

# **Schools of Promise Case Study Report**



Maple Leaf Intermediate School Garfield Heights, Ohio

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Maple Leaf Intermediate School in Garfield Heights, Ohio, was selected for the present research on the basis of its many distinctive characteristics, but primarily because of the high levels of achievement demonstrated by students in reading and mathematics.

Table 1. School and district characteristics

	Maple Leaf Intermediate School, 2004-2005	Garfield Heights City School District, 2004-2005
Percent Minority	33.9%	31.0%
Percent Poverty	52%	47.8%
Years as a School of Promise (reading and mathematics)	1	
District Typology		Urban
Student Enrollment	553	3,823
Attendance—all students	94.8%	93.9%
Attendance —Economically disadvantaged students	94.0%	93.0%
Attendance —Minority students (African-American)	95.5%	94.8%
Attendance —Minority students (Asian/Pacific Islander)		96.8%
Attendance —Minority students (Hispanic)		93.2%
Attendance —Minority students (Multiracial)	94.8%	93.8%
Student mobility: Students in building less than one year	7.4%	8.0%
Number of teachers	27	190
Average teacher salary	\$58,089	\$53,251

Source: Ohio Department of Education.

#### **School History**

Maple Leaf Intermediate School is a fourth and fifth grade school located in Garfield Heights, Ohio. It is the only Intermediate school in the district, and the only school in the district serving the fourth and fifth grades. The superintendent admits that restricting the school to only fourth and fifth grade students was a change made out of necessity, not design, as the district struggled with managing space and facilities. The building has undergone significant renovation since its re-opening with major interior improvements undertaken at the beginning of the 2005-2006 school year.

Maple Leaf was named a *School of Promise* for the 2004-2005 academic year in both reading and mathematics. Maple Leaf students come from two "feeder" elementary schools, William Foster Elementary and Elmwood Elementary. Maple Leaf administrators and teachers feel their

success is closely tied to the exemplary efforts of the two elementary schools. They believe that

if students were not well-prepared upon entering Maple Leaf, teachers would not have sufficient time to prepare fourth grade students to do well on state proficiency tests in just seven months.

#### **District Mission statement**

The Garfield Heights Learning Community demonstrates basic values that meet the **Needs of the Heart** with clear **Academic Goals** applying to all children in **Appropriate Facilities** and where all community members work together.



A few of Maple Leaf's staff: From left: teachers Linda Spremulli, Lisa Perko, Terese Lepelley, Principal Tom Matthews, teacher Jill Frimel, and district superintendent Dr. Jeanne Sternad.

Table 2. School and district performance on state indicators

State Indicators 2004-05 State requirement is 75%				
	Maple Leaf Intermediate School, 2004-2005	Garfield Heights City School District, 2004-2005		
4 <sup>th</sup> Grade Proficiency Test				
Reading	97.5%	97.5%		
Writing	86.7%	86.8%		
Mathematics	86.0%	85.8%		
Science	55.4%	55.6%		
Social Studies	78.8%	78.9%		
5 <sup>th</sup> Grade Achievement Test				
Reading	98.0%	97.7%		
Attendance (State requirement is 93%)	94.8%	93.9%		
Number and percent of state indicators met	6 out of 7	13 out of 23		
Rating	Effective	Continuous Improvement		

Source: Ohio Department of Education

#### Teacher Characteristics<sup>1</sup>

Maple Leaf has ten full time teachers at each grade level and seven other teachers, among them an art teacher, music teacher, physical education teacher, and four intervention specialists. From data provided on a teacher survey, teachers at Maple Leaf are 80 percent female and almost all are Caucasian (96 percent). Over 80 percent hold a master's degree. Teachers have, on average 14 years experience teaching and an average of eight years teaching at Maple Leaf. Although only two teachers are certified by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, seven have an advanced teaching certificate and all teachers are Highly Qualified.

### Schools of Promise Case Study Methodology

On February 24, 2006 a four-person research team conducted a one-day site visit to Maple Leaf Intermediate School. Activities conducted during the day were as follows:

#### **Classroom observations**

Six classes from Maple Leaf Elementary were observed, each for 30 minutes: three mathematics classes (one fourth grade and two fifth grade classes) and three reading/language arts (one fifth grade and two fourth grade classes). The class sizes ranged from 25 to 30 students.

Classrooms were randomly selected by SRG from a list of teachers and class times provided by school administrators using a random number generator. After sample selection, SRG consulted with school administrators and teachers to ensure that the observation period was valid, the selected teacher would be teaching at that time, and that observations would not interfere with examinations, quizzes, or other planned activities that day. In the event of a conflict, a different class period was selected by SRG. Each observation lasted 30 minutes. Two trained researchers conducted observations simultaneously, and their ratings were compared to determine inter-rater reliability for observation protocols. Inter-rater reliability across the six classrooms was determined to be 100 percent.

Observers used a subset of measures from the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS—Pianta, LaParo, and Hamre, 2005) to record qualitative observations and make quantitative ratings on climate (positive and negative), teacher sensitivity, behavior management, productivity, and concept development. Following each observation, teachers were asked via a one-page questionnaire about the particular class that was observed to determine if anything that happened during the observation period was unusual or remarkable; this information was taken into consideration during data analysis.

#### **Teacher interviews**

Individual interviews were conducted with 13 teachers (five of whom were observed): interviewees included the fourth- and fifth-grade chairs, the four curriculum leaders, the five teachers on the grant team for Enhancing Education Through Technology (EETT), the school's art teacher, the physical education teacher, and the intervention specialist. Interviews were also conducted with the school counselor and social worker, the school technology coordinator, and the district's social services director. Interviews lasted 15-45 minutes, and followed a pre-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Data provided by Maple Leaf Intermediate School teachers in a teacher survey provided to SRG, February 2006.

determined discussion guide. Topics discussed included curriculum and instruction, professional development, school climate, policy and procedures, and characteristics of effective teachers.

#### **Administrator interviews**

Individual interviews were conducted with Principal Tom Matthews, Superintendent Jeanne Sternad, and the principals of Maple Leaf's two feeder schools: Principal Linda Reid from William Foster Elementary and Principal Jody Saxton from Elmwood Elementary. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes and one hour. Interview topics included general school history and background, curriculum and instruction, characteristics of effective teachers, professional development, and partnerships; school climate, policies, and procedures; and teacher recruitment and hiring.

#### **Teacher survey**

A teacher survey was distributed to all classroom teachers (n= 27) approximately one week before the site visit. The survey was self-administered and asked questions about the teachers' background and training, professional development activities, school climate and culture, as well as perceived characteristics of effective teachers. A total of 25 surveys were received, representing a response rate of 96 percent.

#### **Student focus groups**

To gather feedback from students, two student focus groups were conducted. Students were recruited by school administrators from classrooms observed during the site visit. Two groups were conducted, one with six fourth graders and one with five fifth graders. Topics discussed included school background, perceived teacher support, learning opportunities, and what students like best about their school and teachers.

#### Parent interviews

After the site visit, SRG conducted 20 telephone interviews of parents. Interviewees were selected from lists provided by school administrators. Each interview followed a prepared survey instrument and was conducted by phone at a time convenient for the participants. Topics included curriculum and instruction, teacher relationships, and opportunities for student achievement. Interviews lasted 11-17 minutes.

#### Results

This report is organized using the "Five Lessons Learned" identified in earlier *Schools of Promise* research. These lessons emphasize the importance of providing rigorous instruction aligned with state standards, instituting strong leadership, designing instruction to ensure student success, engaging parents and the community to support student success, and establishing a school culture that values individual students. Maple Leaf Intermediate School shows evidence of all these components.

In addition to investigating ODE's "Five Lessons Learned from Successful Schools" and how Maple Leaf Intermediate School demonstrates these characteristics, a particular focus of the current research is on teacher quality and the role of the teacher in high-performing schools. Specifically, the present case study inquired as to how teachers, administrators, students, and parents define teacher quality. What teacher characteristics are perceived as most important by each of these stakeholder groups? With these questions in mind, the present research also

examines issues related to teacher quality in these schools and key stakeholders' beliefs and expectations regarding teacher quality.

