

Peebles High School: Case Study Report

Executive Summary

This case study provides insights into school improvement at Peebles High School. Located in Adams County, this 7-12 school is part of the Ohio Valley Local School District. The district, which is among the largest rural districts in the state, is facing challenges associated with the community's efforts to deconsolidate the district into several smaller units.

Despite political tensions in the community, the school has realized improvements in achievement, especially in mathematics. Nevertheless, its performance in 2004-2005 was not as strong as it had been in 2003-2004. This case study, which was based on interviews, observations, and document analysis completed in the spring of 2005 revealed several practices that might be contributing to the school's success and identified several possible concerns.

Promising Practices

- A standards-based curriculum, delivered using methods with which teachers feel comfortable.
- Efforts to reduce curriculum tracking and to increase the integration of students with disabilities into general education classes.
- A strong commitment to providing tutoring throughout the school year and at times convenient for students.
- Decisive leadership focusing on improved student compliance with a consistently enforced code of conduct.
- Efforts to maintain effective school-community relations by involving parents in school decision-making and by building on historical linkages between the school and community.

Possible Concerns

- Frequent turnover of school administrators.
- Reform efforts focused on short-term improvements in test scores, rather than changes to the "deep structure" of schooling practice.

School Profile

Peebles High School serves students from grades 7-12 and is located in Adams County in the Ohio Valley Local School District. Information about the characteristics of the

school, its students and teachers is provided in Table 1. Information about the characteristics of the district is provided in Table 2.¹

Table 1: Peebles High School Profile

School	Average Daily Enrollment	561
	Grade Levels	7-12
	Attendance Rate	95%
Students	Percent Minority	1.8%
	Percent Disabilities	14.8%
	Percent Disadvantaged	39.9%
Teachers	Number of Teachers	33
	Percent with at Least a Master's Degree	81.8%
	Average Years of Experience	16
	Average Salary	\$44,339

Table 2: Adams County/Ohio Valley Local School District Profile

ODE District Rating	Continuous Improvement
District Enrollment	4,044
Total Per Pupil Expenditure ²	\$7,752.00
Median Family Income ³	\$34,886

The building that houses Peebles High School consists of two wings. Each has two stories, and the office is located on the first floor central to both wings. The junior high wing is the smaller of the two with 14 classrooms. The high school wing contains 20 classrooms. A communal area consisting of a gymnasium, music rooms, art room, cafeterium, kitchen, and "round room" (i.e., lecture hall) extend out from one of the classroom wings on the first floor. The building is a source of pride to students and staff; and they treat it with respect. The layout of the building, however, tends to limit routine communication between junior high school and high school teachers, as several of them noted.

Arriving before the beginning of the school day, researchers see students sitting in the communal areas in small groups talking quietly or studying. Students are polite and respectful not only of visitors but also of one another. Their respectful behavior persists,

¹ Unless otherwise specified data come from the 2004-05 interactive report cards available on the website of the Ohio Department of Education.

² This information comes from the 2003-04 Common Core of Data compiled by the National Center for Education Statistics.

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

whether or not they are being supervised by an adult. Many students, for example, arrive at school in the morning before the teachers do. When the bell rings to indicate the beginning of the school day, they clean up the areas where they have been waiting and move into their classrooms.

Being a part of a large countywide school district has created some frustrations for the residents of Adams County as well as for some of its educators. According to the superintendent,

Our district has always had a historical problem of everyone not being on the same page, because of the fact that we are a big district, we are spread out, and in many ways we think as separate school districts instead of one district.

Remembering a time when the districts comprising Adams County/Ohio Valley Local School District were independent, residents have been seeking a return to less centralized governance. Residents of Manchester, another community within the county, have recently established a new district. Some members of the Peebles community, expressing a desire for local control, also want to deconsolidate into a separate district. One community member's comment illustrates this perspective: "I think it is a good school. It would be especially good if we could get out of Ohio Valley Local and be our own school district."

In spite of the ongoing tensions over governance, educators at Peebles High School continue to work well with the Adams County/Ohio Valley Local District to provide standards-based instruction to students. As Table 3 illustrates, proficiency test passage rates increased between 2000 and 2004, with marked improvement in mathematics. Passage rates for 2005 reflect performance on the Ohio Graduation Test, so comparisons with passage rates from previous years ought to be made cautiously. Disaggregated data for 2004-05, which are presented in Table 4, reveal dramatic differences in performance between disabled and non-disabled students, and more modest differences between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students as well as between male and female students. These patterns are typical, with one exception. Typically, males outperform females in mathematics.⁴ That is not the case at Peebles, where the passage rates for females are six percentage points higher than those of males.

⁴ Gender-based differentials in pass rates on the 2005 Ohio Graduation Test in mathematics are rather small (.1%), but the direction of the difference (i.e., boys outperforming girls) reflects the general trend.

