

## **Fredericksburg Elementary: Case Study Report**

### **Executive Summary**

The case study provides insights into school improvement at Fredericksburg Elementary school, a K-8 school that is one of four elementary schools in the Southeast district of Wayne County. The school is located in an agrarian community with a large Amish population, and the student body is 42% Amish. With so many Amish children, the school has developed a special seventh and eighth grade class specifically focused on the needs of these students, for whom eighth grade represents the last year of formal schooling. Since 2000, student achievement at Fredericksburg has improved both in reading and mathematics. Although achievement was never terribly low, performance now is quite high, especially in reading.

The case study is based on qualitative data collected in the spring of 2005—interviews, observations, and relevant documents. It identifies important contributors to the school's success as well as possible concerns.

#### *Promising Practices*

- Coherence: between the school's philosophy and its practices, between the school's culture and that of the larger community, and between the school's structure and its fundamental purposes.
- A cooperative, goal-oriented climate in which teachers work together to identify school-improvement needs and strategies for addressing those needs.
- Classroom goal-setting and performance monitoring.
- Flexibility in approaches to student grouping in order to maximize individual achievement and healthy group dynamics.
- Innovative approaches to teaching, including a focus on differentiation of learning activities in order to meet individual needs.
- Professional development that is both teacher-centered and closely tied to school-wide goals.
- An engaged, democratic, and transformational approach to leadership.

#### *Possible Concerns*

- Resource limitations that keep teachers from using "hands-on" approaches, especially in science.
- The threat of school closure due to the persistent practice statewide (and nationwide) of consolidating small rural schools.

### **School Profile**

Fredericksburg Elementary School serves the population of Fredericksburg and the surrounding Salt Creek Township area of Wayne County, Ohio. With 203 students in kindergarten through eighth grade, Fredericksburg Elementary is the smallest of four elementary schools within the Southeast Local School District: Apple Creek Elementary, Fredericksburg Elementary, Holmesville Elementary, and Mt. Eaton Elementary.

Located in the rolling farm country of southeast Wayne County, Fredericksburg and the surrounding area are home to one of Ohio's largest Amish populations. Many of the Amish families choose to send their children to Fredericksburg Elementary as opposed to the traditional Amish parochial schools. This unique achievement is a source of pride for the staff at Fredericksburg Elementary, as is the fact that the percentage of Amish children attending this public school has increased from approximately 30% five years ago to approximately 42% in 2005. 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.<sup>1</sup>

Table 1: Fredericksburg Elementary School Profile

School	Average Daily Enrollment	203
	Grade Levels	K-8
	Attendance Rate	96%
Students	Percent Minority	0%
	Percent Disabilities	10.8%
	Percent Disadvantaged	40.5%
Teachers	Number of Teachers	13
	Percent with at Least a Master's Degree	23.1%
	Average Years of Experience	10
	Average Salary	\$41,311

Table 2: Southeast Local (Wayne County) School District Profile

ODE District Rating	Effective
District Enrollment	1,699
Total Per Pupil Expenditure <sup>2</sup>	\$8,571
Median Family Income <sup>3</sup>	\$42,500

The school's population of students is more concentrated in the primary grades. Kindergarten and the primary grades represent about 64% of the school population. This

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

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

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

is due in part to the small size of the seventh and eighth grade classes, whose enrollment of 13 students represents only about 7% of the school population. The combined seventh and eighth grade class comprises solely Amish students. The non-Amish (“English”) students transfer to the district’s middle school after sixth grade. The special class for Amish children was created about five years ago in response to the needs of the large Amish community. Amish children, as a rule, do not attend school after eighth grade. Some leave school at the end of sixth grade. This special class has been well received by the students, staff, parents, and the Amish community itself.

The Fredericksburg Elementary School building dates from 1891, and served as Fredericksburg High School until the late 1940s. A small addition to the building was completed in 1967. While the age and configuration of the building present many problems, Fredericksburg Elementary is highly regarded by the community. Community pride in the school reflects, in part, the citizens’ interest in their local history and heritage. As one teacher noted,

A lot of the old-timers in town know this as Fredericksburg High School, so overall the reputation is very positive. There’s a lot of history involved in the school itself.

The elementary school also is a source of personal history and nostalgia. According to one of the teachers,

If you look in the trophy case out here, there’s still some trophies from years ago, and people will say “gee, you know, look in the trophy case; my trophy’s there” from playing football or something. So there’s a great sense of pride here in the community.

The full-time teaching staff at Fredericksburg Elementary is made up of ten regular education teachers, a teacher of students with multiple disabilities, another special education teacher, and several specialists who serve the school on a part time basis. There are also three teaching aides. The school’s support staff consists of a secretary, two cafeteria workers, and two custodial workers.

School employees are assisted by 40 parent volunteers, who provide clerical support for teachers, cafeteria assistance, tutoring in reading and math, and assistance in the planning and implementation of special events and projects. Each June, parent volunteers and staff join together to host an auction to raise additional money for the school. The proceeds of the summer auctions, the most recent of which raised \$25,000, are used to purchase library books, supplemental classroom materials, field trips, special assemblies, and computer equipment and software.