Several characteristics of effective teachers repeatedly emerge. Maple Leaf's principal, district administrators, teachers, students, and parents consider effective teachers to share some common characteristics:

- Teachers should be self-reflective, open to change, and collaborate with their peers to improve instruction.
- Teachers must understand the Ohio content standards.
- Teachers must differentiate instruction to meet the needs of students with different learning styles.
- Teachers must support students but hold them to high standards and maintain high expectations for student success.
- Teachers must have positive attitudes toward teaching and towards working with students.
- Teachers must be effective in managing the classroom and in creating a safe, orderly classroom environment based on mutual respect.

These themes are recurrent throughout the following Five Lessons.

#### 1. The school delivers rigorous instruction aligned to the standards.

<u>Alignment begins at Maple Leaf Intermediate's two feeder schools – Elmwood Elementary and William Foster Elementary</u>

The preparation for the success of the fourth and fifth graders at Maple Leaf is initiated at the elementary schools that feed new students to Maple Leaf. Both Jody Saxton, principal at Elmwood Elementary, and Linda Reid, principal at William Foster Elementary, showed great vision in aligning curriculum to state standards for students in Kindergarten through third grade. The two principals have empowered their teachers to use student performance data to align instruction to content standards and are strong advocates of using data to identify students' needs. When asked what makes her school effective, Principal Reid said:

I think our collaboration among teachers, our intervention program is second to none, and our use of data I characterize as being the real strong point for change.

Four years ago when the Ohio academic content standards were new, Principal Reid encouraged teachers at William Foster Elementary to concentrate on building their knowledge base regarding the standards. Over a two-year period teachers developed curriculum maps that laid out monthly guidelines for addressing standards. Then, as test results began coming in, the principal and teachers began looking at the results section by section to see where their students were strong and where students needed better preparation. Reid said an important part of this process was building teacher confidence to reduce anxiety about state assessment. By building their knowledge and confidence the school has seen great results:

Four years later, here we are, really taking students who come into our building with maybe 33 percent of literacy passage rate on the KRAL [Kindergarten Readiness Assessment for Literacy] test to, by third grade, close to 80 percent. And that's a real improvement there.

Student results on diagnostic tests are used to profile teachers and identify areas where students are weak. For example, the principal at William Foster Elementary generates bar graphs for each teacher to show his or her students' performance on the test. This process shows teachers what standards they need to concentrate on and where additional professional development may be needed. Curriculum leaders are also involved in analyzing student data. If a large percentage of the students are weak in an area, they consider whether weaknesses in a particular area are developmental, or if curriculum maps should be adjusted to introduce topics earlier.

At William Foster Elementary, alignment to standards is vertical (across grade levels) and horizontal (within grade levels). Principal Reid has organized a leadership team; each grade level has a chairperson, and curriculum leaders also pay attention to meeting state standards. Teachers at each grade level meet weekly. Agenda items include continuation of training begun on in-service days and examination of student work to see if classes are mastering skills necessary for success on achievement tests. Reid said the elementary schools have to be sure their students have mastered many skills before they transition to Maple Leaf because the intermediate school cannot take a poorly prepared student and turn her or him into a success between the start of school in September and fourth grade proficiency tests in March.

Like William Foster Elementary, Elmwood Elementary, the district's second Kindergarten through third grade school, is data-driven. Student assessment data are analyzed to identify strengths and weaknesses and teachers are empowered to make adjustments in instructional delivery to improve student learning. Vertical alignment ensures students start building necessary skills in earlier grades. Principal Saxton said a few years ago, teachers struggled with how best to use student data:

We needed to start making our decisions based on data. Initially there was some anxiety because [teachers] weren't sure, well, what do we do, what do we look at? Now we've been doing that each year on a regular basis, looking at the diagnostics.

Every year, the principal begins an analysis of third-grade test results and gives teachers copies of all the information she receives about student performance. Using a PowerPoint presentation, she breaks results down by student race, areas in which students were strongest and weakest, and specific benchmarks. From there, she said, "I let the teachers run with it....So what do we need to do differently? What kind of strategies, what instruction is going on? What do we need to do in first grade, maybe second grade that the teachers can help support us?"

Principal Saxton faced a challenge when she first arrived at Elmwood Elementary because teachers were apprehensive of adopting state standards into their instruction; the state content guidebooks had not even been unwrapped, she said. Her first goal was to make her teachers comfortable with the standards. All teachers submit lesson plans, and plans must be tied directly to state content standards. She now requires her teachers to post their learning objectives for each day or each week in their classrooms. Teachers are expected to include how their daily or weekly objective fits with Ohio's standards. She has provided dry-erase boards in the hallways outside every classroom where teachers can post what they are covering in student-friendly terms. Everyone can see what standards are being addressed that day or that week in a teacher's classroom. The public posting of lesson topics addresses Saxton's belief that expectations must be high and everyone must have shared understanding of the expectations. She said:

Raise your expectations for your teachers, raise your expectations for your kids, and put it out there. Tell them that is non-negotiable. They have to teach the standards. They have to do assessments.

At Elmwood Elementary, the principal maintains a regular presence in the classrooms. She visits every classroom every day, a process which takes about two hours. Principal Saxton completed a training through an Ohio Educational Service Center in how to conduct a classroom walk through that she considers to be extremely valuable, as she described:

It's a real quick and dirty three- to five-minute look at a teacher, an administrator, or anybody. You walk in, and there are specific things you look for to see if things are aligned to the standards. The first thing I look for is to see if the kids are engaged. And then I glance around to see what's the content that's being taught at that time and I can look and see if they have their books open or if they're doing a worksheet. So there's the content, and I mentally make a note that hopefully that is aligned to the standards. I would highly recommend it to any administrator.

The data-driven focus at the elementary schools, as well as at Maple Leaf (see page nine), is reinforced at the highest levels by the District Superintendent Jeanne Sternad. She meets with the principals to set data-driven goals. Superintendent Sternad described how goals are set and progress is evaluated across the district:

Each administrator is evaluated by their goals that they identify and each principal has to have a data-driven achievement goal. We look at [the goals] quarterly. We meet weekly as an administrative staff, and the reports are given to the administrative staff. Not only are the principals accountable to me, they're accountable to their colleagues too. I learn a lot.

Sternad's view, one her administrators share, is that progress must come step-by-step. "You're building for the future, and you have to just be very comfortable taking little steps at a time," she said. She suggested that school districts might not want to start out by tackling their area of greatest need; she recommends beginning with smaller, more manageable goals to see how well teachers and administrators work together. She also said improvement plans should include special-area teachers, such as a music or physical education teacher, in order to make improvement a building-wide commitment.

#### Alignment to standards at Maple Leaf

Maple Leaf continues this philosophy, and the school's path to improvement was taken incrementally. Teachers started the process of aligning the curricula to state standards several years ago. They broke each subject area down into monthly units and then set up a weekly sequence of topics and skills within each month. For fourth graders, the teachers said it was important to address much of the curriculum before the testing in March. A teacher described the process:

For instance, in social studies we focus on economics and government and people in societies, and once we broke down when we wanted to teach and what, then we were able to narrow it down and from there focus on well, 'This week this is what we will be covering and next week this is where we should be'.

Teachers get together both formally and informally to share teaching strategies. Teachers meet monthly regarding curriculum issues to ensure horizontal and vertical alignment. The informal discussions can create more excitement than the formal meetings, as one teacher said:

Sometimes I think unscheduled meetings are where more stuff is shared than the actual scheduled meetings. With our scheduled meetings so many times, 'This is what we want to accomplish,' where if we meet informally some people get really excited with, 'This worked really well and let me tell you about it.' I think sometimes people are more willing to share that when they are not in the spotlight.

