

Laird Avenue Elementary School

Warren City School District

Warren, Ohio

Superintendent: Kathryn Hellweg

Principal: Michelle Chiaro

<http://www.warrenschoools.k12.oh.us/schools/laird.html>

From Academic Emergency two years ago to School of Promise today! The success of this school's efforts since Michelle Chiaro became principal in 2002 is a source of pride for the entire school staff. Ms. Chiaro's experience in this building is not limited to her principal tenure here, however. She was a teacher at Laird Avenue for many years, then left to serve as a middle school assistant principal in the district, and finally came back as principal. "I was able to hire five new teachers when I returned," she shares with enthusiasm. "This had such an impact on the climate here. I knew what was needed, as I had taught in the building before."

SCHOOL PROFILE	
2002-2003 Building Rating	Effective
Enrollment	282
Grade Levels	K-4
Economically Disadvantaged Students	68.3%
Students with Disabilities	16.7%
Black Students	38.6%
Multi-racial Students	8.2%
White Students	52.8%

A dedicated and committed staff worked hard to make this impressive improvement in student performance in this school, where 68.3% of the students are economically disadvantaged. In many cases, they went above and beyond the recommended district-wide strategy. Examples include dissecting past tests and designing instructional programs based on what they learned and instituting a math-mapping process that has made a big difference in the scores. Says Mrs. Chiaro, "The staff is willing to do whatever it takes," and, referencing challenges that come with a high-poverty and transient population, "They are able to let go of what should be and accept what is – this is the way it is and this is what we're dealing with."

WARREN CITY DISTRICT PROFILE	
2003-2004 District Rating	Academic Watch
District Enrollment	6,803

The Laird Avenue school, built in 1919, houses students in grades K-4 and is very well-maintained but is bulging at the seams. Every nook and cranny in the building, including those in the basement, are occupied by teachers and students, and specialty area teachers have small workspace areas (offices) along the wide hallways. In addition, two modular units provide extra space for the school library and ancillary staff, including the school psychologist and the parent/family coordinator. A new facilities plan, approved by the district, will provide a new building in the next few years that will serve students K-8 on the same property.

Following a tour of the building, the School of Promise visitation team was invited to the makeshift teachers' lounge, a folding table and chairs in the basement boiler room, that teachers share with the custodian, where coffee and cake were served. "There is a strong sense of family here," according to Mrs. Chiaro. "Everyone says this has got to be the best staff ever!"

PROVIDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL CHILDREN TO ACHIEVE

A variety of special programs, services and targeted activities are implemented to address the specific learning needs of all children who attend Laird Avenue Elementary School:

- All-day/every-day kindergarten (four classes);
- Kindergarten aides (three with Title I funds);
- Literacy coordinator;
- Reading Recovery program;
- Ohio Reads volunteer program;
- Summer reading program;
- Math intervention teacher (CSR \$50,000 grant);
- Responsible Peer cross-age tutoring program (to assist with homework not completed);
- Computer lab with 22 computers (Success Maker Enterprise software program);
- Art teacher (with masters degree in art therapy);
- Special education resource room teachers (two full time);
- Special education aide;
- Speech therapist;
- Occupational therapist;
- School psychologist;
- Parent/family coordinator (full time);
- Senior volunteers (assisting teachers with miscellaneous tasks);
- School breakfast program.

“For the proficiency test... I learned, I learned, and I learned!” Fourth grade special education student

A data-driven process informs the school’s intervention program. Data are collected on the progress of each individual student and are used to determine daily interventions and groupings, literacy collaborative and center time, each student’s need for the after-school program, and interventions needed to reach targeted performance results. Every third and fourth grade teacher stayed until 5 PM every day (with stipend) to facilitate the intervention provided. Parent permission was obtained for students to participate, and transportation was provided as needed. The staff members are proud of the 96.6% attendance rate for the after-school intervention program. A roller-skating event was sponsored for students who attended all the after-school intervention sessions, and those who were in attendance every day of the Ohio Proficiency Test (OPT) were rewarded with an excursion to a minor league baseball game. When asked what he did to prepare successfully for the proficiency test, one special education student replied, “I learned, I learned, and I learned!”