Fredericksburg’s pass rates on state accountability tests are quite high, typically from 10-20 percentage points above those in similar districts. Tables 3 and 4 display information about the six-year achievement trends for grades four and six, based on Proficiency Test results from 1999-2000 through 2004-2005..

Table 3: Fredericksburg Elementary School

Trends in 4<sup>th</sup> Grade Proficiency Test Performance

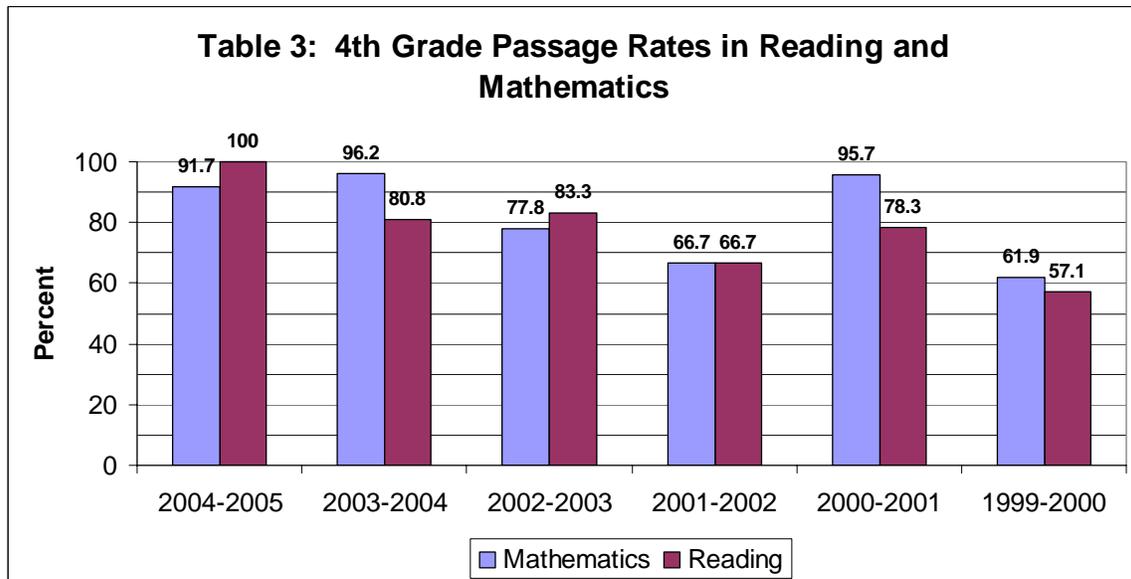
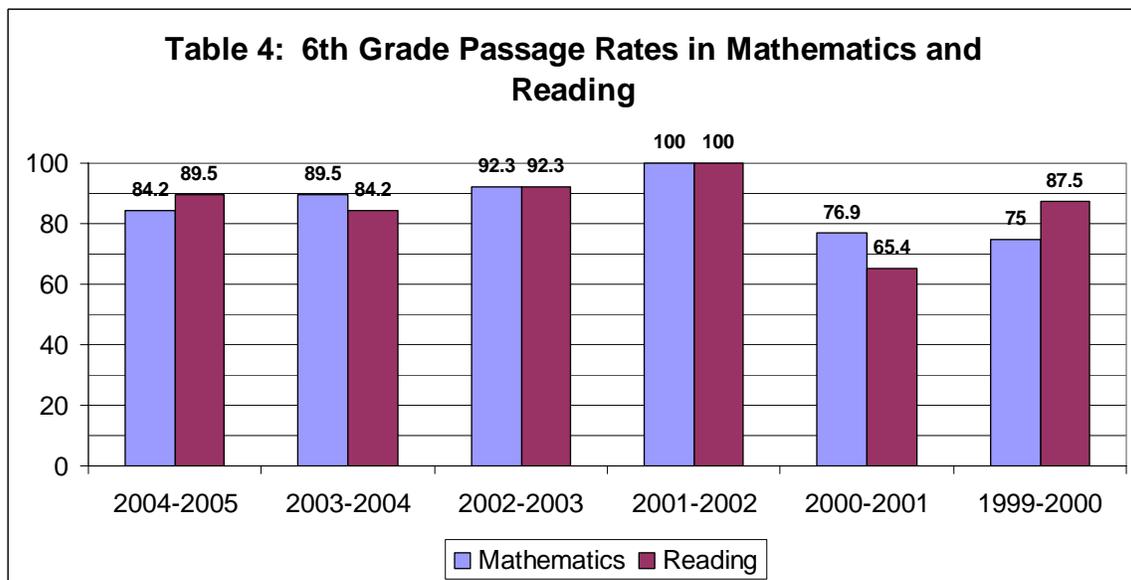


Table 4:: Fredericksburg Elementary School Trends in 6<sup>th</sup> Grade Proficiency Test Performance