The teachers spoke positively about the teachers who serve as curriculum leaders, and feel that the leaders have been a key to their success. The teachers who act as curriculum leaders are described by their colleagues as keeping the rest of the staff focused. Initially, they met with teachers every week, then every two weeks; currently teachers meet with curriculum leaders once a month, as one teacher described:

Now [we meet] probably once a month, just to keep focused and make sure everybody's on track. In the beginning we would bring all of our materials or whatever we were working on or had to cover, and we took a look at the weekly plan and what order we planned to do things in. We had all that laid out and everyone was on the same track. We're not on the same page every day, but we know [what the others are doing].

Although there is little formal communication and coordination between teachers at the Intermediate and Elementary schools today, several years ago, as the district was working to improve on state proficiency tests, teachers from both schools met to review the curriculum and found big differences between the elementary and intermediate schools, including different textbooks. As a result the district adopted a new textbook series, Harcourt Trophies. This series is used in both elementary schools and in Maple Leaf, ensuring consistency from Kindergarten through fifth grade.

The mathematics curriculum closely follows Ohio academic content standards as well as standards from the National Council on Teaching Mathematics. A team of teachers revised the mathematics curriculum beginning in the 2003-2004 school year, moving away from a basal program to a state-specific workbook targeting Ohio Content Standards. Teachers collaborate at regularly-scheduled curriculum meetings and create materials to supplement the workbooks. The curriculum meetings produce quarterly assessments, which are administered to all students.

Curriculum meetings are held monthly and on in-service days. The school has used waiver days granted by ODE to help design curricula improvements and make purposeful adjustments. Staff who teach the subject area attend the meeting along with intervention teachers and special subject teachers (e.g., music, art, physical education, and library science). Teachers who teach more than one area share all pertinent information with each other through individual and small group meetings. Student performance data are analyzed, and students who need intervention are referred to the school-wide intervention teacher who works with students in a small group setting.

#### Impact of alignment to state standards

Alignment to the standards at Maple Leaf Intermediate and at its feeder elementary schools has produced significant benefits in the last five years, according to Maple Leaf's Principal

Matthews. He credits the district's alignment to standards for the significant gains observed among fourth and fifth grade students in the past five years, as summarized in Table 3. In both reading and mathematics, the percentage of students passing in four key subgroups—African-American, Multiracial, Economically disadvantaged, and students with disabilities—increased to levels exceeding state requirements (i.e., 75 percent passing).

Table 3. Gains in student proficiency and achievement, 2001 and 2005

	Percent Passing 2001	Percent Passing 2005
Fourth grade proficiency, reading		
All fourth grade students	57%	97%
African-American students	46%	94%
Multiracial students	33%	100%
Economically disadvantaged students	48%	96%
Students with disabilities	23%	96%
Fifth grade achievement, reading (given for the first time in 2005)	NA	98%
Fourth grade proficiency, mathematics		
All fourth grade students	61%	86%
African-American students	46%	76%
Multiracial students	50%	80%
Economically disadvantaged students	58%	82%
Students with disabilities	41%	86%

Source: Maple Leaf Elementary

As the superintendent restores programs that were dropped during the previous budget crunch, an option that will deserve serious consideration is the addition of a district curriculum director to lead the alignment effort. "Three thousand and some kids, and there's no [district] curriculum director," a teacher said. Teachers and the superintendent believe a person in this position would play an important role to improve alignment between buildings. One teacher said in a meeting with another school she learned first graders were having science classes just once or twice a week, which was not enough. Other teachers expressed concern about different methods in use in third grade social studies. "One group wasn't even using books. You don't get kids at the same level and communication skill," a teacher said.

Superintendent Sternad hopes the Board of Education will support funding for a district curriculum director, but she said Garfield Heights may be a victim of its own success—others outside the schools may not see the need as long as student performance is high. She counters, "Well, [success] doesn't maintain unless you've got somebody who is really, really working on that."

#### Standards are integrated into all subject areas

Importantly, the teachers from various subject areas are working together to reinforce the messages and content taught by others without traditional social walls or artificial barriers. Art teachers are constructing timelines to improve mathematics skills, and physical education teachers post maps to show where professional sports teams are headquartered. "It's

interesting to watch how art can implement some of the goals of the Ohio Proficiency test," said the school social worker.

Everyone works together to support collaboration across subject areas. Standards are integrated in all subject areas by benchmarking when and what is being taught in the classrooms. Special subject teachers take part in creating the scope and sequence; they also integrate and follow the curriculum map in their daily lesson plans and plan their assessments in coordination with the classroom teachers. Another way the teachers work together to integrate standards is through the "word of the day." During his morning announcements every day, the Principal shares an "Achievement Word of the Day." This is a word or concept that students need to know for the state proficiency tests. For example, one day the concept was compare/contrast. Students may be asked throughout the day by any staff member to explain the concept as it applies to various subjects. Principal Matthews says, "Learning is a school-wide function at Maple Leaf. It is not regulated to the classroom teacher behind closed doors. It is open for all staff members to share and expand upon."

The physical education teacher gave an example of incorporating science into PE classes that uses the scientific method. "We have one unit where we are cardiovascular scientists," she said. The students form a hypothesis and collect data regarding the effects of step aerobics. She sees it as important to seek ways to integrate the four curricular areas into PE.

The art teacher said visual reinforcement of lessons in science and mathematics can help students learn core academic principles faster. "I just did a lesson on chemical and physical changes dealing with hot air balloons. By making those connections visually, it really helps out with what they are doing in the classroom," he said.

To reinforce mathematics concepts, the school's PE teacher uses Venn diagrams to compare and contrast results in physical education. She gave another example of when she learned that students were struggling with grids and graphing. She marked grid lines on the gym floor to work the concepts into PE. Integrating core learning skills is routine for the special area teachers in music, art, and PE. "Nobody says, 'Well, that's a little out there'," said one teacher.

Together, these efforts are leading to a feeling of readiness among Maple Leaf students as demonstrated by the students in the focus group. They said they were already doing well in classroom assessments and seemed eager for the "real" test. "Yesterday we took the practice reading test, and today we're going to take the practice writing test for that big test," said one student. When the interviewer asked if they felt ready for the test, a student said, "I could take the achievement test right now."

## 2. The school provides leadership that results in continuous improvement of instruction.

Strong leadership in the Garfield Heights district communicates a common vision based on high expectations for which teachers, students, and school leaders themselves take ownership. The concept of team leadership is in place at all schools, and principals work to empower their teachers. Their leadership promotes a unified effort toward student achievement in three ways: cultivating relationships with teachers and students, incorporating collaborative, data-driven improvements to curriculum, and actively monitoring the performance of teachers and students.

In large part, success at Maple Leaf is enabled by open-minded attitudes toward change. The teachers are eager to be leading innovators, always looking for better ways to reach students from diverse backgrounds. The drive to be on the cutting edge starts at the top. "It absolutely

starts at the leadership, and it goes on down," said an intervention specialist. This is an attitude cultivated throughout the district and was also evident at the elementary schools.

For example, at Elmwood Elementary, Principal Saxton believes in a daily goal of empowering teachers to make changes. She said it was important to focus on incremental changes, because otherwise it is easy for teachers and students to become overwhelmed. She expressed her method this way:

I had a game plan. I described a three-year cycle. And I would tell them, 'OK, let's not be overwhelmed. What's doable this year?' ... I didn't put the game plan in place. I facilitated it.

She said she tried to be sure the plan was realistic, but if efforts seemed to be going awry, she urged her staff to discuss the difficulties and revise the plan. "Your initial plan may look good, but you must be able to constantly assess where you're at with that, and be able to make changes," she said. It is important not to "meet for the sake of meeting" but to have real objectives to encourage collaboration. She provides collaboration time for teachers throughout the school year.

