

Felicity-Franklin Middle School: Case Study Report

Executive Summary

This case study provides insights into school improvement at Felicity Franklin Middle School located in Clermont County. The school is part of the Felicity Franklin Local School District, serving all of Franklin Township. The district's schools also include an elementary school and a high school. All three schools are housed in a single building complex. Six years ago, the middle school was challenged with low performance on the state tests. The school's scores have improved dramatically since that time. The school has consistently met Adequate Yearly Progress requirements under the relevant federal Act.

The study was completed in the spring of 2005, and includes interviews, observations and document analysis. It identifies possible contributors to the school's success and possible concerns, as follows:

Promising Practices

- An approach to curriculum and pedagogy that respects community values
- An ethos of caring that includes behavioral norms and academic expectations
- Emerging sense of collective, or distributed, leadership (i.e., teacher leadership)
- A foundation for adventurous teaching in educators' flexibility and inventiveness
- Collegiality in developing cross-classroom and cross-level activities (e.g., thematic teaching)
- Skepticism of educational fads combined with willingness to experiment (and possibly fail)
- Self-reflection and faculty openness to mutual critique of teaching practice

Possible Concerns

- Difficulty in reconciling concern for test preparation with prevalent views of standards-based curriculum and instruction (new pedagogy-old pedagogy tension)
- Developing an identity as a middle school (i.e., continuing influence of the legacy of grades 5 and 6 as elementary level and grades 7 and 8 as junior high school)
- Issues with using electronic media ("technology") in classroom instruction on a regular basis

School Profile

Felicity Franklin Middle School is located in Felicity, Ohio. One of three schools in the Felicity Franklin Local School District, the 5-8 school serves all of Franklin Township, in the southeast corner of Clermont County, a rather long commute from Cincinnati. The school is rated “effective” by the Ohio Department of Education for the 2004-2005 school year. Additional current information about 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: Felicity Franklin Middle School Profile

School	Average Daily Enrollment	367
	Grade Levels	5-8
	Attendance Rate	94.4
Students	Percent Minority	1.7
	Percent Disabilities	14.2
	Percent Disadvantaged	45.5
Teachers	Number of Teachers	21
	Percent with at Least a Master's Degree	47.6
	Average Years of Experience	6
	Average Salary	\$41,644

Table 2: Felicity Franklin Local School District Profile

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

The middle school occupies the center segment of the district’s three-school complex, and the entrance is on the side opposite that for the elementary school. Classrooms are located to the right and left of the entrance; the corridors branch so that classrooms surround the office, located in the entrance foyer. The office of the superintendent and the curriculum director are close by. Students are very quiet and orderly as they pass between classes.

The middle school opened in the spring of 1998. At that time Superintendent Jeffrey Weir’s predecessor simultaneously established the middle school and doubled the size of the district administrative team (to six—three principals, dean of students, curriculum director, and superintendent). There is little doubt (based on interview transcripts) that educators and community members believe the district has improved, but many of those interviewed were unaware of the role of the middle school in the improvement strategy.

Table 3 shows six-year trend data in sixth-grade proficiency pass rates (percentage above proficient) in mathematics and reading. Mathematics pass rates have risen nearly 25 percentage points and reading over 30 points. The school has met requirements for

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

² Source: 2003-2004 *Common Core of Data*, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).

³ Source: Census 2000 *School District Demographics Project*, accessible through NCES.

Adequately Yearly Progress requirements for the past two years. Table 4 compares pass rates by disadvantaged status and gender groups. (Scores by disability status were not available.) Males and females outperform each other slightly in math and reading, respectively, but the variations are likely within the range of statistically non-significant differences. The differences by disadvantaged status are more substantial (74 percent vs. 88 percent).