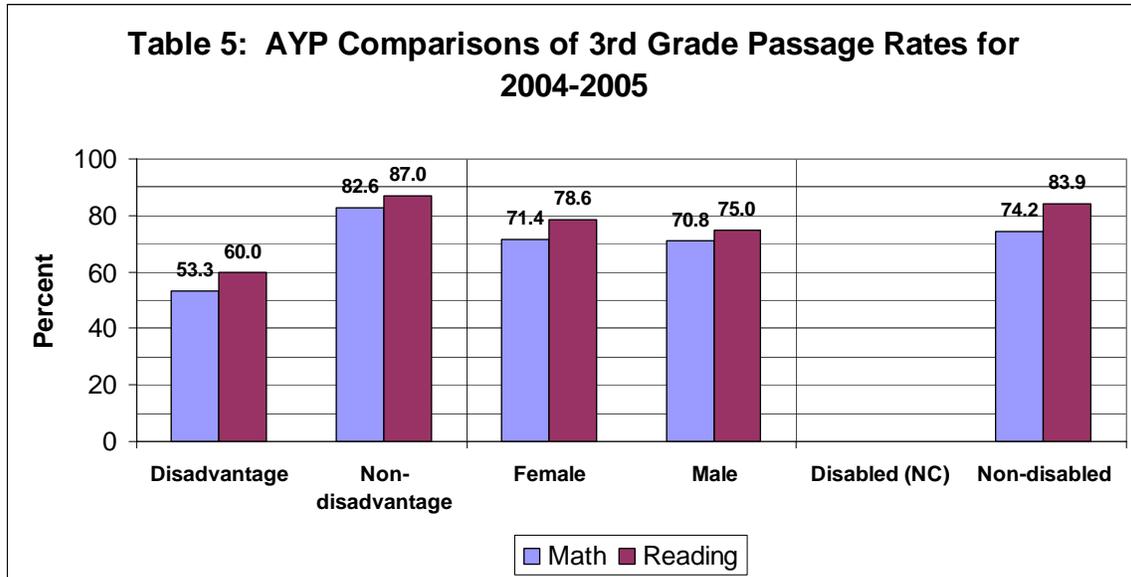


Fredericksburg is a small school, and Tables 3 and 4 exhibit the fluctuations associated with small sample sizes. Given such small sample sizes, however, a cautious interpretation of these data suggests that the school as a whole has been doing very well for some time.

The implementation of the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) requires that separate test scores be reported for key subgroups of students, and Table 5 provides some of the

relevant comparisons for 2004-2005. These are based on grade-three data because of missing data at other grade levels, and they reveal clear achievement differentials between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students. Arguably, however, it takes any school a number of years to reduce achievement gaps. If the data were available, comparisons of the pass rates of fifth or sixth graders might provide a more accurate picture of the school's cumulative influence on achievement equity.

Table 5: AYP Comparisons of 3rd Grade Pass Rates for 2004-05



### Methods

A project researcher conducted individual semi-structured interviews with five teachers, the principal, the district superintendent, three parents, and five non-parent community members, one of whom served on the district's board of education. In addition, he conducted individual and focus group interviews with a total of 12 students. Interviews lasted from 30 to 90 minutes each. The researcher also observed for at least an hour in each of five classrooms, and he 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 using 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. Discussion of two emergent themes revealed meaningful linkages across these categories.

### **School Structure and Culture**

With a mission that focuses on achievement through unity, the Fredericksburg Elementary School community works to create a place and a set of experiences that make sense to all of its members. This approach aims toward coherent connections—between the school’s philosophy and all its practices, between the school’s culture and that of the larger community, and between the school’s structure and its fundamental purposes. These connections result in a school with a distinctive and positive climate.

#### *School Climate*

The cooperative, goal-oriented climate of the school constitutes a major theme emerging from observations and interviews with Fredericksburg students and teachers. Each morning of the school year the principal, Mrs. Arnold, greets the assembled student body at the front door. After a hearty “Good morning boys and girls,” Mrs. Arnold asks, “What are we here for?” The students respond loudly, “To learn!” Mrs. Arnold then asks, “How do we learn?” The students reply in unison, “United effort, united responsibility, united success.” This daily ritual serves as a constant reminder of the mission of the school.

The students appear to react positively to this morning routine. They gather without prompting and respond enthusiastically. As students enter the building, Mrs. Arnold speaks to them by name. Teachers are in the hallways as well, greeting students with friendly comments. As the children move quickly to their classrooms through halls adorned with student work, they talk and laugh with friends.

Students and teachers consistently exhibit a friendly and spirited dedication to learning, which characterizes the climate of Fredericksburg Elementary. Moreover, the students are extremely orderly, reflecting a high level of self-control. Very little “correcting behavior” by teachers appears to be needed, although the teachers do use some behavior management strategies. In addition to reinforcing appropriate behaviors, all of the teachers use a color-coded, response-cost disciplinary system, which appears to have been adopted district-wide. One student describes the system as follows:

We have a chart with names on it, then green, yellow, red and blue tickets and warnings, they go on red. Second time they go on, I mean warning, they go on yellow. And second time they go on red and need to write a note to their parents and third time, they go on blue and need to go to the principal’s office and call home. Then if the whole class is bad, then she erases letters of “recess,” and if we don’t have any letters, then we don’t get recess.