Principal Saxton has tried to focus monthly staff meetings on issues around improving instruction. She uses that time for professional development, presenting current research to the staff, and discussion of instructional issues. She said she has worked to get the meetings away from "stuff you could put in an e-mail." She also requires weekly grade-level meetings as well. She said, "I have some grade levels that work very, very well as a team. They're very tight, they're very cohesive. They'll meet in the morning, afternoon; they'll meet on Saturday." Although she does not attend grade-level meetings she reviews their agendas to be certain that meetings focus on best practices, lesson planning, data analysis or other topics related to the school's mission.

In terms of organizational structure, Maple Leaf utilizes teachers as leaders in curriculum as well as administration. Two teachers serve as grade level chair people (one for fourth grade and one for fifth grade). Teachers also act as curriculum leaders in four core areas (reading/language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies). The principal attends the grade-level meetings to be aware of problems or changes in the classrooms, while stressing the need for teachers to take ownership of the student performance improvement process. This structure empowers teachers to take ownership of educational issues and seems to positively impact school climate and teacher morale.<sup>2</sup>

#### Leadership empowers teachers and fosters open communication

Tom Matthews, the principal at Maple Leaf, is described by teachers as having an "open door." He tends to let the teachers take ownership of academic and school climate programs, and his leadership style is intended to empower teachers to take an active role in day-to-day decisions. One teacher said:

I think Mr. Matthews is very open to listen to any ideas that we have and make any changes that we feel need to be made. He's seen very much as an open door principal. There's nothing set in stone with him.

Maple Leaf teachers agree they receive clear messages from school and district leadership regarding policies, expectations and initiatives. More than 88 percent of teachers agreed school

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> A similar organizational structure is used at William Foster Elementary, one of Maple Leaf's feeder schools.

leadership communicates expectations clearly to faculty, staff, students and parents. Nearly 85 percent agreed school leadership effectively communicates state, local, and national educational policies and initiatives, and 80 percent agreed there is an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect at Maple Leaf.

More than two-thirds of teachers agreed that the principal makes an effort to address teacher concerns, and teachers feel supported by the principal. Sixty-eight percent of teachers said they felt centrally involved in decision making about important educational issues.

Committees take an active role in decision making. "We have an open door policy," says Principal Matthews. "All staff members are given the opportunity to get involved in the decision making process." Curriculum leaders make decisions about the curriculum issues only. Other issues or concerns may be raised at a staff meeting or a visit to the very open principal's office. The final decision making, however, rests with the principal, who bases his decisions on what is best for the entire building as far as improving instruction, developing the professional growth and performance of the entire staff, and what is best for the children and promotes a positive environment for their learning.

#### Teacher leaders at Maple Leaf

One of the most effective strategies implemented at Maple Leaf is extensive use of teachers as leaders in the school. As mentioned above, teachers serve as leaders at grade levels and in curriculum areas. Additionally, they lead efforts to adopt and incorporate technology in the school.

A key opportunity for teacher leadership involves preparation and development of curriculum. At Maple Leaf teachers participated in curriculum alignment several years ago and, through ongoing collaboration, coordinate and differentiate instruction.

The grade-level chairs were very complimentary regarding the effectiveness of the curriculum leaders; the curriculum leaders have been instrumental in keeping teachers focused on content standards. Another teacher said the curriculum leaders have helped the faculty narrow down their teaching so they focus on what the test will cover first and get to fun or lighter material later.

Teachers have changed their emphases in different subject areas based on a review of old achievement tests. "The short answers, the extended answers, not all of us were using all of those. Using rubrics much more frequently in the classroom -- things like that have really made an impact on the kids," she said.

Again, teachers' roles as curriculum leaders provide colleagues opportunities for collaboration and support. Also, seasoned teachers serve as mentors for new teachers (by assignment). One teacher described how she worked with a new teacher to develop aligned lesson plans and help with her preparation for PRAXIS. The latter function she viewed as particularly valuable as a "refresher" for herself.

At Maple Leaf, mentor teachers are assigned to help a new teacher develop and refine his or her skills in the classroom. They also help the new teacher adjust to the school culture and get to know parents and the community. Mentors are available to help new teachers on a daily basis and meet with the new teacher once a week. This helps new teachers refine their skills and knowledge and become more successful at an earlier stage in his or her career. The principal believes that mentoring positively impacts the quality of the instruction and helps the new teacher become a contributing part of the team.

At Maple Leaf, teacher leaders lead by maintaining a focus on teaching and learning and by establishing trusting, constructive, collaborative relationships with colleagues. They lead from formal positions of leadership as grade level chairs or curriculum leaders as well as through informal collegial interactions. This is consistent with the research on effective teacher leadership (York-Barr & Duke, 2004).

#### Professional development

Because of the district's tight budget, Maple Leaf has a very small budget for teachers' professional development. In the 2005-2006 school year, the district invested in training on Dr. Ruby Payne's Framework for Understanding Poverty. This day-long training was provided for teachers from Maple Leaf Intermediate, William Foster Elementary, and Elmwood Elementary and focused on increasing teachers' understanding of the "culture of poverty." In addition, one day per quarter each school building has a professional development day for teachers, designed by the school itself.

Maple Leaf has also emphasized use of technology. The school had a one-day in-service to demonstrate to staff how to utilize DSL (Data for Student Learning)<sup>3</sup>, e-mail, PowerPoint, Excel, and Progress Book (an electronic grade book). Also, because of the school's involvement with their Enhancing Education Through Technology grant, the five teachers who participate in this grant conduct one additional day of training for the rest of their colleagues one day per quarter.

Maple Leaf's teachers take an active role in the professional development of their colleagues. All respondents to the teacher survey agreed teachers work together to improve teaching and learning, and 80 percent agreed teachers are provided opportunities to learn from one another.

Teachers at Maple Leaf said collaboration was an important part of their effectiveness, and being open to new ideas and willing to share ideas through collaboration were key to their success. As one teacher said, "That's a big part—openness for change. You have to be able to collaborate, share." Some examples of changes that may not have occurred if staff had not been open to change are the school's adoption of Progress Book (a web-based grade system), and the school's new standards-based report card. "These changes could not have been successful if the staff had not been open to those changes," the principal said. "They required an extremely large amount of time and effort to implement successfully."

Other staff members, including the school social worker, counselor and physical education teacher, praised the faculty of Maple Leaf for their ability to seize opportunities that help with professional development. These staff members noted that the teachers work well together, both at the grade level and across the building. "I think our teachers have nothing and they turn it into something. They have almost no budgets, almost no anything. The teachers here are what make this building," said the physical education teacher.

When Maple Leaf teachers were asked about the primary focus of their professional development activities in the previous year, developing instructional strategies to meet diverse student needs was clearly the primary focus. Other areas emphasized in professional

access through a web-based interface down to the classroom level for a means of improving studen administrative decision-making. For more information, see <a href="http://www.mcoecn.org/">http://www.mcoecn.org/</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> The concept of "DSL" is to create a centralized core database for current and historical data collected at the local district level from fiscal, student, staff, EMIS, and testing into a single database. This database is maintained by the Management Council of the Ohio Education Computer Network (MCOECN). The MCOECN provides graphical access through a web-based interface down to the classroom level for a means of improving student instruction and

development at Maple Leaf are collaboration for improving instruction, focused study of the teacher's content area, and understanding and applying Ohio content standards (see Table 4).

Table 4. Focus of teachers' professional development

Thinking about all your professional development activities last year, what was the focus of the activities you selected? <sup>4</sup>	Which areas apply to you?	Which one area was your primary focus?
Instructional strategies to meet the learning needs of diverse groups of students or students with different learning styles	70.8%	54.2%
Collaboration for improving instruction	66.7%	8.3%
In depth study of the academic content of the subjects I teach	58.3%	12.5%
Understanding and applying Ohio content standards to student instruction	45.8%	8.3%
Strategies for creating and maintaining safe and orderly classrooms and schools	45.8%	8.3%
Strategies for engaging parents and families	33.3%	
Using assessments to gauge student mastery of Ohio content standards	29.2%	
Strategies for engaging stakeholders as active members of the school communities	8.3%	
Using research results for decision making	8.3%	

The recent Ruby Payne training was particularly valuable to teachers in broadening their understanding of how to work with children with diverse backgrounds and educational needs (see page 23 for more information about the impact of this training). The school's emphasis on technology is also seen as valuable in this regard, as one teacher said, "I learned more about available technology and how to use it to improve teaching and record keeping."