Table 3: 6th Grade Pass Rates in Mathematics and Reading

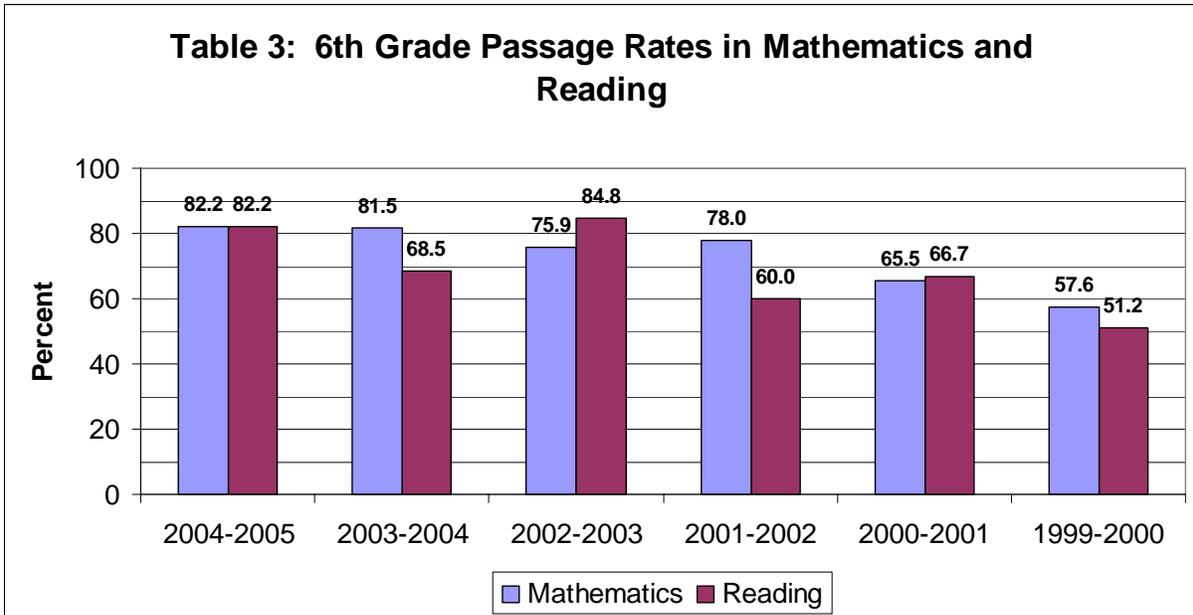
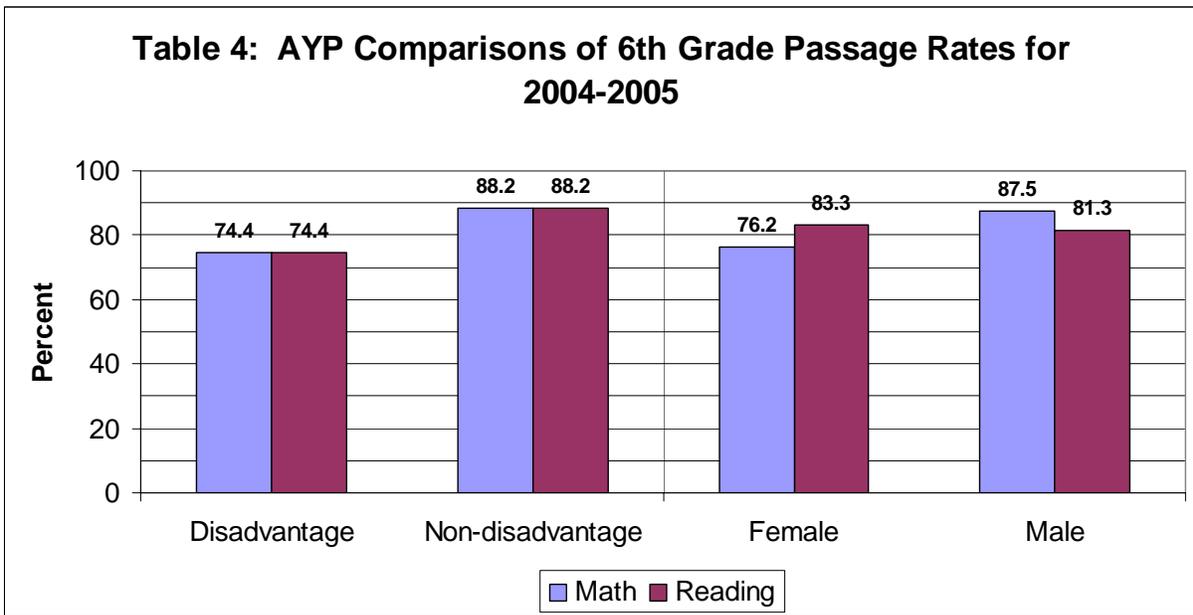


Table 4: AYP Comparisons of 6th Grade Pass Rates for 2004-05



Methods

Three project researchers conducted individual semi-structured interviews with 10 teachers (including all those responsible for mathematics), the principal, the district superintendent, and three parents. In addition, two members of the school research team conducted two focus group interviews—one with students in grades 5 and 6 and the other with students in grades 7 and 8. Interviews and focus-group sessions lasted from 30 to 90 minutes each. The researchers also conducted full-lesson observations in 10 classrooms (including three mathematics lessons) 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 researchers drew on the 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. Development of the report involved the three researchers and feedback from the Ohio Department of Education (ODE). Subsequent revision followed a report model approved by the Department.

Structure and Culture at the Middle School

Structure and culture were mentioned frequently by interviewees. The study team infers three related themes: the idea of structure itself, stories about varied kinds of grouping, and middle school theory and practice.

The Idea of Structure

Informants at the middle school use the idea of structure to describe their intentions across a number of domains, from discipline to academic learning to community involvement:

When you got hired you were told...there are rules and you need to follow those rules. Teachers need structure as well.

It gets them in another structured atmosphere for a short period of time and it's good for them.