Although this classroom management system appears to contribute to students’ orderly behavior, their respectful attitude seems primarily to reflect community values. Teachers’ practice of rewarding academic achievement also plays a role. Certificates are awarded; names are posted; student papers displayed; and charts document various goals and objectives attained by classes and individual students. There also appears to be a friendly, respectful relationship between students and teachers. The warmth of the

relationship may result from the fact that most of the teachers live in the community and are familiar with the students' families.

The school climate is also marked by a sense of purpose. Each classroom establishes a set of learning goals for a particular period of time (e.g., grading period or school year). For example, one of the goals for a third grade class reads, "14/17 students will pass the Reading Achievement Test." When goals are met, the poster is marked "retired" and placed on the "Retired Goals Wall" near the office. Students have progress folders for every subject. They track their own progress toward meeting specific learning goals and record this information in their individual folders. These folders are checked almost daily by the teacher. The school appears to be student-centered in that the progress of each individual student seems to be a matter of importance to the teachers and principal. Moreover, because each teacher employs similar procedures for classroom organization, the students know exactly what is expected in every class.

Students respond enthusiastically to the friendly, purposeful climate of the school. When students were asked, "What do you think about this school?" the responses were positive.

I like coming to school. The teachers are nice and they help us a lot. (fifth grade student)

I was in school in Holmes County before coming here. This school is a lot better. Everyone is friendlier. (Sixth-grade student)

In the student focus group, several students mentioned that the teachers seemed to care about helping them learn.

If we need help the teacher will take extra time to help us understand. (sixth grade student)

The climate appears to be just as positive for the adults at Fredericksburg Elementary, with teachers reporting that the school is a good place to work. In particular, they cited the feelings of support they receive from the principal and from each other:

Last year was my first year here. Everyone went out of their way to help me get started on the right foot. (third grade teacher)

We share a lot here. We try to help each other. We feel good about what we've been able to accomplish together—as a team. (first grade teacher)

### *Connection to the Wider Community*

Whereas the climate of Fredericksburg Elementary is one manifestation of its rather unique culture, its connection to the local community is another. The school serves a rural area where many families, Amish families predominantly, are engaged in farming or related agricultural operations. The large percentage of Amish students in the school contributes significantly to its culture. In general, the Amish families appear to be reserved, respectful, industrious, and quick to offer help to their neighbors—both Amish

and “English.” The Amish children who attend Fredericksburg Elementary mirror these qualities. The girls in particular are typically somewhat more reserved than their “English” peers. When asked about the influence of the Amish children, educators and parents agree that their presence is positive:

The Amish children provide a very positive example for all of our students.  
(principal)

At first my children weren’t sure about the Amish children. My son complained that they always won the spelling and reading contests because they never watched television—they just read! But now, my children have lots of Amish friends. (parent of two children)

I think our school is a much better place with the Amish children. It shows them another culture. Hopefully, it teaches tolerance and understanding. (sixth grade teacher)

In most Amish communities parents choose not to send their children to the “English” public schools, preferring the Amish parochial schools instead. However, Fredericksburg Elementary has seen a steady increase in the number of Amish children attending over the past three or four years. This increase suggests that the Amish community feels comfortable with the culture of acceptance found at Fredericksburg Elementary.

For the past three years the school community has made a concerted effort to operate according to its mission: *United Effort, United Responsibility, United Success*. Children are encouraged to help one another, and they often work in pairs or small groups to complete class assignments and projects. Teachers appear willing to share and help one another. Overall, classroom observations as well as information provided by interviewees reveal far more examples of cooperation than of competition. While evidence of the values implicit in the mission statement can be readily observed in the school, the same values appear to be a part of the community culture as well. Comments from two community members show how practices in the wider community embed these values:

We are a very close knit community—almost like a very large family. People are generous with their help. For example, the volunteer fire department has never had to ask for a tax levy. When we need new equipment, the entire community pitches in to raise the money—this includes the Amish too!

In this community, I think, caring and sharing. Um, like I said, we’re not a wealthy community. I mean, you know, we don’t have a lot of ... rich people, oh yeah, [we have some] rich people, but not . . . there’s [not] a difference between the rich and the poor. I mean you can have a club and you’ve got poor, you’ve got all kinds of incomes in there and it’s not, it doesn’t make a difference. You’ve got, especially with the Amish, you need help with something, they’re right there to help. And they’re a big factor in this community. I mean, it’s, and it’s not just the Amish. I mean, anybody in the community would do almost anything for you.

This melding of the Amish and “English” cultures seems to have a positive influence on the learning environment. Further research focusing on this relationship may better define the depth of the influence on the overall performance of the students at this school.