#### Recommendations for preparing new teachers

On the teacher survey, a question asked, "How well-prepared were you to teach this population of students when you first started working at this school?" Almost two thirds indicated they felt "prepared" (28 percent) or "very well prepared" (32 percent). Teachers were next asked to explain their response. Among teachers who said they were "very well prepared," the main reason was previous teaching or work experience. Several mentioned that they had taught in an urban environment. A few teachers also mentioned that their college courses helped to prepare them.

Teachers who felt less prepared were those who had either less experience in general or their experience involved working with a different population of students. Some said they were not ready to manage a classroom, and others said they were poorly prepared for the demands of state testing.

Teachers could not emphasize enough the value of teaching experience in their own preparation. "When I was student teaching I taught in an inner city school in the city of Akron.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> These response options were adapted from the Maryland Survey of Teacher Participation in High Quality Professional Development, 2003-04, Maryland State Department of Education

The diversity helped me to be prepared for my teaching future," one teacher said. Others had experience working in day care and Sunday school. The direct experience working with children was invaluable, they said.

Teachers' college programs—methods courses, subject content courses, and master's degree programs— were also mentioned as good preparation for their current roles.

Teachers were also asked about their recommendations for training and preparing future teachers to be effective. Many teachers again emphasized that structured, hands-on experience in a classroom with supervision is needed and should begin as early as possible. Teachers also noted that this "hands on learning" should include a wide variety of schools and class environments. "The best preparation and training is actually working with the students in real school settings," was a typical response.

In an urban setting where many families live in poverty, teachers also need to be prepared for priorities that have little to do with learning. Some suggested a teacher mentoring program so that teachers new to the urban environment are not overwhelmed. As one teacher noted:

Often times, academics are not important to students and their families when there are other problems in the home [violence, substance abuse, poverty, et cetera]. Teachers should be equipped to deal with student concerns and fears before the curriculum can sometimes be addressed.

#### 3. The school designs instruction to ensure every student's success.

Throughout the site visit, the Maple Leaf staff pointed out the importance of teachers' enthusiasm; knowing the academic material is almost secondary to being able to motivate the children and keep them engaged in the learning process. A commonality observed among the teachers was collegiality, familiarity, and warmth. They clearly collaborate frequently and freely, often lapsing casually into conversations about how they can improve their instruction.

At Maple Leaf intervention is a critical aspect of ensuring student success. Intervention at Maple Leaf is integrated so that students are in their mainstreamed classroom most of the day. Some classrooms are identified as "intervention classrooms," meaning students may be "pulled out" for reading with an intervention teacher, but the rest of the day the children receive lessons in a "mixed group." One teacher described the process this way:

The rest of the day the kids are all together in a group and they might have extra help from me, they might have extra help from the intervention teacher, or our classroom aide. The kids are mixed up all day long depending on ability level, but they tend to get lessons together, but when it comes time to do work depending on what they are doing, we pull them out for separate help.

Students are targeted for intervention by a variety of assessments in the district starting with the preschool and Pre-K screenings at the elementary schools. Parent information and other shared medical resources may be used to help the teacher plan and deliver an effective intervention plan at the earliest time to help advance the learning of each individual child. In grades one through five, test results are used to ensure the correct intervention is being used to address the gaps between a child's performance and potential. The Total Community Solutions (TCS) team in the building works with the student, parents, and teachers to collaboratively find ways to motivate students and to help them assume responsibility for their own learning (for more on TCS, see page 22).

Maple Leaf uses a variety of assessment tools, such as state-mandated yearly tests, quarterly tests and short-cycle assessments. Teachers use summative and formative assessments daily. Assessment results guide teacher meetings, both grade-level and curriculum meetings. Students are offered small-group and individual intervention in core subject areas with an emphasis on mathematics and reading. Teachers collaborate on this intervention with parents and colleagues to make sure everyone is on the same page. Intervention teachers may work with students in a small group setting or go into the classroom if necessary. They also work with teachers to look for ways to create and select activities that will help the students improve.

Intervention begins in earnest at the district's Kindergarten through third-grade schools. To achieve vertical alignment across grade levels, William Foster Elementary uses multiple forms of assessment as early as Kindergarten to target skills students will need in third and fourth grade. After the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment for Literacy [KRAL] is administered during the first six weeks of Kindergarten, students with the lowest scores are put into a two and a half hour literacy skills class added in addition to their half-day of Kindergarten. Morning Kindergarteners stay for the literacy block in the afternoon, and the reverse takes place for afternoon Kindergarteners. The school also uses Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), a research-based assessment from the University of Oregon, to provide baseline information about five major components of reading. Reid emphasized the importance of early intervention to close emerging achievement gaps:

What we're hoping is that when those children enter first grade, because you can't hold back 32 kids, that they'll keep closing the gap. Those are those hard ones who don't seem to pass by fourth grade that we've given an early intervention and are not so lost in first grade.

Beyond Kindergarten, at William Foster Elementary, an intervention team labels students as low risk, at risk or high risk. Low risk students usually do not leave the classroom for outside intervention. Rather, the intervention team offers some techniques to the classroom teacher for improving skill level. High risk students receive intervention services every day.

The Garfield Heights district also offers a program called Extended Learning Opportunity (ELO). Funded by a federal grant, ELO provides after-school tutoring for at-risk students after their needs have been assessed. Garfield Heights performs assessments within 30 days after a child enters the district. Thus, any intervention indicated by testing can begin in a timely way. When the assessment shows gaps, parents are contacted by letter and often by a telephone call to make notification more personable.

At Maple Leaf, ELO consists of 90 minutes of mathematics twice a week and 90 minutes of reading, also twice a week. With 14 teachers serving as tutors and two coordinators, about half of the teaching staff is involved in providing ELO tutoring. One teacher said others wanted to be tutors, but lack of funding prevented Maple Leaf from extending the program any further. Students understand ELO is there to help them pass the achievement tests. "We have this ELO after-school program, and I go to it to get more ways to learn and pass the test," said a student who participated in a focus group.

The school's gifted program has an intervention specialist specifically for gifted students. Teachers welcome the gifted program because it stimulates high achievers who might otherwise become bored and cause behavior problems, and pushes good students to perform even better. In addition, when the gifted students are working with the specialist, a teacher will have fewer students in the classroom and can concentrate directly on other students' needs.

The gifted intervention specialist said Maple Leaf administrators supported the program and kept it in place when the budget crisis in Garfield Heights was forcing them to cut many programs. "Even in times when money's been tight, we've just always managed to try to keep the key components in the gifted program," she said. The specialist said she offers support for teachers with gifted students in their classes and also works with small groups. However, the specialist will present lessons to entire classes as well. "And a lot of times we see sparks flying in some of those kids that we might otherwise kind of dismiss in our day as being the lower ability kids," said the specialist, who also works in a middle school nearby.

It is obvious that teachers appreciate differences in student needs but set high expectations. Teachers at Maple Leaf try to get to know all of their students quickly at the beginning of the fourth grade year. Even with close communication from the two feeder elementary schools, the fourth grade teachers make a concerted effort to get to know where the individual child is and teach from that point. The superintendent described the importance of understanding student needs:

Teachers don't expect all their kids to walk in and be the exact same level. They recognize that all these kids come in with different baggage and they're at different levels of their education. They teach from that point, and expectations are high.