Table 3: 10th Grade Passage Rates in Reading and Mathematics

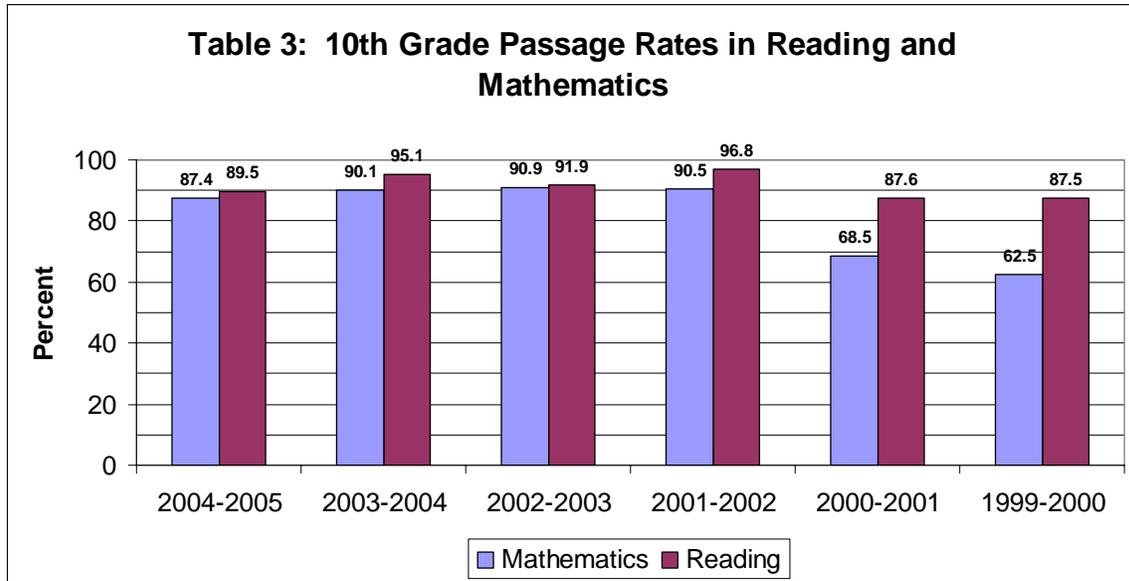
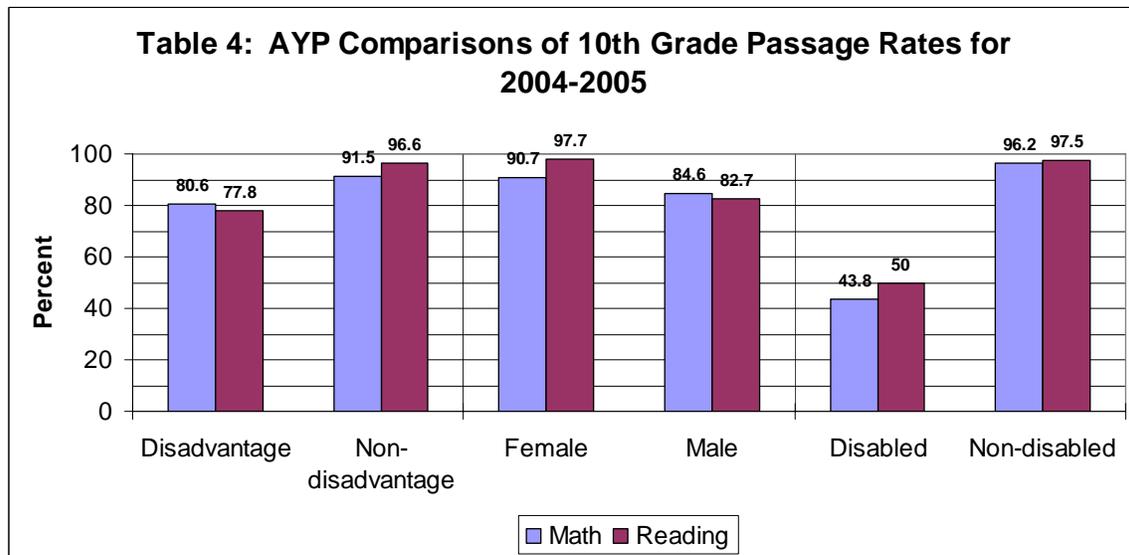


Table 4: AYP Comparisons of 10th Grade Passage Rates for 2004-05



Methods

A project researcher conducted individual semi-structured interviews with 10 teachers, the principal, the district superintendent, five parents, and four non-parent community members. In addition, she conducted one group interview with two community members, and two focus group interviews – one with five junior high students and the other with five senior high students. Interviews lasted from 30 to 90 minutes each. The researcher also conducted observations in 10 classrooms and reviewed relevant documents such as teacher-made tests, lesson plans, school handbooks, worksheets, and continuous improvement plans.