### *Cooperative Structures*

Two structural features of the school—its student grouping arrangements and its professional development program—draw on the deeply held and widely shared belief in achievement through unity. Interestingly, as the following discussion shows, both sets of structures give teachers latitude to engage in practices that attend both to the needs of individual students and to the needs of the student body generally.

*Flexible approaches to student grouping.* Although educators at Fredericksburg are aware that the conventional wisdom of the moment calls for heterogeneous grouping of all students coupled with full inclusion of students with disabilities, they are not convinced that these approaches are always in the best interest of children. Rather, they see themselves as the arbiters of grouping practices that work to maximize student achievement and healthy classroom dynamics. A passage from the interview with the principal summarizes a perspective that seems also to be shared by the teachers:

Are they being successful here if we have them whole group? Are they being more successful inclusionary as opposed to being pulled out? Are we getting better results where you want a whole class to experience it versus I've got a group of students that needs a remediation—we need to hone in on this specific skill, and I can work with them. So it's—you have to look at the needs of the child and if you're looking at a class, you know, what's right for them...and we have a lot of discussions about that as staff.

The teachers, moreover, understand the dangers associated with rigid tracking. The grouping arrangements they use, however, are anything but rigid. Comments from two teachers illustrate the teachers' thinking about this issue:

I do lots of different [kinds of grouping]. Occasionally I'll do [it] by level. Usually, though, they're mixed. It just totally depends on the activity. Sometimes I'll mix the quiet ones with an outspoken one. Sometimes, [it's] based on skill. Lots of different things: We're constantly switching it up.

In math, sometimes I do [grouping] based on skills, and sometimes I just do [it] based on interest, and sometimes we have a game day, and so I have different games set up and they can choose their choice. So I do it lots of different ways.

The approach to inclusion of students with disabilities also combines flexibility with appropriateness, as the following comment from the principal illustrates,

Sometimes inclusion works with our special needs kids, and sometimes they need to be pulled out to have that one-on-one, so we do all. It's what's going to be right for the child. You have to look at their needs, look at the data.

Notable in all of these examples is the way educators at Fredericksburg work to design grouping structures that meet needs—the needs of individual students, the instructional requirements of particular lessons or activities, and perhaps also the need for variety.

*Collegial approaches to professional development.* With a staff that so clearly espouses the value of cooperation among students, one might not be surprised to see a cooperative approach to professional development. Nevertheless, not too many schools view professional development in this way. Furthermore, in a state that requires individual planning for professional development, team strategies inevitably exist side by side with individual strategies. The value of the team approach is evident, however, in comments from the educators we interviewed. The principal, for example, explained,

One of the things that I think has helped them and myself—we have team meetings. We have the monthly staff meetings, and it's more professionally development geared. We don't do a checklist. I bring questions; we have dialogue; we look at videos. That's the type of staff meetings that we have. Team meetings will focus on a primary issue or an intermediate issue of concern. And one of the things that's happened is asking those questions, the right questions, and having dialogue.

At Fredericksburg, a professional development committee helps to keep professional development focused and relevant to the immediate needs of the school community. According to one of the teachers,

We have a professional development committee. We usually have a particular focus for a school year. Last year it was math and math instruction, so most of our professional development was focused on that. Several of us traveled to Akron and Youngstown to see the *Everyday Math* program in practice. We also had people come into the district and give workshops on math instruction.

Even the professional development that individuals pursue because of their own interests and needs forms the basis for a collegial experience. Principal Arnold explains how this practice came to be established:

The other thing that we've been doing, and I tried to do this three years ago: okay, if you go to an in-service, you go to a conference, you're going to come back and share. That went over like a lead balloon. So it was interesting because this year I was talking about something with some of my teachers, and she said, "Yeah, I think when we go to a conference we should come back and share with everyone," and I went, "Really? That's a great idea; let's do it!" So now we are sitting down and they'll do a whole mini-presentation. They come back from a conference, they can't wait. They get up and they present, and they're having us do activities. So everybody's being pulled in; there's follow-through; you're touching more than just the one teacher.

## **Academic Focus**

Considering the commitment to learning that characterizes the school climate and its culture and community, there is a strong focus on academic progress at Fredericksburg Elementary. Curriculum decisions and decisions about instructional methods are based primarily on the Ohio content standards and students' performance on the Ohio proficiency tests. The orientation toward progress is represented by the on-going goal setting and monitoring of the mastery of academic concepts and skills.

### *Curriculum Approaches*

Both curriculum and instruction are guided by the state content standards and benchmarks. All teachers utilize the standards in developing lesson plans and goals. A new math program, *Everyday Mathematics*, was chosen because it aligns with the Ohio Content Standards in focusing on problem-solving and providing numerous hands-on activities for students, as well as because the program "spirals" to allow for smooth transitions from one level to another. The program is being implemented in stages: 2004-05 was the first year for this program in grades K-5, and the sixth grade will begin implementing the program in the fall of 2005.

