific instructional strategies that they are required to use.

The principal's efforts to coordinate and structure activities also reflect top-down leadership. Teachers seem to appreciate the consistency and organization that this approach provides. According to one teacher,

She's ... organized; she works very hard; there's not any wishy-washy... You know what she wants and ... I feel like she's fair to everybody. There's not a favorite, there's just "this is the way it is."

This approach also seems to resonate with some of the parents and community members who were interviewed. When asked about the role of the principal, one parent commented, "I think they have to keep control and order in their building." Perhaps as a result of how they see adults in general, the elementary school children mirrored this sentiment. Responses to the question, "What does the principal do?" included the following:

She's like a teacher of other teachers. And the teachers have to turn in their homework to Mrs. Foreman. (second grader)

She keeps it [the school] clean and running. And no kids running, and keeps it good and healthy. (kindergarten student)

She goes into class by class and tries to see what they're doing, and if they're not doing their work, the principal goes and talks to the teacher and tells her what to do. (second grader)

### *Bottom-up Leadership*

Across the district, leadership is authoritative; but it is neither autocratic nor unresponsive to the concerns of constituent groups. Evidence suggests that the district is moving toward increasingly democratic forms of leadership – what Superintendent Jeff Weir refers to as a “service approach.” Numerous interviewees commented that communication has been opening up districtwide. Whereas in the past, communication had been more carefully controlled, now members of the school community seem to feel comfortable sharing their perspectives. For example, teachers report that they speak about school issues with board of education members who visit the school. Teachers also believe that the principal and superintendent pay attention to their perspectives. One teacher’s description of Principal Betsy Foreman captures this sentiment:

She made a lot of changes in the beginning but now it's very much “How do you want to handle this and, “What do you think we ought to do”.... So teachers pretty much feel like they have a part of it. And that makes a big difference.

According to several teachers, this approach to leadership – authoritative, yet responsive – is what they have come to expect from a principal. According to these teachers, Mrs. Foreman fits in with the leadership patterns set by a now retired principal who served in the district for a number of years. As one teacher explained,

And, you know, dealing with Mrs. Foreman is very similar to what I was doing with Mrs. H.... I bring something to her, and, of course, it's in our best interests to help take care of it. I never have any doubts that she will help me, even if it's “how would you approach this”... and I feel comfortable enough to come and talk.

Another feature of responsive school leadership that is important to members of the Felicity Franklin community is what might be termed “student-centered” leadership. Respondents praised both Superintendent Weir and Principal Foreman for taking this approach. With respect to Mr. Weir, who recently moved from the high school principalship to the superintendency, comments often had a bittersweet tinge, characterized by the following tribute from a parent:

You saw him with the children. He wasn't always in his offices like you see some principals. As a superintendent, I see him sweeping the basketball floor in the middle of basketball games. So he continues to have the personality even in this other leadership position that he's in. So he's just very involved, so that was one of the big downfalls of him moving up, even though he is for sure going to continue to strive with his excellence.

Parents and teachers have had less time to observe Mrs. Foreman, who was just completing her first year at Felicity Franklin when the research team was in the district to collect data. But one teacher saw her as forging an effective balance between responsiveness to children and attentiveness to organizational needs:

She's very kind to them [the children], but she doesn't go overboard. I think she encapsulates a little of this and a little of that and meshes them together. I watch very closely. I watch people and see how they're reacting. An example: in the cafeteria

yesterday she said, "I need to talk to you about something," and I said, "Okay, can we talk?" ... and this little girl comes up, first grader or kindergarten, and says, "Mrs. Foreman," and she turns around and she asks, "What do you need," and she started to tell her ... to wait a minute and was going to re-direct or give her to someone else, but she said, "Well, do you need to go to the nurse for that?" And the little girl said "Yes," and she said, well come on and you walk with us and I'll show you where it is. And to me that's the way to handle it, because yes we were having a conversation, but this kid had a problem.