But the kids, you know, a lot of them come from broken homes and they don't have structure.

“Structure” is a concept strongly related to *discipline*, a word that is often used lightly in schools to describe the routines for managing misbehavior. That meaning was used by interviewees but the same word (*discipline*) also refers to academics. The study team concludes that at Felicity Franklin Middle School, educators care strongly for students *and* for a more clearly disciplined sense of learning.

One practice in which the two meanings of *discipline* converge is the system of incentives for academic accomplishment. Some interviewees claimed that principals had been offered bonuses for improved test scores under a previous leadership team; some believed that teachers had also been offered payments if students they tutored passed state tests. Students themselves earn treats (e.g., candy or money) for small accomplishments, parties for larger accomplishments, and a trip to a famous amusement park for passing state tests. A subsequent section of this case study also presents one teacher's description of a complex token economy (in the form of a game) used successfully with one group of reportedly challenging students.

Stories about Varied Grouping Arrangements

The interview protocol includes a question about student grouping. Responses at the middle school revealed strong engagement with the issue, and considerable inventiveness, as the following passage suggests:

Earlier in the year, we split them up into two different groups... We had our [highest tier] go to By-ways [gifted program], then we had the medium to high and the medium to low...and then we would switch classes, like one week I would have the medium-to-lows and ... she would have the medium-to-highs and the next week we would switch. That way the expectations out of what you are going to get out of those students are more equal.

The grouping described in this passage not only represents a structure that applies to students, but one that applies to teachers as well. And its intention seems to be to improve learning opportunities for all students, especially those in the medium-to-low group. This idea – later referred to in the transcripts as a “differentiation process” – appears to have originated with Curriculum Director Glenn

Moore, but was reportedly prompted by one teacher's concern about a particular student. In discussing the student, the teaching team decided to try out Moore's idea. Further, swapping groups between the teachers soon enough led the teachers to change the group assignments of some students. Overall, this episode suggests the inventiveness and flexibility that seem to characterize the middle-school faculty (see subsequent sections of this report for further evidence of this claim).

Middle School Theory and Practice

Young-mindedness, grade allegiances, and ways of viewing social class characterize the faculty's thinking about middle school theory and practice. The researchers heard substantial affirmation of the faculty's pleasure in working with this age group, but remarkably few references were made to the special needs of young adolescents.

Young-mindedness. The middle school reportedly has the youngest staff in the district (with an average of six years experience), and they enjoy working with each other. One interviewee reported that the middle school teachers get together socially about once a month. Older teachers, however, are not excluded from this collegiality. The whole school faculty was characterized as “young minded” by one teacher:

In this particular school it's a wonderful opportunity for any young teacher, any old teacher. The good thing about the middle school ... is that we're young and flexible. Young-minded, not young-aged, but young minded.... We like change, and we see the direction going where it's supposed to be going. And there are some teachers [elsewhere] that don't like change, and they just stay with what they've got. Well, in

our middle school, we don't just stay, we go and change. We try to do better every time.

There were many faculty changes in the first year of the middle school, and the departures may have been associated with initiatives started by the curriculum director. As a newly established school, the district leadership might logically have viewed the middle school as harboring two auspicious qualities for the school system as a whole: (1) the best potential for academic improvement and (2) the least entrenched resistance to reform.

Grade allegiances. The history of the middle school as the joining of the upper elementary grades (5 and 6) with the former junior high grades (7 and 8) seems to exert a persistent influence, a legacy, for faculty and district leaders. One interviewee observed,

I think we're kind of...hmm...our school is kind of weird, in that, the fifth and sixth grade still operate as kind of a mini-elementary. They "team teach" – there are two teachers that have basically a set group of kids. Then you hit seventh and eighth grade and we're departmentalized.

The fifth and six grades also include special needs students in regular classrooms, but in the seventh and eighth grades pullout classrooms reportedly take special needs students for core instruction (e.g., in mathematics and language arts). Interestingly, interviewees reported that the fifth and sixth grades had previously used pullout classrooms but had decided to discontinue them in favor of "inclusion."

Student misbehavior is also handled differently at the two grade levels – by the principal for the fifth and sixth grades but by the dean of students for the seventh and eighth grades. These reports indicate that the lower grades look to elementary-level practices and the upper grades to high-school practices. The teachers seem not fully comfortable with this status quo.

Expectation and ways of viewing social class. A final sub-theme of middle-level education in the Felicity Franklin district was given exact voice by one interviewee:

The different standards that poverty level has than the middle class, and you need to educate them on what the middle class standards are, because that's the standard that they're going to be living in if they want to have a functional job.

Across the district, the explicit structuring of middle-class values, modes of self-presentation, and aspirations seemed a widely shared purpose. Not all district educators subscribe to this view. One interviewee, not raised locally, gave what is perhaps the minority view. The response is passionate:

Interviewer: Do you see any impact in the school, cliques or things among the kids that would follow from the characteristics of ... the influence of free and reduced lunch [i.e., poverty]? Is there snobbism...?