Change from a more traditional approach to one that is more inductive and inquiry-based is difficult, as the teachers acknowledge. Nevertheless, the following comment captures what many teachers said, namely that the change has been worth the effort.

But it's been great. I cannot believe the growth that I've seen in my students with their math skills and concepts with just that higher level of thinking. And our old math curriculum was good, but I did a lot of trying to making it fun. So, creating games where this [program] has [those materials]. When they bought it, they did a very nice job—our district did—because they bought pretty much everything we needed. We have all the games...so it's just fun. They really enjoy it.

For reading instruction, a basal reader (Harcourt) is used, in combination with leveled reading books, in grades K-3. All primary teachers employ phonics-based instruction in conjunction with a contextual, whole-language approach. In the intermediate grades, leveled readers and classroom libraries are used to promote reading. Students begin writing in sentences in kindergarten. Sight word recognition and spelling are emphasized. Science instruction is primarily guided by the textbook, in part because the lack of a science lab reportedly inhibits experimentation. However, some use is made of "outdoor" labs, especially when the science topic relates to the environment.

### *Instructional Design and Delivery*

With the principal's leadership, teachers use data derived from standardized tests and informal classroom assessments to pinpoint areas of the curriculum that need extra emphasis. These data are also used to track the progress of individual students and to indicate where intervention is necessary. Since the progress of all students is carefully monitored, those students experiencing difficulty can be readily identified. The Intervention Assistance Team meets monthly to discuss and plan intervention for these students. Parents are invited to attend these meetings, and generally they do. As one of the Title 1 teachers explains, "All of my work is on a one-to-one basis. Students who are

struggling in reading and math come to me. I try to design a program for their specific needs and work with them individually.”

In addressing group and individual needs, teachers at Fredericksburg Elementary use a variety of teaching methods. Grouping methods include whole group and small group instruction, and students working in pairs. In a third grade classroom, for example, while about a third of the students were working with the teacher on a math lesson, a third were at the computers doing an independent math project, and the other third were reading silently in the reading corner. Some computer-assisted instruction was observed in every classroom. Each classroom has three to five computers. A computer lab with 25 Apple computers is also available for whole-class projects.

The library is an integral part of the instructional delivery process. The librarian works closely with the classroom teachers to provide resource materials that match lessons and projects. Students make frequent use of the library to find supplemental reading material and to gather information for their research projects.

Individualized (or differentiated) instruction seems to represent the most pervasive instructional strategy used by the teachers at Fredericksburg. Even those who describe their teaching methods as traditional also make ample use of individualized teaching. As one such teacher explains,

I guess I'm old fashioned. I pretty much stick to whole group instruction. It seems to work best for me. I do give my students a lot of individual attention though. I can do this in class, and students know they can come to me after school for more help.

According to Mrs. Arnold, most teachers are willing to experiment with innovative approaches to instruction, and their selection of the *Everyday Math* series—coupled with the commitment to pursue the professional development needed in order to use the series well—attests to their receptivity to innovation. As Mrs. Arnold explains,

They're open-minded. I've got a few that think that there's only one way to do things, but that's typical. But for the most part they're very, very open-minded, they're here for the kids, their hearts are in the right place, and they're moving forward. And they're constantly willing to learn and try new things, and I find that exciting.

### **Leadership**

The principal at Fredericksburg Elementary, Mrs. Patricia J. Arnold, is completing her fifth year at the school. She was educated at the University of Akron, Ohio State University, and Ashland University. Prior to assuming the duties of principal, Mrs. Arnold held various supervisory and teaching positions within the Southeast Local School District and surrounding districts.

Mrs. Arnold appears to be a dynamic and energetic leader. She employs a collaborative leadership style, but is also aware that the ultimate responsibility for many decisions

rests with her. She challenges her teachers to engage actively in their own learning and to share their learning with colleagues. For example, as mentioned above, staff meetings are given to discussing curriculum, instruction, teaching strategies, and achievement data. Relevant books and journal articles are also frequent topics of discussion. This past summer, she asked her teachers to read a motivational book, *Good to Great*. Copies were purchased for each teacher; and, at subsequent staff meetings, teachers were asked to critique chapters from the book. According to one teacher,

She [Mrs. Arnold] challenges us to do our best for every child, to constantly look at our teaching and see where we might improve. Patty sets the tone by how hard she works and how she looks for ways to help us.

Mrs. Arnold is currently working with the staff to make better use of the various forms of testing data. Achievement, diagnostic, and proficiency test results are routinely discussed with staff, and she asks the teachers to disaggregate, or “drill down,” the data to reveal information that can better inform the instructional process for individual students within their classrooms.

Mrs. Arnold is quick to praise teachers when it is warranted. She gives a large share of the credit for the school’s success to the instructional and support staff. A number of staff members indicated that this appreciation for their efforts is a prime factor in the high morale and collegiality at Fredericksburg Elementary. Mrs. Arnold holds high expectations for her teachers, and they appear to respond accordingly.