Teachers at Maple Leaf use different strategies in various subject areas to meet the range of learning styles. For example, in language arts, the teacher might employ direct instruction to introduce new vocabulary words, followed by modeling the words on the blackboard and breaking up the class into small groups to reinforce the lesson. Guided practice also takes place in language arts. Mathematics, technology and science use an inquiry-based model to explore concepts. Some mathematics classes use manipulative materials for instruction. Science often will use experimentation to work through the scientific method.

Social studies classes have used simulations, role-playing and modeling. During a unit on the Revolutionary War, a teacher simulated a town meeting for discussion of whether students saw themselves as a patriot or loyalist. To teach economics, students were placed in groups that formed companies so they could better grasp the factors of production.

In focus groups, the students said the teachers break down units of instruction to small segments, which helps them understand and remember new information. The students liked learning shortcuts for doing their work, and they said they enjoy seeing they can use different approaches to completing an assignment. Teachers who make lessons fun also win praise from their students.

#### Technology is used to differentiate and enhance instruction

Enhancing Education Through Technology (EETT) is a federally funded grant that is a result of No Child Left Behind. The school received \$165,000 the first year, and \$72,000 the second year, 25 percent of which had to be used for high-quality professional development. The grant money purchased a new server, laptop computers for each classroom of teachers on the team, projection units and licenses for Compass Learning and EasyTech.

Teachers have utilized the EETT grant to jump start their efforts to differentiate instruction and customize intervention. The school technology leader involved other teachers in writing the grant, and the five participating teachers' classes directly benefit from using the software package Compass Learning, which helps teachers concentrate on reading and mathematics. Maple Leaf holds open computer laboratory sessions after school for students in the grant program. They can stay after school or access the program from home.

The entire staff was trained by the EETT team during an in-service. This allowed teachers to use the lab effectively to enhance the student's knowledge. Every student uses the lab at least once a week. The teachers create lessons which allow the students to use all the software provided as part of the grant. All students and their parents also have access from home so they can use the software any time<sup>5</sup>. The Garfield Heights library staff has also been trained to help parents and students use the library computers to use these tools. The technology is available for everyone to use. "The challenge," says Principal Matthews, "is making sure all families have easy access to it."

Teachers who are involved in the program are required to use the computer lab with their students for up to 90 minutes every week, and they have scheduled times during the week when they are in the lab. The grant also provided computers for teacher's classrooms and laptops for the teachers, and they can access the software from their classrooms as well as the lab. Teachers can assign assessments through Compass, which then designs a learning path for each child based on assessment results. The learning path may include many activities that reinforce the concepts where a child is weak, or the path may have just a couple of activities. Teachers can go back to lower grade level work or can go up to higher grade level work based on a student's assessment results. "The neat thing about it is, it's not just for weaknesses; it is also for strengths," said the technology teacher. Gifted children also benefit from the program, and teachers can assign work at higher ability levels.

In addition to Compass, the school also purchased EasyTech, a web-based application, for the entire building. Teachers coordinated the Ohio content standards with EasyTech and taught all of the faculty how to use the program. The program teaches students technology skills, such as word processing and spreadsheets, while also teaching subject content.

EasyTech is something the students like to do, said the technology teacher, but it also has received significant support from teachers. "The teachers believe in it. They've done all the work. It wouldn't work without them," said the technology teacher. Maple Leaf teachers are concerned about the grant ending. "We've come so [far] with all of this technology," one teacher said.

#### Teachers are self-reflective and open to change to improve instruction

Teachers believe in students' ability to succeed, and are open and willing to re-evaluate their own teaching methods. Administrators at all three schools—Elmwood, William Foster, and Maple Leaf—emphasize this as a critical component of teacher effectiveness at their schools. Being an effective teacher means "being a reflective practitioner in the sense of looking at their teaching and their students' achievements, their students' strengths and weaknesses, and being able to go back, if you have to re-teach," said Principal Reid of William Foster. Elmwood's principal echoed this sentiment: "They know how to analyze and self-reflect their own teaching. I don't think a lot of teachers take enough time to do that. You know, 'Oh, this went really well, how can I do better?' "

Attitude and personality are traits of effective teachers that Superintendent Sternad mentioned:

If they're not willing to sit with a kid after school and talk to him about whatever issues, it's not going to go very far. If they don't make that connection with that

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Home access is not considered part of the 90 minutes a week required of teachers participating in the grant as discussed later.

child, there's no bridge for that step to go from the teacher to the child. We talk again here about the needs of the heart.

In focus groups, students liked how their teachers kept the atmosphere in the classroom light while also taking the time to help students learn and do hands-on activities. They said they received a lot of individual help. They also said the teachers went to great lengths to make sure their students understood what they were being taught. "She'll ask us, 'If you need any help, come in my room for recess sometimes.' She makes sure we know everything real good before she gives quizzes," said one student.

Parents said Maple Leaf teachers motivate students to do well, and exhibit patience and understanding. Most importantly, parents believe their children's teachers communicate in a way that meets students' individual needs.

In interviews, parents were asked about their overall rating of the school. Almost two thirds of the parents interviewed said the school was "excellent" (39 percent) or "above average" (22 percent). Parents were asked why they chose that rating. Among those who said either excellent or above average most mentioned the teachers or the school staff in general. They were often described as "going above and beyond" to make sure the children learn. Several parents also mentioned their child is doing well at Maple Leaf and is treated fairly. "We came from a private school and I am amazed how good a public school can be. They have gone above and beyond to help my children learn," one parent said.

#### 4. The school engages parents and the community to support student success.

Teachers and administrators have a sense that direct parental involvement with the schools decreases as students get older and the short (two-year) stay at Maple Leaf may have a negative impact on parental commitment to the school. One teacher said she has difficulty predicting which parents will respond positively to requests for help. Yet, even though Maple Leaf houses students for only two years, she said there are still parents who are willing to do almost anything a teacher requests. "I really have seen a pattern over the years that every year I have several parents that are very willing to come in and do whatever needs to be done, I just need to ask," she said.

The same teacher works closely with the PTA and stated that Maple Leaf PTA meetings often will draw only a half-dozen parents. The parental attendance is similar at the middle school, she said. In interviews, parents indicated awareness of PTA and said they could become involved with the school as volunteers, but few of them said they had contributed to the school as volunteers.

Standards and student performance data are communicated directly to parents. Information is available to parents and the public through the school district's web site. Visitors can access ODE web pages about standards and testing. Parents are provided a security code to access Progress Book, a web-based grade book, which contains students' academic information like homework and test grades, attendance, assessment results, and e-mail contact for teachers and administrators.

The technology teacher leader explained that the online grade book gives parents timely, updated information that was not available to them before. Entries in the grade book reflect the Ohio content standards, so parents have an understanding of what is being taught.

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The district prepares "parent guides" to the curricula for both grades four and five, which outlines on a one-page brochure the academic content taught and how it relates to the state standards. District and school newsletters are distributed on a monthly basis. These contain classroom news as well as assessment results from quarterly report cards and state assessments. They are available through the district Web site and at various locations in the community, including the Garfield Heights Senior Center and public library.

With more than 60 percent of parents reporting in the survey that they are familiar with Ohio's academic content standards, it's clear the school has done an effective job of conveying standards to parents. Of those who were familiar with the standards almost all learned about them from information that was provided by the school.

One particular newsletter is funded by the school's EETT grant and is produced in-house by teachers. "Tech Talk" explains the grant, how the funds are used, and what student activities are funded under the grant. The newsletter also provides web links to the programs used by the grant team, Compass Learning, EasyTech, and others, as well as contact information for the teachers on the grant team. The purpose of the newsletter is to explain how the programs are used to improve students' technology skills and enhance the classroom experience for students. Also, it explains how parents can access online resources, even if they do not have home computers.

#### Teachers reach out to parents

On an individual level, teachers make many provisions for keeping parents informed of student progress. Some teachers collect e-mail addresses at the beginning of the school year. Most of the teachers list daily homework on their voicemail, even updating the assignments to cover the weekend. "If you were to call my room right now, you would have to go through my voicemail message, which is my homework for the weekend," one teacher said.