Teacher: In my opinion, when someone puts the "free and reduced" label on our school, they just are trying to find something, an excuse, and we don't need it.... It's an excuse for someone to say, "Hey, these kids can't do it; they're on free and reduced lunch." It's an excuse.

Interviewer: So the teachers here don't give that excuse?

Teacher: No, we don't. We might say it, and ... the next thing out of our mouth: "It doesn't make a difference." At least, in my opinion. These kids are just like me...I went to one of the richest schools in Ohio. They're just like I am. I could afford lunch. My family could afford lunch. I learned. They can learn too. We provide breakfast. Every school provides breakfast. I don't buy into the whole thing.

Academic Focus

The quest for appropriate structure in the middle school has an important academic focus: *engaging the challenges of the "new pedagogy."* This new pedagogy is now the conventional wisdom among teacher educators at the university level, where it originates in the varied perspectives of "constructivism." The making of meaning is what is important according to the new pedagogy, rather than the learning of facts and rules. Facts and rules are not irrelevant, but they are not considered central in the new pedagogy.

Pedagogy New and Old

The new pedagogy is hardly understood by anyone outside education according to many scholars, and so it's not surprising that parents and community members expressed concern and surprise during interviews at the "advanced" knowledge being taught at the elementary and middle schools. Parents, however, expressed their trust that teachers knew what they were doing, and pass rates on the state tests – which everyone knew about – reinforced their trust.

The state tests require students to produce short answers, elaborations, and to make inferences, and draw conclusions; the old pedagogy is considered unlikely to prepare students for such tasks. The state tests require students to be more productive (not just select a multiple-choice answer), and their performance is more public and significant to the school and community than ever before. It's not surprising that teachers and students should find themselves using a new vocabulary to describe what needs to be done. Many teachers reported introducing students to the relevant vocabulary and performances of the tests, as the following passage recounts somewhat wryly:

For example, yesterday I said, "Can you elaborate on what causes tides?" and that comes from the Ohio Graduation Test questions and the kids had no clue what *elaborate* meant. I gave another example from the OGT, "Can you draw a conclusion from your answer?" and the kids were actually drawing me a picture of it.

To move teachers away from yes-or-no questions, the district encourages the use of higher-order questions. During observations, the study team saw teachers ask students to give interpretations, to elaborate views and to draw conclusions.

Because standards are so numerous at each grade level, however, teachers might be tempted to revert to the practice of "covering content," losing sight of the new pedagogy. At Felicity Franklin, teachers take an approach that lets them honor the spirit of the content standards. One teacher described this approach as "bundling":

Since we're going to be tested next year, we're trying to bundle which ones to [teach] ... in a unit. You know we can't teach each individual standard by itself, because there is no way that we can get that done. So we've just been working a lot with the

bundling. And we haven't done it yet but we're supposed to be doing cross fifth grade meeting with the group below, so fourth and sixth grade above and below. And see if there's something that we can shift around. That is, would these things go better...kind of like the bundling but cross grades.

This sort of collaboration perhaps has the potential to lead the faculty toward fashioning a curriculum that is guided by the Ohio content standards rather than being fully determined by them. The faculty may eventually design a Felicity Franklin curriculum that articulates not only what is to be taught in the abstract but the sort of experiences that students actually encounter.

Thematic Teaching

Bundling involves teachers in conceptualizing curriculum, and then in designing units and determining instructional methods. The middle school data describe a number of activities illustrating the faculty's engagement with the new pedagogy: use of "jigsaw" procedures for cooperative learning; improvisation around student groupings; use of manipulatives; and the cooperative design of cross-subject thematic units.

The latter activity seems to the study team the most ambitious and the one that provides the greatest scope for inventive teaching. The following interchange illustrates an application related to writing in mathematics class:

Teacher: We're also in the middle of starting thematic units. So next year our goal is to have one thematic unit every quarter that is all four of us combined, science, math, social studies and language arts.

Interviewer: This is at the eighth grade level?

Teacher: Yes. But the whole school is doing this. So fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth grade are going to have a thematic unit each quarter. Where we're all incorporating each other's standards and showing how they fit in too. And doing writing with them and that kind of thing.

Variation exists among grade level teams—not so much in willingness to engage such work, but in trust and shared experience. The culture of the school (and the district) seems critical to sustaining extant capacity and building new capacity. One interviewee noted:

The fifth grade and the eighth grade, we're kind of newer teams. I've been here three years and I think I'm the newest one on the team. But the same time that I was hired, there was the Special Ed teacher and the Title teacher, and then the science teacher was hired the year before us. So our team is getting there.... It's become easier ... to suggest ideas, and how can we do things together, and—you know—come up with thematic units and do things across the classrooms. We're getting ready to do a civil war museum at the end of the year that [the social studies teacher] and I are doing together. And so it's become easier now to do things because we're getting to know each other.