The researcher transcribed all interviews, 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 the data relating to four salient categories: academic focus, leadership, school structures and culture, and parent and community engagement.

Academic Focus

Proficiency and graduation test scores speak to the academic focus at Peebles High School. The qualitative data collected for the case study reveal the specific ways the school's educators target academic content standards, communicate high expectations to students, develop practices that support students' learning, and keep track of results.

Curriculum Approaches

The curriculum at Peebles High School is clearly grounded in the Ohio Academic Content Standards. Posters listing the standards hang in every classroom; every teacher is required to use the standards and to document in lesson plans which standards and indicators each lesson covers. According to one teacher, "They are our bible. They are on our desk. I use them every day." Speaking about all of the schools in the district, Superintendent Charles Kimble emphasized the importance of the standards: "First of all, the staff members are absolutely focused on teaching the content standards. That's a very key ingredient that has to be present."

Teachers also believe it is important for students to be aware of the standards, and daily classroom routines involve posting the standards addressed by each lesson, or at least, telling students which standards will be addressed. From the perspective of many teachers, the standards provide a rationale for teaching particular content and thereby lend credibility to the school's curriculum.

It re-emphasizes to the kids that standards are important. It is not that I have decided I like teaching box-and-whisker charts so that is what I'm teaching. I explain that just as they have rules they have to follow here at the school, I have

rules I have to follow. These are the things that are dictated to me that I will teach; I don't get to lead the way.

Classroom observations also showed that students are familiar with the standards as well as the routines teachers use to emphasize them. As one teacher explained,

I actually post them in my room so the kids know what is expected and what they need to be able to do. And some of the kids say, 'I have never heard of that before.' So I say, 'We have more work to do then. We need to get busy.'

Comments from students, while not explicitly making reference to the content standards, also reveal the school's dual emphasis on academic content and adherence to rules. As one student put it,

Our teacher is trying to prepare us for college. He gives us a syllabus at the beginning of the week and expects us to have certain assignments turned in. We know in college we aren't going to be spoon fed a lot, and he is trying to break us from that. He is making us a little bit more independent on our assignments right now.

In response to a question about what makes Peebles a good school, another student explained, "We are well disciplined." Students appear to view such discipline as evidence that the teachers care about them. And they believe teachers take a personal interest in their learning, as the following comment from a junior high school student reveals,

I went to like eight different schools, and this one is the best school. I went to [another school], and they have nothing compared to this. The mathematics teachers are willing to help you more than at the other schools. If you have a problem, they come over and help you and show you how to do it. I think it is a really good school because the teachers keep an eye on you to see if you need help or are doing anything wrong.

According to educators at Peebles, emphasizing the content standards was a logical first step in fostering improvement. But teachers at Peebles High School, along with those throughout the rest of the district, have taken the process further by creating curriculum maps and identifying "power indicators" in the five core subject areas. These processes have resulted in a curriculum that is aligned both within and across grade levels and that is uniform across the district. As Principal Brian Justice reported,

What we've done is taken the state indicators for each grade level in each content area, and staff members from the whole district got together. Because we are part of Adams County/Ohio Valley Local schools, they divided them into four different nine-week segments because we are on a nine-weeks grading period. That way we would be sure that each indicator was being covered. So that was the first step we covered. We geared our curriculum map to make sure everything was covered that we should be teaching at that grade level. Now the next step was marking the power indicators – the most important indicators of the state content standards that we felt a child needed for the next grade level.

Even though this initiative involved all of the district's educators, Justice explained that Peebles' teachers took the lead: their own engagement with the standards had prepared them well for the work undertaken district-wide. A final step in the district's curriculum plan is currently underway with teachers developing short cycle assessments keyed to the standards. The purpose of these assessments is to provide ongoing feedback about students' progress in meeting grade-level indicators. According to Justice,

Now the third part of it right now that we are working on is the assessment tests. We are getting ready to make them up this summer. We will have a pre- and a post-test for each nine weeks. That way every teacher will have knowledge of the student beforehand and gear those nine weeks to covering that material. The only things that will be carried over on each post-test will be the power indicator questions. Now we guarantee that no matter what, they will know those strong power indicators.

Instructional Design and Delivery

Although they are required to use the content standards in determining what to teach, teachers have free reign in deciding how to teach. In the words of one teacher, "I had the freedom to teach the way I wanted to teach as long as I was teaching academic content standards."

Observations and interviews suggested that many teachers interpret this freedom to mean that they can use traditional methods of direct instruction that they feel comfortable with. Observations revealed a dominant mode of pedagogy where teachers provide explanations and directions, set practice activities for students, offer feedback and support as students work through the practice activities, review major concepts with students prior to tests, and administer tests. Many were quite articulate about how and why they teach in this way. One high school math teacher said she tries to break down the process into steps, which is sometimes different than the way students learn information or terminology in other subjects:

Mathematics is a process, so you have to do it in steps and stages. It's basically first you do this, next you do this, and break it down into what you physically do. Because it seems like the lower achieving mathematics students want to just punch in the calculator and get the answer; and if they have to write and put it in steps or a process, they just kind of balk at it, and you really have to force them. You really have to take a few steps and write a few things down to complete the process.