### **Emergent Themes**

Across the schools that were part of our study of *Schools of Promise*, we saw two issues with particular relevance to the school improvement process. Because these issues were also highly salient to participants, we took them to represent "emergent themes." The first concerned the character of the curriculum work undertaken by school participants. The second described the character of the relationships that were fostered in smaller schools.

#### *From Deep Curriculum Work to Teaching to the Test*

At Felicity Franklin Elementary School, teachers and administrators have been engaged in curriculum work that ranges from specific test preparation to more thoroughgoing design of instructional sequences and materials. In addition to the main approaches to curriculum and instruction described in the previous section, many teachers, and particularly those teaching at the grade levels at which standardized tests are administered, use more explicit techniques to prepare students to perform well on the proficiency tests. One third grade teacher, for example, explained how she was helping her students prepare for the new achievement tests:

We have ... tests similar to the state's, on every single reading story, skill... We did a *Measure Up* booklet that focuses toward the skills. We've pulled some stuff from the fourth grade, which already had to prep them for the proficiency. So it's just continuous prepping.

Several other teachers described similar approaches. Most indicated that, while they did work to prepare students for the test, they did not let explicit lessons on the content and format of the tests dominate instruction in their classrooms. This explanation was reiterated by Principal Foreman:

I am very aware that some time needs to be spent giving students samples of old tests so that they're aware of the format, for instance, of the test, so that they know what to expect, so that they know how to bubble in the answers and all that sort of thing, depending on the grade level of the child.... I would hope that the majority of the time is spent on instruction and using instructional strategies.

Teachers at Felicity Franklin Elementary School recognize that "teaching to the test" is a short-term strategy—one that ought not to be confused with real teaching. A comment from one teacher shows how clearly she sees the difference:

And when I say teaching to the test, I mean, actually taking prior years' tests, reviewing those with the idea that some of those same questions pop up again from test to test, so it's like, "Oh, I know the answer to that, we just did that." And it's just practicing test after test after test. I do not think that's teaching.

As explained earlier, curriculum work at the school primarily involves mapping to the standards, but other initiatives are also underway. Teachers are undertaking some informal lesson study in order to improve upon what and how they teach. For example, many are working to incorporate higher level questioning into their lessons, and others are developing projects that engage students actively in the learning experience. One teacher, for example, explained why she thinks projects represent a powerful way to teach:

An example would be when we did economics. We covered the early history of Ohio, the Indians, the mound-builders, and those types of things. The kids were allowed to focus on one area, do a project, maybe do a hands-on activity, turn it in and share it with the class. The kids who concentrate on something that they're interested in learn a lot more – by doing the research, by doing their reading, by sharing it and by having other kids ask them questions.

Furthermore, comments from Curriculum Director Glenn Moore and Principal Betsy Foreman suggest that, because teachers accept the content standards as the substance of the curriculum, they can now focus on expanding their repertoire of effective instructional strategies.

### *Smallness Makes Schooling Personal*

With 452 students in grades kindergarten through four, Felicity Franklin Elementary School is somewhat larger than average in size for an Ohio elementary school.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, because Felicity and its environs constitute a small community, the school has the close-knit “family feel” often associated with smaller schools. From the perspective of several teachers, the culture of the school reflects a small-town or rural ambiance. One teacher characterized it in the following way:

I think it's because it's small there's not so much peer pressure to conform and to have everything that everybody else has. I like the Christian atmosphere here. I think they're exposed to less, and that's not necessarily true, but a kid can be safer and healthier because it's rural.

Some teachers talked about how connections between community and school personalize the relationships among educators, children and parents. According to one teacher, the elementary school is “one big family.” Other teachers talked about the friendly and productive work environment: “It's very friendly and a nice place to come every day. We have a genuine enthusiasm for teaching.” Parents and teachers characterize the school as a safe and nurturing environment for children.

At the same time, the size of the school challenges educators to sustain the close-knit family atmosphere. Keeping class sizes small is one way that the district has supported this important feature of the school's culture. Promoting collaboration among teachers is another.

## **References**

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<sup>5</sup> In 2000, the average primary school enrollment in Ohio was 397. (See U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data, “Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey,” 1999-2000.)