Another interviewee asserted that Curriculum Director Moore played a key role in the middle school's decision to sponsor cross-subject thematic units: "That was one of his main focuses that he wanted to get us to move towards."

A possible weak link in such an ambitious plan is the pedagogical and curricular knowledge of teachers. Teachers at the middle school, however, seem remarkably used to collaborating with one another, confessing difficulties and seeking help, and being observed in one another's classrooms. This circumstance suggests that as difficulties are encountered in running the thematic units next year, the faculty is in a fortunate position to address them.

Caring Academically and Diversely for Students

The academic performance of a school now depends on the individual performance of its weakest academic link—children whose lives are conducted under inauspicious circumstances. In this school, such students are noticed, observed, and attended to. Several interviewees reported that they routinely stayed after school to provide tutoring and homework assistance to struggling students.

One interviewee, an eighth grade teacher, spoke of the methods and motivations for his attention to his students:

Teacher: It sounds stupid, but reading their magazines, listening to their music, knowing when they talk about Snoop Doggy Dog, knowing who that is. Knowing when someone comes in with a Korn shirt on ... knowing who that is and being able to talk to them about it. I always tell people that teaching eighth grade is 50 percent academics and 50 percent socialization. If you can mix it, you do a heck of a job....

I was a horrible student in middle school. I didn't have any direction so it was kind of like no one connected to me. And it's kind of like this is payback, because no one did it with me, so I'm going to do it with you.

Interviewer: Are there kids that come in and say, "Hey, I have a problem. I want to talk to you"?

Teacher: Other teachers. I don't think...this might sound arrogant but I think I'm a very intimidating person.

The final answer suggests that this teacher wants to connect to "student culture" to improve teaching, but not to take on the role of counselor. This position might, in fact, help students connect their own experiences to the intellectual work of the classroom.

"Caring" is a quality seen as most needful for students from the most threatened backgrounds. Much less common is attention to the academic dilemmas of quite talented students. There's much to worry about, however: the bad effects on character of work that is too easy, an attitude of undue privilege or entitlement, failure to manifest potential, and so forth. The usual, comfortable assumption is that "these kids are going to do OK anyway." One excerpt from the transcripts, however, suggests that the usual comfortable assumption has been challenged at least once at the middle school:

I ... had a student this year who was tested [for the gifted program] and she "blew off" the test [i.e., did not take the testing seriously]. I took her out in the hallway and made her cry. I apologized for making her cry, but I didn't apologize for what I had to say.... I said, "Now even if you don't want to be in the Byways [gifted] class," which is the language arts one, and they're afraid of it because there is an extra lot of work in the program.... But I said, "Next year they're doing it [the gifted program] different. They're

doing it for math, science—they're doing it for all the subjects and you're going to miss out." So she took a different test and she qualified for everything.

Three points are interesting in this anecdote. First, the teacher observed what the student seemed to have done and intervened forcefully. Second, the intervention reveals the teacher as comparatively tough-minded and academically focused. Third, part of the intervention consisted of telling the student that the gifted program would be different in the future, which invites the student to accept the integrity of the teacher's judgment about academic quality.

Miscellany

Two issues raised in the interviews seem to require a section of their own as relevant sidebars. Each relates most strongly to engaging the challenges of the new pedagogy.

Technology. First, the middle school was the only one of the three schools at which the study team heard about technology in the classroom. The comments consisted of regrets, along the following lines:

Interviewer: So are you thinking that you might change your teaching next year, or no?

Teacher: Change my teaching? I would like to. Actually we've been going through a lot of technology issues with network problems and things not working. So hopefully everything will work okay, they'll get those kinks worked out... That's the number one hindrance; I would use technology, but a lot of times it doesn't work.

Interviewer: It doesn't work?

Teacher: We're so slow. Those [computers over there] are Windows '98—ha! We check our announcements on there every day and walk away and wait for the attachment to load up in about ten minutes. I'll be back. Because it does, it takes a long time. And they're trying, and I know it's not their fault.

Interviewer: So if you had workable technology you would do some things with it?

Teacher: [affirmative sound] Yeah.

Corroborating this teachers' perspective, Curriculum Director Moore told the study team that the district was indeed experiencing difficulty managing its computer networking operation. The point here is not these difficulties, but the fact that the *middle school interviewees* (of the faculties at the three Schools of Promise in the district) were the only ones to voice concerns! Rather than a bad sign, the mild complaints suggest that the middle school teachers may be among the most eager in the district to incorporate computers into their practice.

Manipulatives. The second issue concerns differing perspectives on the use of "manipulatives" or "hands-on" activities:

Teacher A

But as far as like detailed steps to follow or shortcuts or manipulatives to try to help

understanding, *I don't separate, everybody* does it. Because there's probably other kids that don't understand it; they're just not saying it, or I haven't caught it. There are some things that the Special Ed kids get different and pulled out, but for the most part everybody gets the differentiated instruction in manipulatives just things that maybe some people would think just the lowest kids would need. But I think the middle kids and high kids benefit also.