A few teachers, mostly those teaching the seventh- and eighth-graders, seem to be experimenting with a more inductive, inquiry-based approach. This approach often takes the form of small-group activities where students work together to brainstorm, to solve unstructured problems, or to help one another learn new concepts. As one teacher explained,

I do a lot of group activities. You know when you have geometry particularly, you got a box of solids and you want to hear them discussing the different characteristics of it. You've got to have discussion, you've got to have brains

working, and the only way to do it is to put them together.

When students need more than classroom instruction, the teachers provide individual tutoring. As one teacher explained, the tutoring offered at Peebles is extensive; it is not a short-term intervention offered right before the state tests are administered.

We offer tutoring; we've had it all year. We had students, and they came in any time they wanted. The teachers here on staff will stay after school and will put in extra time with the students.

Furthermore, teachers are willing to provide tutoring at the students' convenience. Some teachers talked about before-school tutoring – others about tutoring during homeroom period. As one teacher reported,

They know they can come into my room any time. I make that clear that if they need any help, they can come either after school or before; they can come in and see me. Most of the time, it is after school, but they know the door is open and they can come.

Leadership

The influence of leadership on school performance is documented throughout the literature on educational change. Members of the Peebles High School community certainly agree that leadership has played an important role in their efforts to improve, attributing the school's turn-around to one transformational leader, Mr. R. Five years earlier, a former administrator started out as the school's assistant principal, then became the principal, and then left the district. As Kimble summed it up: "Basically the school was – if not the poorest – one of the poorest performing high schools in our area. So they've done a very good job of turning that around in a lot of ways."

Teachers concur with the superintendent's assessment. When asked to speculate about why the school is doing so well, every teacher interviewed immediately mentioned Mr. R. They said leadership has been less stable since his departure. Although the principal who then took over supported the work started by his predecessor, that administrator also left the district after just a few years.

According to the teachers, the most important change Mr. R. instituted was increased consistency in the way discipline problems were handled. In the past, inconsistent responses to students' misbehavior had increased students' disruptiveness in classrooms and their negligence to school rules. Teachers who sent students to the office did not get the back-up they were looking for. With an established discipline policy, consistent enforcement of the rules became the norm. As one teacher commented,

Mr. R. really helped with the discipline, and once we had the discipline, I think the kids knew we were serious. That is what triggered the process. We had smart kids and they passed the tests, but overall the whole school didn't do as well as it could have. But after we had the discipline in the building and teachers were keeping the kids in the room like they were supposed to, it started to get better.

Once student behavior was under control, Mr. R. began to change other features of the school culture. According to one teacher, he became like a “cheerleader.” The teacher explained,

He would come to the room regularly, tell the kids what a great teacher they had, and ask the students if they were aware of what a great teacher they had. Now don't tell me that won't make you be a better teacher. He would brag on the kids. If you wanted the kids to behave and you did not want them to repeat the behavior, you knew they wouldn't because if Mr. R. looked down at them, they were going to straighten up. He was incredible. I mean I can't say everything the man did. The discipline changed, the attitude of the school changed, everybody. He was very competitive about the scores and the attendance, and he just put up a lot of incentives. He was just great.

Another teacher elaborated, describing Mr. R.'s ability to motivate students and staff:

A lot of it goes back to leadership. We didn't have a huge staff turnover when we gained Mr. R. as principal. The same people were here. The students' characteristics didn't change. He really was the change factor when he came in. I think that making a match with the right kind of administrator – one that is actively involved, one that sets expectations and goals, and one that provides strict discipline – makes a world of difference.

And a third teacher's description of Mr. R. sounds almost like a textbook definition of “transformative leadership.”

He had high expectations of students. He pushed us continuously. He encouraged at an almost pressurized rate to the students to come to tutoring. But he showed them that he felt it was important, and therefore, it was important to them. He rewarded kids who came and made the extra effort. But he also made the staff see how important it was to focus instruction; and if he came into your classroom, he wanted to know what objective you were working toward that day. He didn't mind how you got there, but he wanted to know what you were doing to get to that objective. I think the strongest push would have to be leadership. Because people tend to have their own different philosophies, but he pulled us all together and narrowed our focus on what we were doing.

Not only did this administrator take the school's performance personally, he cultivated responsibility for performance among all teachers and students. Whereas in many schools proficiency tests scores are shared with teachers, Mr. R. began to share them with students as well. One teacher described this approach:

Well our principal at the time, who is incredible, who was wonderful, took every child into this room over here – every child in the entire school. He told them what the scores were, and then patted them on the back. Now that's incredible.