All fifth graders and some fourth graders have homework assignment books. The teachers took an actual page from the assignment book, enlarged it and posted the page in their classrooms. They write the homework on the enlarged page in the exact place where it should be in the assignment book. Teachers encourage students to take responsibility for knowing their own assignments.

Despite their efforts, teachers still have some difficulty communicating with parents. One teacher said some parents did not do well in school themselves, so they believe their children's lack of performance is natural. As one teacher said:

Not only are we dealing with limited money and limited staff, but very little parental involvement. A lot of times you tell someone their child's failing, they say 'OK.' That's all, that's the answer. 'I didn't do good in school, he gets it from me.' You're kind of fighting this social mentality. Not all of them, but a lot of them are saying, 'I dropped out in ninth grade, my child is in school, I'm doing ok.' That's the realism

Another teacher noted that she had just learned that one of her student's parents was illiterate and had been too embarrassed to bring this up to the teacher. As a result, she said she would like to see Garfield Heights offer adult literacy classes. The high concentration of economically disadvantaged families in the district makes parent engagement a challenge.

#### Engaging the community

Maple Leaf's feeder schools begin the process of acquainting the community with the district's goals when they invite day care center and preschool providers to attend meetings. "I share with them our curriculum maps for Kindergarten so there is an understanding of what the expectations are," said the William Foster principal. The school also has used the Families and Schools Together (FAST) intervention program to acquaint at-risk families with the school's resources.<sup>6</sup>

The Maple Leaf guidance counselor will step in whenever possible to pull the student, teachers and parents together. She sometimes will try to locate community resources that can help the families. As she said:

Options; I think people need options. Oftentimes my goal is to get people choices, things to choose from, and the information to know the difference what they're choosing from. I think sometimes the economically challenged are people who haven't had a lot of options, and don't always know how to get things, where to go to get things, and the things that they know how to go and get aren't always the most mainstream socially acceptable. In society, no matter where you go, you see that the people who have money have more options than the people who don't have money.

The guidance counselor said about half of her job is bringing together resources inside and outside the school district. She tries to help both teachers and parents understand how outside resources will fit with what the school district is able to provide. If a meeting with the school is ineffective, the second step is to schedule a Total Community Solutions (TCS) meeting to address the academic and social needs of the student. She described the process:

Generally, you try to have parents come in and talk about the situation. We work on things like assignment books. If that doesn't work then they get scheduled for a TCS meeting, Total Community Solutions, which involves the guidance counselor and the social worker. The parent comes in and whatever teacher that's involved with that child will be there at the meeting and talk about what's going on in the classroom, what can we do to make some changes, what can the student do, and what the parent can do at home. That generally gets done before any kind of testing is recommended. We try that for several weeks and if things don't improve then they [are] recommend for testing.

TCS is a team of staff members who discuss and strategize how to meet individual learning needs. A student who is referred to TCS can be followed as he or she progresses from one building to another in Garfield Heights. So, teachers and staff in a new situation can see what was done before and how well previous efforts worked.

The principal provided an example of outside resources being brought in to help families. When a fifth grade child threatened another child on the Internet from his home, the TCS team was contacted by the parent of the threatened child. TCS worked with the Garfield Heights Police Department, but when they communicated with the family of the child who initiated the threat, they identified many problematic issues in the family which needed to be addressed, and they realized the situation in question was just a symptom to a very big problem. TCS was able to provide outside family counseling for the child and his family. The coordination and cooperation of all the parties involved helped the child, helped the families and helped the school. "This helps Garfield Heights be a better and safer community," the principal said.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> For more information, see <u>www.fastnational.org</u>.

Despite all of its programs for supporting the families of Garfield Heights, the school district, like many others in Ohio, has faced frustrations when levy increases are placed before the voters. Community surveys show that the voters are supportive of the schools. The superintendent explained:

Overwhelmingly, like 87 percent supported the schools [in a survey], but yet they are not willing to vote for a levy increase. And we really came to the conclusion it's not because they don't like what we're doing. They just simply can't afford it, or think that they can't afford it.

The school district is trying to educate the community about the importance of supporting the schools. They are using any means possible, including their own cable TV show. Each month, a different representative of the schools is featured.

#### 5. The school creates a culture where each individual feels valued.

"Meeting the needs of the heart" is the core philosophy at Maple Leaf and in the Garfield Heights district. With both a social worker and guidance counselor on the school staff, teachers can focus on the needs of the class while special attention is directed towards individual students whose personal challenges lie beyond the parameters of academic achievement. "Now we are able to spend more time on teaching rather than handling the problems that go on throughout the day," said a teacher.

#### District emphasis on social services

Maple Leaf's social worker and counselor are essential to meeting an important district goal in Garfield Heights. The social worker will address concerns that spring from a student's home life; the counselor addresses concerns that crop up in school. The counselor, for example, started character education to address trustworthiness, citizenship, fairness and other pillars of character as they play out at school. The district's social services director explained:

In our district, we have three priorities: number one being achieving the academic goals that we have for our students, two being facilities: making sure that we're providing appropriate facilities for our young people to learn, thirdly meeting the needs of the heart.

The district administration has been committed to meeting the needs of the heart for about 15 years. This is a commitment to making sure children feel emotionally safe so they can turn their attention to academic achievement. The social services department dedicates its efforts to the holistic child and is attentive to everything from violence in the home to the arrival of a new baby. "Something as simple as a new birth in the family; the birth order changed. That child used to be the only child, and now they're not. Sometimes we see that causes some strain, stress, and anxiety for that young person at school," the social services director said.

Because of a district-level commitment to the whole child, Garfield Heights sought out grants to provide support services. Elementary guidance counselors came about in 2003 when the district received a Safe Schools, Healthy Students federal grant. The grant was provided through the Ohio Department of Education, the Department of Justice and SAMSA<sup>7</sup>. Not only did the grant provide funds for educational purposes, but it also provided funding for drug and alcohol prevention and mental health treatment and prevention care. Social workers and guidance

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

counselors are part of the program. In explaining the use of the counselor and social worker, the district's social services director said if a student uses behavior that might be a reaction to a problem at home, the social worker will help the family find counseling services in the community. The director said:

I'll just give you a case in point. If we identify that a family—let's say, a family member just lost employment—and they are struggling with that, because it wasn't by choice. That completely changed the dynamics of the family. The ability to provide changed. So if we have an opportunity to help make linkages—getting support from county agencies can be an uncomfortable feeling. If we can facilitate those referrals and kind of help them feel more comfortable and empowered about accessing and securing resources to help their family, then that's what we want to do.

Guidance counselors and social workers are available in every school in the Garfield Heights district through the Safe Schools, Healthy Students grant. The Garfield Youth, Family, and Teen Services (GYFTS) program can provide support for students in stressful or extraordinary circumstances. Counseling, mediation and anger management training are three of the services that can be provided through GYFTS. The superintendent said:

What we realized was that we have a lot of kids in this district who have barriers to learning that have nothing to do with what they're doing here in the schools, and have a lot to do with what's happening at home, with the lack of support that they get, all kinds of things. So we had a dream and our dream was to establish a social services center here in Garfield Heights, and we did.

The GYFTS program consists of about 15 staff members who offer their services in every building in the Garfield Heights district. The director of the program is a member of the superintendent's cabinet.

The Safe Schools, Healthy Students grant also provided funds for professional development, allowing for consultants from the Ruby Payne center to discuss the "culture of poverty" with the teachers and the support staff. The consultants helped administrators, teachers and staff learn about the value systems of impoverished families and also examine the implications of these values to an education system. At least one teacher commented that the training helped her develop effective strategies for her at-risk students, like helping them with basic skills such as getting organized, following a routine, or making lists—fundamental skills that are not taught or reinforced at home. Teachers spend time in class on social skills that are often not taught at home, as one teacher said, "A lot of it is not only with the academics but social skills, and that takes up a huge amount of time."