Teacher B

Where I think when we got those low ability kids they got left behind because we got to keep up with our curriculum. You know we got to keep to it. What we're doing and we can't go down to their levels, so then we do a lot of hands on and a lot of extra activities like that, you can take it to their level.

These two excerpts reflect the historical divergence of opinion on such matters. One rationale for the use of manipulatives is that it is an effective introduction to an abstraction, or, as in the passage from Teacher B, is an effective a backdoor to abstractions. The other view is that active learning is appropriate for everyone, as Teacher A claims. This report does not suggest that one view is better than the other, but that the different views could (and probably will) generate continuing conversations among a faculty used to such discussion.

Leadership

Marty Paeltz is in his first year as principal of Felicity Franklin Middle School. Paeltz previously served the district as dean of students. That position is the district's "component manager" for "barriers to learning," with significant daily responsibilities for districtwide behavior management (especially in grades 7-12).

Setting a Tone

The role of principal, however, has been sharply distinguished from the role of disciplinarian possibly in order to create more room in the principal's day for instructional leadership. Thus, Paeltz's previous daily routine might have been at odds with expectations for his new role. An interviewer probed the issue:

Interviewer: So you see a change in Marty, the way he is with the kids?

Parent: No; he was that way before. Not as much as he is now, but he waves to them; he talks to them; he pats them on the back. He'll take the time. It doesn't matter if it's a welfare child or a child on the outskirts. He treats them all the same.

In fact, the new principal seems to set this tone for the entire school. The team spent some time loitering around the middle school office and was able to observe first-hand the attitude characterized by the parent in the quoted excerpt. It seems that the new principal gives the faculty a quality for which they have been searching. One longer-term middle-school teacher offered a relevant opinion, based on experience:

We're on my third principal and I've been here seven years. I don't know—we seem to like each other as a staff, and we get along great: But for some reason we're difficult to lead. The principal now is...and I've liked every principal we've had. I really have.

The one now is more of a, “Here’s an idea. Let’s explore it and let’s decide what to do with it,” not, “This is what we’re going to do.” *I think we work well under that type of leadership.* [emphasis added]

Isomorphism of Teaching and Learning

This theme concerns a striking similarity of expectations for teachers and students, and to strikingly similar ways in which the expectations are fulfilled. (“Isomorphism” means, literally, “equal structure.”) One teacher’s remarks, quoted in their entirety, illustrate the relevant structural parallels:

I know that we have a lot more criteria than the majority of the other schools. We’re held more accountable for what we teach. You know? I know in other schools, it was *my* classroom, if you said you’re meeting the standards and you said you’re teaching it, then that’s great. Here [by contrast] we’re made to show it and *turn it in* and we’re graded basically. *Our lesson plans are graded.* I’ve never had my lesson plans graded before. My lesson plans, our lesson plans are graded on a rubric, *just like OGT test scores are.* You know? Everything we do, we have so many rubrics that we have to test them on. *Everything that we’re expecting them to do is basically expected out of us too.* So we know that what we’re teaching is relevant to what they’re doing and vice-versa. [emphasis added]

A possible challenge of this approach is over-specificity—a tendency to construe knowledge as definite and certain. Although this possibility may not seem to influence practical matters, it actually does have such an influence in many schools, especially those in traditional communities. This is because the idea that knowledge is constructed and contingent is difficult for most people (teachers included) to accept. A problem arises, however, because the theory behind standards-based curricula commonly draws on an opposing set of ideas, in which knowledge is viewed as *constructed* and *contingent*.

The bedrock of common belief about knowledge concerns widely accepted Biblical versions of human nature and education, where (a) human nature is inherently sinful, (b) the Word of God constitutes definitive knowledge, and (c) true education is mastery of Biblical knowledge. The idea that knowledge is objective and definitive, in short, has considerable Biblical support, a support that most community members and teachers in Felicity would likely find compelling. In light of local values, then, the school’s (and the district’s) incremental and skeptical approach to curricular and pedagogical change seems reasonable.

Distributing the Leadership

Collective leadership may be particularly relevant to sustaining academic focus and elaborating it more complexly. Among the questions posed by the study team were several that sought to elicit accounts of teacher leadership, which included this one: “How would you describe your leadership role within the school and district?” Teachers were *voluble* in their replies. Reactions were frank and somewhat conflicted (leadership being risky business by definition). One teacher described teacher leadership like this:

And so, kind of, the leadership differs depending on the grade level in the middle school, and how long the teams have been together. The seventh grade team has been together long before I ever got here, and there hasn’t been any changes in them other than the By-ways [gifted] teacher. So you know they are a really cohesive group. They have lunch together every day; they discuss all the things that they are

going to do; they plan things together; they're very good at that. The sixth grade is the same way. They've been together for quite a while; they're good at that.