Supportive Atmosphere

Beginning with the changes instituted by Mr. R., the atmosphere at Peebles has become focused and supportive. Justice, the principal at the time of this study, continued the practices established by Mr. R. As a former mathematics teacher, Justice said he understood the value of basing decisions on data. In addition, he drew on his experience at Western High School, another 2003-2004 School of Promise, in his efforts to sustain high performance at Peebles. He described his role as follows:

My role just like anything is to empower the teachers that are in the content area. It is not to go and tell them that I know more than what they know. It is to take their expertise and channel it into what we, as a group, know we have to cover. If we have this curriculum map, and we have spent a lot of time on it, and we have this short cycle assessment, and we have done all of this and everything else, then we have done this as a team. Now my job is to make sure it gets done. My job is to communicate with the teachers and see how they are doing. Once they get the results, I go over the results with them to red flag items with them. Not to criticize them, but to help them. So my job is to try to keep them on task and meet with them and communicate all the time with data. That way they get to see the data, and they get use to it.

Feeling the support coming from school leaders, teachers at Peebles reciprocated. As one teacher put it, "Here the staff supports the administrators and administrators support the staff. I mean that is just the relationship we have right now. And that is what makes it a good working environment." Moreover, even though the teachers described their leaders as directive, they did not seem to resent that stance. Rather, they saw it as supportive: "The administrator made sure we were teaching academic content standards. There was very strong support for teachers here."

In this culture of mutual support, teachers readily assumed leadership roles. Some took on curriculum work –others exercised leadership over school activities such as the after-school tutoring program. All of the teachers talked about themselves as role models for their students. As one teacher put it, "I see my role as vital. I see my role as making sure that I am doing my part with the kids to continually show improvement."

School Structures and Culture

With supportive and shared leadership, Peebles has become a place where staff members work well together and provide help to one another. Although much of this collaboration seemed to take place informally during planning periods and before and after school, some formal venues for collaboration had been provided by the district, such as meetings to go over curriculum mapping.

In addition, teachers spoke enthusiastically about their colleagues, praising them for high levels of devotion to students and to the teaching profession. One teacher's comments illustrate this perspective:

I think teacher dedication is high here. I think that we are committed to our students and our community overall. We have very little turnover here at the high school level, and I think that kind of goes along with the dedication that we show. Some of us have stayed past retirement. I'm surprised at that. And I think we really like what we are doing. We strive for – it's a constant push for us – like we are here, but we have to go further.

Teachers' mutual admiration appeared to contribute to their effectiveness as a professional community. Particularly within departments teachers plan collaboratively and coordinate lessons to produce a coherent instructional sequence across grade levels. According to one of the mathematics teachers,

Within our department we dialogue a lot. I teach the most basic mathematics in the high school. I will go to the person who is teaching Mathematics 2 and say, 'What do I need to be looking at teaching for them to move on to the next level? What are that I need to really stress, to build on?' As I said, of course I'm teaching everything that I'm supposed to be teaching, but I ask other teachers if there something I need to build upon. And they talk to me. Mr. E, who teaches Algebra 1, will ask, 'What do you want me to teach them?' Or in Algebra 2, I'll say, 'What do they need to know for trig to move on?' So we are pretty interconnected through our department.

The inspirational leadership at Peebles and the camaraderie among staff has created cultural norms that, according to one teacher, drive staff "to be the best they can be." Another teacher elaborates:

The whole feel that I get here is everyone is for my success and the kids' success. ..I have been in a couple other schools and this is a different place. I felt good from the first day I walked in here. All of the teachers impressed me – the hardest working group of teachers I have ever met. Lots of late hours, lots of projects on the side, lots of weekends. Just a good group of people. I love working with them.

The norms shared by the educators also seem to influence the character of the school structures they build in order to accomplish their goals. Two emerging structural features of the school seem particularly well aligned with these norms: (1) student grouping arrangements and (2) discipline procedures.

Student Grouping that Communicates High Expectations

Commentary from all respondent groups suggested that teachers at Peebles High School hold high expectations for all of their students. Certainly this attitude alone may have an influence on students' performance. But the school's leaders also realize that structural arrangements, such as student grouping, can impact students' opportunities to learn and achieve.

Justice expressed concern about ability grouping in mathematics – a practice that was reinforced at Peebles by rigid distinctions between the college preparatory and the general mathematics curricula. These distinctions, moreover, were made even more rigid because the school used a staffing plan in which some teachers claimed ownership for "high-ability" (i.e., college prep) mathematics classes and others for "low-ability" (i.e., general) classes.

In order to start the process of “detracking,” Justice modified staffing arrangements, giving all mathematics teachers responsibility for some general sections as well as for some college preparatory sections.