During the day, Mrs. Arnold spends most of her time out of the office visiting and observing teachers, talking with students, or conversing with support staff. Fredericksburg is a small school, and her involvement in the day-to-day routine of the students and teachers allows her to be knowledgeable about what is happening in the classrooms. Clearly, she has established a positive rapport with the students. She knows most of the students by name and is frequently seen talking with individuals and small groups of students—asking them how things are going, urging them to do their best, commenting on good behavior. Responses to the question, “what does the principal do?” included the following comments from students:

She makes sure we have what we need to learn. She tells us to always do our best. (Eighth-grade student)

Mrs. Arnold talks to us when we are not behaving, but she’s not mean. I like her because she makes school a lot of fun. (Fourth-grade student)

The principal’s leadership also extends to the community at large. Parents regard her as competent and caring. They feel welcome at the school, and many of them volunteer in various ways. Mrs. Arnold is well-known in the community and works to keep the community informed about school events and issues through newsletters and personal contact. In addition, she uses one-on-one conversations with area business leaders as a way to build and sustain school-community partnerships.

As the discussion above suggests, members of the school community react favorably to Mrs. Arnold's leadership. Most of the teachers and parents interviewed regard her arrival as the "triggering event" leading to improvements in the school's performance (e.g., increases in fourth grade pass rates in math from approximately 68% in 2001 to approximately 96% in 2004). Mrs. Arnold offers a more modest assessment. She gives much of the credit to her staff and views her role as that of a facilitator and provocateur. Nevertheless, her leadership embodies many of the practices that research attributes to transformational leaders:

- She establishes a vision: "One of the things, one of my responsibilities as administrator of the building is that I've got to have a vision. And when you come in as an administrator, you have to get a feel and a flavor of what's going on before you can see that. Once you see that you have to promote it. You have to promote it in every professional...whether it's a meeting setting, a one-on-one conversation, your actions—you have to constantly promote that vision so that people know what I believe. And it can't just be about me." (principal interview)
- She makes use of inspirational motivation: "I'm thinking about the building and about how to keep them motivated. I have to—you have to be the cheerleader, you have to keep things going, and it's continual." (principal interview)
- She provides intellectual stimulation by asking questions, providing insightful resource materials, and provoking meaningful dialogue: "I've learned—this is my wisdom from my very long short reign as an administrator—to question. I can lead better with a question, and asking the right questions is hard to figure out. It is. I mean I struggle with that. And I'm always trying to get better at it."
- She exerts idealized influence, taking actions that encourage others to follow her lead: "She is dedicated and enthusiastic. Sometimes we have to tell her to slow down! It's easy to work for someone who loves what they do and work hard" (teacher interview).
- She brings stakeholders together on behalf of common purpose: "the principal that's there now, she just, she just absolutely sells the place. She goes out of her way to make sure that, that things are run well, and that she has contact with the community and that kind of stuff" (community member interview).

### **Parent and Community Engagement**

At Fredericksburg, there appears to be a concerted effort to engage parents in the education of their children. Pre-kindergarten parents, for example, are invited to spend a day in the kindergarten classroom to experience what it will be like for their children. Parents are in the building each day conversing with the teachers at appropriate times and meeting with the principal. The principal reports nearly 100% participation of those parents asked to attend monthly Intervention Assistance Team meetings. A number of parents assist in the classrooms under the direction of the teacher, and parents report feeling a close connection to the school and the teachers. In interviews, they express the belief that the principal and teachers care about their children and work hard to help them succeed.

Some interviewees, however, explained that in the recent past the school was not open to families and community members. Their comments suggest that, historically, there

had been a strong connection, which was eroded to some extent by policies and practices in the several years before Mrs. Arnold took over as principal. Many attribute improved parent and community relations to Mrs. Arnold's efforts, as the following passage illustrates:

I think the school is coming along a lot better than they used. When I was in there, I think it was more, more the school and not so much the community. And I think once Patty got down there, she turned it more into a community thing.

As with most schools, parent involvement at Fredericksburg is encouraged. But also, as with most schools, parent participation in some activities is limited to a relatively small group of parents who, for a number of reasons, are more willing and able than others to participate. As one parent expressed it, “. . . you have your handful of people that did the bulk of the [PTO] work.”

Nevertheless, with a variety of opportunities to participate in different ways, parents' and community members' involvement does seem to be increasing. For example, a few interviewees explained that they attend evening events that are scheduled at several of the schools in the district, including Fredericksburg. One parent of older children talked about her continued engagement with the elementary school.

I'm a little more involved in the junior high, high school, now with my children. But I've been here to many assemblies and I think when they got the blue ribbon award and I've been here for several things. I wish I could be here for more.

As mentioned previously, the fact that Fredericksburg Elementary serves a stable agrarian community may help to explain why parent and community engagement is high. Many parents attended Fredericksburg Elementary when they were children; grandparents may have been students at Fredericksburg when the building housed a high school. In addition, many of the teachers live in the area, and thus have a strong connection to the parents and community at large. This circumstance appears to add to the high level of trust between school personnel and parents. Although being able to trust the school is important to all parents, it may be especially important to the Amish parents. After all, in sending their children to the public elementary school, these parents are agreeing to have their children educated in a culture that is not fully their own. The large (and growing) percentage of Amish students is, however, strong testament to the openness and trustworthiness of Fredericksburg educators.