The level of teamwork at the middle school may contribute to middle-school teachers' sense of self-efficacy and collective efficacy. Moreover, it speaks to an evolving commitment to share leadership. In several instances, for example, teachers would start to say "we're required," but then would rephrase or amend their words with something like, "No, not required, *asked*."

District administrators also seem aware that distributed leadership is playing a more prominent role at the middle school and recognize its importance for sustaining the reform efforts that are underway. Comments from a middle-school teacher in fact suggest that distributed leadership is already having an impact on teachers' views about the role that the curriculum director plays:

Interviewer: What's going to happen when he [Curriculum Director Moore] leaves?

Teacher: Good question.... I think from our end [i.e., the perspective of teachers] the biggest loss will be that we won't have him there as that resource. Because it's not so much him leading anymore as it is just being there to back you up and guide you and maybe give you some help. He doesn't have to set the rules and get people moving forward.

Professional Development as Curriculum Direction

The simplest characterization of professional development is that it is what the curriculum director does. As evidenced in transcripts from all the district's schools, Glenn Moore's influence is constant, helpful, and appreciated. The following excerpt presents some of the relevant history:

Teacher: I know when CIP [comprehensive improvement plan] came around, we lost some good teachers because they were very...they didn't want to change. And when we started doing walk-throughs they [those who left] felt like they [administrators] were coming in to watch them. I have always felt when it comes to evaluation or walk-throughs or anything, [that] if I'm not doing what I'm supposed to be doing, come in and tell me what I need to do. I'm not ashamed of what I'm doing, and I haven't been ashamed in seven or in ten years of teaching.... Because if I'm doing something wrong, I want somebody to tell me

Interviewer: And that was three years ago?

Teacher: Three or four years ago. It was when Glenn Moore, whenever we hired our curriculum director, whenever that year was, was when that started.

The simple answer, however, probably misrepresents the role of teachers in their own development. Teachers spoke of their eagerness for feedback (as in the quoted passage) but also of their willingness to experiment, even to fail: Many accounts of teaching regard such qualities as "courageous." Professional development, on this view, is not principally the event or package, but the actual development of a shared culture focused on improvement of

teaching. Arguably, at the middle school professional development exhibits an internal coherence based on the openness and security shown by the teachers themselves.

The district also supports teachers' individual efforts to participate in workshops at their discretion (via the work of the Local Professional Development Committee). Teachers are appreciative, and they understand how rare this support is in small rural districts. Additionally, pre-school in-service days are a fixture at Felicity Franklin, as they are nearly everywhere. These days seem, predictably, less appreciated by the teachers.

Parent and Community Engagement

Positive Views of Impoverished Kids and Families

Strikingly positive views of impoverished students and families surfaced in interviews, together with regrets that parental and community involvement was not more evident. A previous passage has already quoted the testimony of the middle-class teacher who asserted that "free-lunch" students were as capable as anyone. A different teacher offered the following testimony, remarkable, perhaps, for its view of poverty in the development of character:

Interviewer: Is there something that you like about these kids?

Teacher: *They are who they are.* But it's part of why I teach middle school too.... When I came here I was offered either a high school job or a middle school job and I took this job purposely, because I love this age group, because *they are who they are*.... It's when you're not honest with them they get their back up, because they know you're trying to play them. And they are looking for that because they expect people to try and mess with them. But if you're honest with them, then they'll be honest with you....

Interviewer: Why do you suppose they're that way?

Teacher: I think maybe that's what they're used [to] ... I think that's how they have to approach the world. I think that, you know, in their homes and in this community as a whole that's what they're used to.... If you don't have money and you don't have a great family life and you don't have all the things you want, whatcha' got to show? That's what I love about them. *They are who they are.*

This passage conveys insight into the sorts of struggles that poverty imposes, which, in this teacher's telling, are associated with honesty.

Bridging with Parents

If shared among a substantial portion of the faculty, such views as just quoted could facilitate a range of bridging actions with parents. One teacher's comments seem to suggest this likelihood:

Well, sometimes I think maybe the parents need a little bit of training. They're doing the best they can with what they know how to do. So we try to offer help and training

sessions.... I don't really have anything to compare it to because I haven't taught anywhere else. But I do feel like we try very hard to meet parents on their level, and make them feel comfortable, and have them involved as much as possible in their child's education.

Another teacher explained changes in the structure of parent-teacher conferences that seemed to respond to the needs of busy parents, or perhaps parents reluctant to make formal appointments to see teachers:

I would love to see every single one of those parents [i.e., uninvolved parents] but there's no possible way. We went to a brand new system of conferencing this year, called "arena scheduling," where the parents just show up, and we set up in the gym, and we have our own table, and [parents] come talk to us if they need to.... I think that is a little more inviting. We used to schedule fifteen minutes with each parent. With some parents' schedules, they couldn't do it.... With this new scheduling, whenever they can make it between our certain dates, they can come out.