Inclusion of students with disabilities in general classrooms was another way that educators at Peebles used school structures to communicate high expectations. According to Kimble,

That is one thing that I have actively championed in the district because I believe so much in it. We have a fairly large students-with-disabilities subpopulation in our district.⁵ We will never meet AYP in our district unless we have a very comprehensive, inclusive approach to education.

When asked to explain how educators at Peebles High School interpreted inclusion, one teacher explained,

We do have all of the special needs students in two general education classes, just simply for the convenience of the intervention specialist to be able to come into those rooms and help more students. But, they do learn the same content standards and basically, pretty much keep up with the other two classes. Basically, they are teaching the same content standards in each class. Every now and then, we get a little behind in those, but we continue to work at it.

Another teacher talked about the way help in the special education resource room dovetailed with instruction in the general classrooms:

Take for instance mathematics. Our mathematics teachers are all very, very good to work with. If we have a problem, we modify. They work with the kid to get it down to their level so they can understand it and then that is where we take over. Students with disabilities come to the resource room and we help manage their time on their mathematics problems, plus get their homework, test time, extended time, maybe a calculator they can use – anything to help them meet some kind of goals in this class.

Although the practices used at Peebles might not match up with some definitions of full inclusion, they did seem to represent an intentional effort to combine integration with support. Kimble’s comments, reported above, suggest that an even more inclusive approach might be needed.

Authoritative Discipline

According to many of the members of the Peebles High School community, discipline was a real problem before the arrival of the dynamic assistant principal, Mr. R. Although discipline problems never created real dangers, they did disrupt the orderly operation of the school. As one veteran teacher noted,

⁵ Based on the most recent (2003-04) information from the Common Core of Data, students with disabilities constitute 15.1% of the student population in the district, in contrast to 13.9% statewide.

The biggest difference in our building has been the discipline. If you don't have discipline, I don't care what kind of content standards you have, I don't care what kind benchmarks you have. It's just...you're not going to be successful.

By all accounts, Mr. R was strict, establishing a code of conduct and standards for applying disciplinary measures that the teachers appreciated and now expect the current administration to continue. As Principal Justice explained,

I'm stepping into a building [where] the discipline was [working] well. And our job was to keep it going. We didn't really have to tweak a lot of things to be successful this year. In fact this year I have kind of just observed.

According to Mr. Justice, the most important focus of the discipline policy and procedures is "respect," and his acknowledgement of the value of mutual respect suggests that what he means by the term is something more than mere obedience:

We really focus on that hard to make sure that a teacher is not going to be disrespectful to a student as well as a student to a teacher. We emphasize that on both ends.

At the same time, the current discipline policies and procedures do focus on compliance. Students are expected to follow certain rules; and when they transgress, administrators impose specified punishments. Consistent enforcement of rules is important to the teachers at Peebles, as one teacher's comment shows: "You can have all the rules in the world, but if you don't adhere to them and follow up on them, it is not going to matter."

Peebles' students also talk about the strictness of the discipline policy, expressing resentment about some of the rules (for example the rule forbidding them to wear shorts) but also appreciation for the clarity of the rules and the consistency with which they are enforced. According to one junior high student, "It is not really too tough."

Parents and community members also seemed to support the school's renewed strictness, although some expressed the view that administrators should clamp down even further by resuming the use of corporal punishment. This practice is, apparently, acceptable under board policy, but the educators do not make use of it. By and large, however, the sentiment of one parent captured the sentiments of the parents and community members who were interviewed: "Overall I think the school has had good discipline...So, I think it seems to be a safe place for our kids."

Observations, moreover, confirmed what study participants reported. Despite a past in which student misbehavior disrupted school routines, current procedures have contributed to a school in which respect, order, and compliance prevail.

Parent and Community Engagement

Parents and community members described Peebles as a quiet, caring place to live, removed from big-city problems such as drugs and gangs. Peebles High School, moreover, is an important fixture of the community. As one study participant explained,

“Peebles has always been a school that the parents took a lot of interest in. Pride in community: I think that is what it is.”

The strong and long-standing bond between school and community has contributed to trust between parents and educators. Although educators recognize the challenges that some parents face, they are generally appreciative of parents’ attitudes and efforts to seek the best for their kids.

Parents and community members also identify their connection with the school as important. Many talked about attending ballgames and helping their children with homework. Others described somewhat more far-reaching stewardship over the school:

I think a lot of our community holds the schools accountable for the kids and how the kids behave and what the kids are taught. I, as a parent, expect my kids to learn what they need to learn in order to graduate and make it in the real world once they get out of here.

Educators, for their part, encourage parent involvement, and maintain an open-door policy. Those who live in the community find it particularly easy to connect to parents, as two teachers reported:

If we do have a concern with a student we can just simply call or generally it is such a small town, you see a lot of the parents in the grocery store or at Wal-Mart or wherever you are, churches.

Well it is a little easier here because you go to church with them. You see them at the grocery store when you live here. They remember when I was four or I sang at their daughter’s wedding. So, in that respect I already know a lot of people or have some kind of connection.