An Intervention Assistance Team (IAT), described as being of exceptionally high quality by the special education supervisor, meets prior to student arrival from 8:10-8:30 on select mornings. The team addresses the more challenging issues related to individual learning needs such as designing behavior interventions, recommending strategies for addressing non-academic barriers to student learning, and documenting pre-referral interventions prior to multi-factored evaluation for special education eligibility. Team members include the Community Solutions liaison who links students

and families to needed community services as well the school psychologist, who is described as very “hands-on.”

“We try really hard to keep kids in the regular classroom,” shares Kathy Shook, a special education supervisor made available through the Trumbull County Education Services Center (ESC). One successful strategy is the district-wide Success Maker Enterprise software program that supports daily 45-minute interventions in both reading and math. The individualized program provides immediate feedback, includes teacher and parent reports, and provides very good data for the IAT teams. The best part is that the kids love using it.

School attendance and behavior are also considered important contributors to the success experienced at Laird Avenue. Monthly graphed attendance charts are posted in the entry hallway for everyone to see. A color-coded behavior plan system is used in every classroom throughout the building:

- Green signifies Great Behavior;
- Yellow signifies that a warning has been issued;
- Blue results in lunch detention and phone call home; and
- Red results in a writing assignment, an office visit with the principal, and after-school detention.

Mrs. Chiaro noted that many of the students at Laird Avenue attended Head Start, and those early learning experiences now contribute to their success in school. An introduction to school, the Jump Start program, is also available three weeks prior to the beginning of school. Students are eligible only if they are registered for kindergarten, however, and the principal reports that most parents in the area don’t register their children until the day before school so those students can’t take advantage of the Jump Start. Laird Avenue staff members are working closely with the Head Start program to encourage parents to register their children earlier and also to link families to the free immunizations provided at the local health center.

Mrs. Chiaro states that transition issues are very important not only when children are beginning school but also when they move on to middle school. Staff members work to support a smooth transition to middle school. In preparation for their journey, the fourth grade class brainstorms openly on both their public and private fears about middle school. Sometimes it is as simple as the fear of using locks on lockers, so practice and experience with locks takes care of that. Others are concerned about what to expect. Former Laird Avenue students who have moved on to the fifth grade help their younger peers by returning in the spring to talk about their experience in middle school.

CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

The fundamental importance of focused curriculum and instruction is evident both district-wide and at the building level. Intra-district alignment is facilitated through regularly scheduled curriculum mapping meetings. As there is much mobility within the district, cross-district alignment is critical. At Laird Avenue each grade level has 45 minutes common planning time daily. “We really do a lot of work with the common planning time,” the teachers report. In terms of prevention and early intervention, “Our full-day kindergarten has made a big difference,” report the first grade teachers. “In the first grade the entire morning is dedicated to three hours of uninterrupted language arts,

and the full-day kindergarten experience has prepared the students for this intense exposure.” When asked about the retention policy, Mrs. Chiaro states, “Occasionally we will return a kindergarten student due to immaturity, but retentions are very, very rare here.”

Warren City School District is a Literacy Collaborative District and all teachers in grades K-6 receive professional development on reading and writing strategies. In alignment with this initiative, the curriculum throughout the district is literacy-based in grades K to two. Each of the eight elementary buildings has a literacy coordinator who supports continued focus in grades three and four and also facilitates the building's Literacy Team that has responsibility for benchmarking student performance.

Special initiatives provide added interest in and emphasis on early literacy. The author visitation program is very popular. When an author visits, related student artwork is displayed throughout the classrooms and hallways and the author comments on the students' work. The librarian is also very involved in the literacy initiative. She facilitates an innovative student book review program (funded by the Warren City School Foundation) featuring videotaped student reviews that run continuously in the library. She also encourages a summer reading program that is very popular among the students.

“You have to model what you want to see!” Michelle Chiaro, principal

On the topic of instructional leadership, the principal emphasizes the importance of modeling. “You have to model what you want to see!” Mrs. Chiaro is a great example of this. She meets with the teachers on a regular basis, visits the classrooms frequently and has great rapport with the students. Mrs. Chiaro also believes in shared leadership. A representative building leadership team provides guidance on building issues and concerns.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Professional development priorities are based on data that informs what is needed to improve the instructional process. The immediate priority at Laird Avenue is focused on next year's goal of improving differentiated instruction, and this will be the topic of the regular summer in-service program. Literacy training is an ongoing priority. Cross training with regular and special education continues to be a strategy that has been successful in supporting inclusion and it remains a priority.