Unusual for many communities today, in Fredericksburg, the school building and grounds are still frequently used for community events; and several school events are, in fact, regarded as community events. The annual auction to benefit Fredericksburg Elementary, for example, is a popular, well-attended community event, an all-day affair with food, door-prizes, and the sale of numerous items donated by local businesses.

Parents' loyalty to the school is also reflected in their concern about consolidation. A number of parents, aware of consolidation that has occurred in nearby districts, said they were worried that the district's small elementary schools, like Fredericksburg, may, someday, be forced to consolidate with other schools in the district.

## Emergent Themes

As with other schools that were part of our study of Schools of Promise, two issues are especially relevant to Fredericksburg Elementary's efforts toward school improvement. The first issue concerns the nature of curriculum selection and development that appears to be emerging; and the second concerns the nature of the interpersonal relationships found in this small school.

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

At Fredericksburg Elementary as in many of the schools in the state, Ohio's content standards (with their clarifying benchmarks and indicators) form the basis for the curriculum and instructional program. The faculty and administrators at the school have worked hard at curriculum mapping, carefully aligning the curriculum with state standards and ensuring that students learn the skills and concepts represented on the standardized tests administered statewide. Teachers monitor students' progress toward mastery of these standards, and the students themselves are sometimes asked to monitor their own progress.

As the following comment from Mrs. Arnold suggests, curriculum mapping involved a systematic process

Mapping was huge when the standards came out. I mean, we have mapped K-12 on a monthly basis with the standards, what we're teaching, to try to help teachers to understand. When they came out, [the teachers] were like, "Oh, but I taught this." Well, does that fall into the standards and if it does, when are you doing it? So they have a roadmap of where they're going.

The roadmap metaphor is an apt one to describe what's going on with standards-based instruction at Fredericksburg. Teachers see the content standards as an important source of information about what to teach. But they do not regard the standards as the only source of such information. The seventh and eighth grade curriculum designed for the Amish children attests to the fact that the school's educators consult other sources as well—in this case, the community.

Moreover, teachers engage sincerely in deep curriculum work, as evidenced by their decision to adopt the *Everyday Math* series and learn how to use it to good advantage. The nature of the activities and discourse in math classes at Fredericksburg was qualitatively different from that in any other School of Promise we studied. This difference suggests that the teachers at Fredericksburg have changed their instructional practices in significant ways. Such deep engagement with curriculum work confronts fundamental issues regarding disciplined knowledge and learning processes. It is far different from superficial efforts to raise test scores by asking students to memorize items from previous versions of the state's accountability tests. Although we observed this kind of "teaching to the test" at other Schools of Promise and in comparison schools, we saw no evidence of it at Fredericksburg.

### *Smallness makes Schooling Personal*

With 203 students in kindergarten through eighth grade, Fredericksburg Elementary is one of the smallest schools in our study. In a society that tends to see bigger as better, schools this size are becoming rarer. At Fredericksburg, students, teachers, and parents seem, for the most part, to feel fortunate in reaping the benefits of a setting that is now available to very few. Parents, in particular, are pleased by the individual attention their children receive in such a small school. As one parent noted,

I would say because our school is small, that lends to that individual attention that they can give the kids. Just because the school is small enough that the teachers know your children's name before they even get to the classroom as opposed, I'm sure, to a bigger city, [where] "these are just kids, you know, there's too many kids, I can't think of the individual needs."

Furthermore, the small size of the school supports a culture of cooperation, rather than competition, which appears to foster authentic learning experiences. In general, children are not afraid to make mistakes and learn from them. Students are encouraged to explore alternative ways to solve problems and to work in teams or small groups with their peers to complete substantive class projects.

The small size of the school promotes cooperation among teachers and their engagement in school-wide decision making. As one teacher explains, "we are a small enough staff that we all can have input into most everything that we do—in fact, we are encouraged to offer opinions." Collegiality is also the norm at this small school. Through more formal team and school meetings and less formal encounters in halls and classrooms, teachers share ideas and help one another improve their practice.

Parents and community members also talk about the "close-knit" or "family-like" atmosphere of the community and its school. They feel comfortable visiting the school, talking with teachers (many of whom are their friends and neighbors), and providing help to the school when there is a need. As is the case in many US communities that cherish a small school, citizens of Fredericksburg worry that their school will be taken from them. As one parent put it,

One thing, though, that I hope they don't do, and I know it's been brought up a little bit, is, I'm not sure if you're aware, Southeast Local is comprised of the four separate towns elementary schools, and I know they're about trying to consolidate a couple of those, and I really would be kind of against that idea. I think that's one of the things that make Fredericksburg, Mt. Eaton, and Holmesville different from some of these urban schools. I would just hate to see that come to consolidation.