Parents also become involved with school governance, at least in some spheres. One parent talked about the openness of the board of education to parents’ concerns. A teacher described the involvement of parents in committee work:

We have several committees that parents and community members get involved with. For example, we just had an after prom that was completely done by parents and community members here at the school. Our boosters clubs are fairly active. I have seen over the years we have had different levels of involvement.

That same teacher noted, however, that direct involvement of parents in school decision-making has been decreasing. In describing parents’ participation in decision-making, she reported that it is ...

... Probably not as high right now as in the past. We used to have parent [and] community member committees almost for every possible decision we made here, and that was a focus several years ago. It is not quite that way because it took forever to make a decision about anything.

Teachers also remarked about other challenges associated with efforts to involve parents in meaningful ways. According to some, parents readily become involved with the extracurricular activities in which their children participate but are less willing to get involved with activities relating to students' academic performance.

Community-School Dynamics

Many participants in the school and community acknowledge that this is a challenging time for Peebles High School, and the challenges seem in some ways to be bound up with the identity of the school. A contingent of community members, seeking a stronger voice in the governance of the schools in Peebles, has been taking steps to establish an independent district. As one parent noted, "I know there has been a problem as far as communication [of] needs and wants, because we are in such a large school district that the needs aren't always met."⁶

Those seeking district reorganization are encouraged by the success of neighboring Manchester, which separated from Ohio Valley several years ago. According to one teacher, "Right now, it is divided because part of the community wanting to go Peebles Local and part of the community wanting to stay Ohio Valley Local." Educators also have mixed views about the possible reorganization of the district, but many seem to distance themselves from the contention, concentrating instead on the work they're doing with the community's children.

As is the case with many high schools, Peebles also faces the challenge of strengthening ties between the school and community. Perhaps the tensions around secession are making this more of a challenge than it might otherwise be. Several parents, for example, expressed the view that the size of the district interferes with their direct involvement in school governance, and some educators seemed worried that unproductive discord over school governance might be diverting attention from the sorts of home-school partnerships that are productive of students' achievement.

In addition, the character of the partnership may be colored by teachers' perceptions of parents. Numerous comments from teachers suggested that their attitudes toward low-income parents were less supportive than their attitudes toward middle-class parents. The following quotes illustrate these differences:

I think we are getting a lot of kids who don't get a lot of support from home. And I think it has been emphasized how important education is to some of our kids. Don't get me wrong we've got a tremendous amount of kids here that do get a lot of support from home. I think we have low income, more. And I don't think their emphasis is quite on education.

⁶ Based on the most recent information from the Common Core of Data, which were from the 2003-04 school year, Adams County had the largest enrollment of any rural (locale code 7) district in Ohio. Because of the separation of the Manchester district, the Ohio Valley Local/Adams County district now has somewhat lower enrollment, but for a rural Ohio district its enrollment of 4,044 still makes it among the largest.

If you have higher-class kids or more intellectual kids, then the parents are really behind them. They want to know [about what's going on in their children's education]; they want you to do the best for them – so that the kid can go on to the next level. But, you get down to your middle class, same thing. You've got a little bit in the middle class, but you get below middle class and then the parents start, you almost have to beg them to come in. It is just the way it is anymore. They don't care.

At the same time, Peebles' educators recognize the struggles that poverty imposes on families, and they view themselves as offering hope to children who otherwise would be destined to a life of poverty. The following quote illustrates this perspective:

The hardest battle we have with the kids is what their parents put into them. Some of the kids are made to feel that they are worthless; some of the kids are trying to rear themselves. Now that's difficult. Working with kids whose parents are on drugs and things like that [is] tough; they need some hope, and once you make them realize that it is just a few more years and you will be on your own and you get to decide your destiny – you don't have to live like this – a lot of talking, a lot of encouraging, a lot of crying on your shoulder, but they need you. And finally they are old enough at the seventh and eighth grade levels that they can reach beyond the parents' strings and reach out to another adult who they can trust and believe.

Emergent Themes

Data analysis revealed two emergent themes that help to explain what is going on at Peebles High School as well as the other Schools of Promise studied by the Ohio University research team. The first relates to the way educators use standards to guide curriculum work, and the second relates to the opportunities and, in some cases, challenges associated with the small size of the schools.

From Deep Curriculum Work to Teaching to the Test

For the parents and community members in Peebles, state achievement testing and particularly the graduation test now required for a high school diploma brought about a desire to see changes in what the school was doing. Most parents who were interviewed talked about state testing and acknowledged the concerted effort that teachers were making in order to prepare students to succeed.