The district requires 18 hours of professional development each year for all staff members. The Laird Avenue staff members try to keep most of the professional development in their building. There is typically a district-sponsored in-service in August just before the school year begins; in 2005 it will focus on using data for decision making. The district usually sponsors workshops on scheduling and data analysis for the administrators in the district. In addition, district principals get together frequently for a lot of sharing of best practices.

PARTNERSHIPS WITH PARENTS/FAMILIES/COMMUNITIES

Laird Avenue is a community school to which most of the children walk. Only one bus is needed to transport a few students. The service area contains many rental properties; considerable mobility within the district creates a challenge for instructional continuity. Parents are a key to working toward that continuity. “We have an open door

policy with all of our parents,” shares Mrs. Chiaro. “With a visitor’s badge, parents can visit their child’s classroom at any time. Parents here trust us and want the best for their kids. We take as much time as needed with the parents—we owe it to them—they deserve it.” In addition, staff members maintain continuing communication with parents through phone calls and notes. Laird Avenue also hosts family activities such as the four family nights sponsored each year through Ohio Reads. Childcare is provided, and the parents love the activities.

Parents also support the school with their activities. Members of Family for Laird Avenue meet monthly and conduct a variety of fund-raising activities. They use the money to pay for a bus for one field trip per class. They also provide treats for the students at Christmas and on Valentine’s Day, and they organize an end-of-the-year school carnival.

Parents and students view Laird Avenue as a very special place. “Schools provide a ‘Safe Haven’—and instill behavior, values and social skills that the children might not get someplace else,” explains the principal. In addition to the support and love from the school staff members, the school provides a connection to needed social services. A parent/family coordinator provided by Community Solutions assists the school’s families with connections to social services and provides a 24-hour 1-800 link for them.

Following are examples of the conditions that some Laird Avenue students face. A fourth-grade teacher tells of a student on medication who has a probation officer; another student has talked about violent feelings and must be watched to ensure that he gets on the bus and doesn’t run away. One student’s family was without laundry facilities; after Laird Avenue staff members took up a collection, the Parent/Family Coordinator found a washer and dryer at a garage sale. He then delivered and hooked up the appliance himself. Additional community support comes from the First Presbyterian Church (e.g., school supplies and winter clothing), and from the Trumbull Hospital for health care issues.

SCHOOL CULTURE

Laird Avenue Elementary is a living example of how a district’s formal mission and vision can translate into the heart and soul of the culture of a school. The mission statement for Warren City Schools reads, “Each staff member will work as a team with students, parents and the community to provide an effective, high-quality instructional program in a safe, pleasant, learning environment.” The vision statement reads, “All students will leave our doors ready to build and embrace a successful future.” Each classroom at Laird Avenue has a Mission Statement and Goals posted in the room.

“This is a very, very beautiful school.”
Fourth grade student with an IEP

“The culture of this school is so positive and so warm,” says Mrs. Chiaro. “We have a personal touch here, and we’ve built a community among the staff and students.” As one-fourth grade student puts it, “This is a very, very beautiful school.”

What Does the Data Say?

Laird Avenue Elementary School is one of 14 elementary schools that were identified as a 2003-2004 School of Promise with special recognition being given for improving the performance of students with disabilities. In these 14 schools at least 75% of their students with disabilities demonstrated proficiency on the reading and/or mathematics sections of the Ohio Proficiency Test.

Between the 2001-2002 and 2003-2004 school years, passage rates for Laird Avenue's fourth-grade students in mathematics increased from 53.4% to 90%, and during both the 2002-2003 and 2003-2004 school years the Laird Avenue fourth graders scored above the state standards for mathematics as depicted in the bar graph above. Reading scores have continued to increase but at a slower rate, with at least 75% of all fourth graders demonstrating proficiency during the 2002-2003 and 2003-2004 school years.

Fourth-grade students with disabilities have demonstrated proficiency in both mathematics and reading for the last three school years with 100% of these students passing the mathematics and reading sections of the test during the 2003-2004 school years.

What does the data say?