Finally, eight teachers among this young-minded faculty of 28 (plus 2 aides) are currently making the ultimate bridge between parents and staff: they are pregnant. This fact was disclosed with humor, but it is an evident stressor on emerging collaborations.

Emergent Themes

From Deep Curriculum Work to Teaching to the Test

Within the concept of "standards" a great deal of space remains for invention, reflection, and differentiation. Sometimes, however, this space is not perceived by teachers, as the following passage might suggest:

Interviewer: So you mentioned proficiency [testing]; how does this school use the state content standards?

Teacher: For...that's the new stuff?

Interviewer: Yes, for math.

Teacher: We are just...we've really been focused; we've done an alignment, so that we've aligned proficiency with the content standards.... It was the beginning of the last school year ... or even the end of the other school year, and we actually had to...We already aligned our curriculum with the state model, with proficiency, so now all we had to do was go in and change it to the state standards and match them up.... And now we're in the process of taking out the proficiency standards ... and just leaving the standards in there so we're ready to go.

In this passage (which is characteristic in some of the interviews), the process of change is more about the organizational re-alignment to changing state regulations than about adventurous teaching. Lacking an appreciation of the wider *debate* about standards-based-education and constructivism, many teachers arguably have less purchase than they need in order to engage in deep curriculum development. This would seem to be an issue professional development might address. This insight resembles the prevalent view that elementary and middle-school math teachers need a "profound knowledge" of basic

mathematics in order to teach it well. Lack of such wider knowledge among teacher might place unfortunate limits on organizational capacity.

The question is this: Lacking better grasp of the wider issues, how are teachers to go beyond concerns that students perform well on tests and move towards authentic standards-based curriculum development? Fortunately, the district administration exhibits a grasp of this issue. The leadership seems to know how much remains to be done, but teachers are largely unaware. Hence, the emerging teacher leadership is a structure through which the future development of organizational capacity—and the sustainability of improvement—might be realized.

The middle school, not surprisingly, given the team's judgment of its comparative openness, was also the only school in the district in which a teacher offered a complex and unconventional view about "meeting the standards":

I think sometimes when you're set in what you're going to teach for the standards [i.e., when content is fully specified and coordinated] the administration sometimes gets a little leery of you ... trying something new.... They're worried ... that your test scores may drop, or you're not getting enough of the content "in" to teach to the test. But my goal has never been to *teach to the test*, but to integrate what we're doing so that they can *pass the test*.... You have no other choice sometimes. I mean they think that [i.e., that there is no other choice], but I think if you ... integrate many things into the one you don't have to [worry]. [emphasis added]

This teacher's answer to "Why shouldn't you teach to the test?" appears to be that it is unnecessary, given a sufficiently circumspect view of content. Many teachers may not possess such circumspection. Those who do, however, are likely to feel more comfortable about deeply engaging the new pedagogy.

Smallness Makes Schooling Personal

Smaller size helped structure the middle school's success, according to many people. References to the "small community" and "small town," however, were as numerous as references to "small school." Smallness is seen as providing a certain intimacy and familiarity, construed principally as a benefit:

I think that one of the reasons why Felicity might be so successful is because it's a smaller school. And the classrooms are not as large so the teacher can get to know the child a little better.

Yeah. I know that they're getting a better education here. And I don't know if it's because they're a smaller school but I don't want them to go anywhere else because I know that they're getting a good education here.

I feel like we are exemplary in that because I think we do take kids that...I mean part of it too is just being a small school.

So there's a lot...and that's another good thing about a small school district, the superintendent's two hallways away. I can walk over there if I need to and ask him anything.

I used to live in Dayton, and we moved here actually when I got the job. I like it

because it's small and you do get to know all the kids.... you get to know them a lot better than at a big school district.

Smaller size, however, also harbored challenges in the words of some interviewees. For instance, the concept of professional isolation, familiar enough in the rural education research literature, figures in the following passage:

I'm the only eighth grade science teacher so I stand alone, by myself, with nobody to feed off of But we're a small school too.

The "too" in this passage expresses ambivalence, not only explaining the professional isolation, but also suggesting some compensation in the familiarity and access bestowed by smaller size. A different sort of pride about smaller size is seen, however, in the following remark, in which the district is construed as having resources that are unusual for its size:

We have a lot of things that I've never [seen], for it being such a small school district. For example, the curriculum guide coordinator [Moore] who I think is our whole rhyme and reason why our test scores are the way they are.

At the middle school, as at the high school, what interviewees seem to appreciate is a sense of scale inherent in the nested structures of school, district, town and township. The Felicity Franklin High School report, in its consideration of emergent themes, contains an extended discussion of the issue of scale from a districtwide perspective.