Educators at Peebles, and indeed throughout the district, were also concerned and took action to improve performance. District-wide curriculum mapping formed a cornerstone of the improvement effort. Staff worked to align the curriculum with state standards – an initiative designed to improve performance at each school as well as to provide consistency across the schools in the district. Once the district-wide curriculum map was complete, teachers worked to identify “power indicators” at each grade level. One teacher described these indicators in the following way:

And we went by grade levels, and they decided what the indicators that were the most important to carry on. So an example is if you are leaving the ninth grade,

you should know these power indicators. If you don't know anything else, these eight to ten power indicators you should know going into the tenth grade. So we did that all the way through K -12.

Nevertheless, some members of the school community expressed regret; they were concerned that the exclusive focus on standards might be crowding out other important learning. As one parent put it,

I think what they are doing is just trying to get the kids to pass the state test, instead of concentrating on kids learning. They want to force them to pass that test and move them on. Our class was the guinea pig when they first started that test, and if you missed a section, then they made sure you pass it the next time. You basically just focused on that, and they taught you a practice test or something similar to it. I don't think that is right.

Teachers acknowledged that "teaching to the test" has been part of the regimen at Peebles. According to one teacher,

That is the way we get [high scores]. It is bad to say, but we are pushed into doing this: teaching to the test. And I think we are not the only ones doing it. You see a lot of other schools that's got good scores, too.

Among the teachers, some expressed misgivings about the curriculum decisions that the standards seemed to be forcing upon them. For example, the mathematics teachers at Peebles were pleased with their decision of several years ago to make Algebra available to eighth graders, but they were rethinking that decision. As one teacher explained,

And we are looking right now at that being at the eighth grade level because the reason is we've got the achievement test. Algebra [fits] more... with the ninth grade indicators. How are they going to do on the eighth grade achievement test? If you're not covering the material that is on the eighth grade test, then they aren't going to do very well. So we are looking at that. So that may change. It may go back to the old fashioned – ninth grade is when you start algebra. So we are trying to decide that with the achievement test now.

Smallness Makes Schooling Personal

Teachers and students at Peebles High School reported that because of the small size of their school, everyone knows everyone else. In this close-knit environment students feel supported and cared about. As one student explained, "Our senior class, we are very close, and we are close to the faculty and the secretaries."

Community members also described the benefits of having been educated in a small, caring school. They noted, for example, that their teachers followed their progress even after they graduated. According to some, such personal care and attention has been made easier because many teachers live in the community. One community member's comments summed up what many reported:

This is the type of school I would want my children raised in as far as the atmosphere. It is nice to have the principal know your child's name when they walk down the hallway. Or to see them out and carry on a conversation and ask you how your particular child is, and call them by name. So I would take this over city schools and city living any time.

Because teachers take a personal interest in the students, they set high expectations for their performance and support students in meeting those expectations. Among the responses of teachers, the practice of setting high expectations was cited as one of the most important contributors to the success of the school. In fact, teachers seemed to act almost like academic cheerleaders. Listening to teachers talk about their students was very much like listening to parents extolling the virtues of their own children. One teacher's comments illustrate this attitude:

If our school is looked at as dumb Adams County hicks in this community, then our kids are going to act like that and think that's all they are. But they are more, and it is helpful that I have lived all over the place because I can tell them that I have been in places where people make lots of money, where parents are doctors and lawyers, and there is nobody with better minds than you guys right here. And they just don't know it. And I really am sincere about that. These kids are the best, and until they know that, they will not learn. When your brain tells you that, "I'm stupid. I'm an Adams County hick that will never amount to anything," you don't open up and you don't make connections. It is very important how they see their school and how the community sees the school. It is extremely important. I tell them every year, "You know, when you leave eighth grade, you may hate me because I have pushed you so hard, but I will be able to match you up against anybody in the world in eighth grade mathematics because you will be able to do it." They like that. They don't like the push, but they like that. They can leave saying that I've got a good education at Peebles and that's good.

Students, moreover, seemed to feel encouraged by the cheerleading their teachers provide. They expressed confidence in their teachers and other staff members at the school. When asked what they would do if they had trouble with an assignment or didn't understand something, without hesitation all 10 of the students interviewed replied that they would go to the teacher.

Even while disciplining students, teachers convey the message: "I believe in you and recognize your potential." During one of the classroom observations, a group of students was held after class to discuss a disruption. The teacher told them she expected better of them. She asked what they thought they were doing. Telling them they had great potential, she explained that she wasn't going to *allow* them to waste it. The students expressed regret and apologized with sincerity.

These students did not seem to be the exception. All students who participated in the focus group interviews, in fact, had extremely positive things to say about their teachers. One student's comments seemed to capture the general sentiment:

They relate to us. They don't treat us like kindergarten kids. A lot of teachers are just willing to listen and are really supportive, whether it is school related or not. If

you have a personal problem, you can talk to Mr. E.... Any time you have a personal problem, you can go talk to him. Any time I have a mathematics problem I can go talk to him. A lot of teachers are like that. They are always willing to listen.