The grant also provided funds for resource materials, so teachers could continue to review the information provided during the training session later, on their own. The principals also continue to address the "culture of poverty" in staff meetings so that teachers and support personnel are abreast of current issues among the families of their students. Similarly, follow-up discussions help teachers create different approaches to lessons so students are engaged in the material.

Finally the grant helped Garfield Heights take several steps toward assuring school safety. These included photo identification badges for district employees and contract employees. Visitors receive a lanyard and ID badge when they are in a school. Two-way radios are on hand in each building and are provided to district administrators. Administrators have made an effort to be in compliance with the National Information Management System. To meet this goal, they have held training sessions with both the fire and police departments so that they know when to

make calls, what to say, and what to do while they await the arrival of firefighters, emergency medical technicians or police officers.

#### A sense of family and mutual respect

Listening to conversations in the halls of Maple Leaf, one comes away with a warm feeling about the closeness of the people in the school. Students and teachers interact with a high degree of courtesy and respect. The students notice this approach and respond well. According to one student, "Mr. Matthews [the principal] is nice. When we are walking in to school he always says, 'Hi, good morning,". When talking about teachers, another student said, "They have a lot of respect for other people." Another student captured the feel of the atmosphere at Maple Leaf when they said, "It's really home-like, because the teachers are so nice."

Students feel free to seek help, and everyone at Maple Leaf will give it. "Everybody here notices who needs help, whether it's emotional help or educational help and acts on it, doesn't just push it off to the side," one teacher said. There are mornings when a student will need a little extra attention because something isn't quite right at home. "Something has happened at home, something has upset them, or maybe they're not getting enough attention at home and they just want to talk in the morning before they get started," said a teacher. Another gave an example of how she responds to student needs:

I've got a whole drawer where I throw stuff in—and they know they can come up if they are hungry. I usually have extra milk in my fridge and they know they can come up and get that. I think it helps the kids to know that maybe if their needs aren't being met at home, they are being met at school. It makes it easier then to go through the rest of the day. There are no questions, and I don't care if they spent their money. They know that they can come upstairs and the drawer gets opened and they're not going to be hungry for any reason and I think it makes it easier for the rest of the day.

Like in a home setting, teachers feel it is important to be good role models for their Maple Leaf classes. This includes having a pleasant, orderly place for learning to occur where discipline is tempered with caring. "Acceptance, or love, is important. Because we all have bad days, and they have bad days, and every day is a fresh new day," said a teacher.

Teachers at Maple Leaf share a sense of community and care deeply about student success. "I have a stake in this. I take this personally. We all do. This is not just my job," said a teacher. The physical education teacher added that those who teach special areas are just as involved and just as important to the team as the classroom teachers:

I can go to any classroom teacher, and whether I'm dealing with a student situation or somebody in their class, you know, you can interact. We're not out there, we're part of this. We have very mutual respect; we're very much a part of the academic team. That's how this building was put together with the previous administrator, and that's how it has remained.

In classroom observations, observers noted the positive climate and tone. Teachers gave positive feedback to students who gave correct answers. Teachers who created the most positive atmosphere frequently smiled or joked with the students. In these classes, the students related well to each other. In one class, they helped each other when some students were having difficulty.

Having just two grade levels in one building is viewed as a positive for academic climate and maturity issues. However, half the student population turns over every year, so building new relationships is constant. One teacher said the students can be themselves because they don't have younger students to show off to. She also said the fourth and fifth graders do not have older students around, so there is no concern about fitting in with young teenagers who typically make up the seventh and eighth grades.

Another teacher said many Maple Leaf teachers previously were middle school teachers who brought high expectations to the fourth and fifth grade. The teachers have learned to provide a little more individualized attention to their students than they offered at higher grade levels. "The needs of the heart. That was really something we had to work on a little bit," she said.

When asked in interviews about what makes Maple Leaf special, many parents mentioned Principal Matthews specifically. "I love the principal; he has a real heart for the children. He cares so much and takes each child's situation personally," one parent said. The principal speaks warmly of his students. "These are our children. We should treat these children the way we as parents want our own children to be treated," he said. In focus groups, students said the teachers and principal are supportive. They also mentioned, "You have so many friends" and pointed out, "Nobody's fighting; nobody's calling names."

#### Character education and classroom management

With about 30 children in each classroom, classroom management becomes a challenge. When a number of those children come from families that were short on discipline and structure, the teacher has a bigger challenge. Even as high as the fifth grade, Maple Leaf students have difficulty knowing what a schedule is and how to follow one. Basic morning procedures such as hanging up coats and putting breakfast trash in a container have to be listed and checked off. "They don't know how to sequence; they don't know how to time manage," said a teacher. The faculty has become more involved in addressing structure issues after the Ruby Payne training. For many longtime teachers, trying to teach living skills is new, but they are open-minded about it.

To address this issue, Maple Leaf has implemented character education along side the teaching of academic subjects. "We chose to teach character education because nothing is more important to our future than a society of healthy, caring and productive citizens," Superintendent Sternad said in a press release announcing the beginning of the program across the district. The character education curriculum teaches that character consists of responsibility, fairness, caring, respect, trustworthiness and citizenship. The traits are displayed in the school's main hall, and each trait is emphasized for a couple of weeks so the children understand what the character trait embodies. The students create slogans relating to the trait, which become part of a class discussion. In focus groups, students were proud to share that they have been on the merit roll or the honor roll. "Last year I wasn't trying that much but [this year] I worked real hard and I actually got up to honor roll," a student said.

Students seen demonstrating good character, doing good deeds or meeting one of these six areas of character education receive rewards such as gold coins, character coupons or certificates. Part of this program is a "caught doing good" campaign. The principal visits all classrooms daily. When he sees students behaving well and demonstrating the areas of the character education program or otherwise exhibiting positive behavior, they receive a reward and their pictures are taken and put on a large bulletin board running through the main hallway at the school.

The school counselor views character education as positive discipline because it rewards good behavior rather than punishing bad behavior. Character education is preventative, staving off bad behavior. The school's social worker and counselor concentrate on character education. "The teachers are looking at the academic and learning to help the mind grow academically, and we're looking at helping the mind grow socially and emotionally," said the counselor.

Character education is integrated into other aspects of the curriculum. In physical education, for example, the teacher exposes the students to juggling to demonstrate the importance of perseverance. "Juggling – you are not going to get it right away. That's the same with your math facts, and that's the same with your reading," said the teacher. Even though perseverance is not one of the "pillar words" in the school's character education program, the physical education teacher suggested it as an addition to the list.

### **Key Findings: Themes and Trends**

The high level of achievement at Maple Leaf Intermediate School in Garfield Heights, which serves fourth and fifth graders, is the result of a strong effort that begins in the two "feeder" elementary schools, Elmwood and William Foster, and continues through the Maple Leaf experience. With only seven months at Maple Leaf before students take the statewide achievement tests, it is vital that both elementary school principals have pushed their teachers to use data strategically to identify student needs and align instruction to academic content standards. Because of the commitment to student success on the achievement tests throughout the elementary grades, Maple Leaf teachers are able to seamlessly continue the preparation process and work individually with children who need special attention.

Maple Leaf, Elmwood and William Foster all use a team approach to academic leadership. Lacking a district-level curriculum director, the principals have responded by creating teacher leaders who concentrate on the various content areas. For instance, Maple Leaf has teacher leaders in each of these four areas: language arts, social studies, science and mathematics. In addition, the schools have a teacher serving as the grade-level chairperson at each grade level. The teacher leaders and grade-level chairs meet to discuss assessment and instruction. The grade-level chairperson can meet with the other teachers at that particular grade level to share information.

Perhaps the most distinctive component of the Garfield Heights educational mission is "meeting the needs of the heart." A constant theme of discussion among teachers and administrators, this directive calls on all district employees to provide a safe, caring environment for Garfield Heights students and foster a feeling of "family." The Garfield Heights superintendent has made a strong commitment to helping students cope with the challenges of living in an impoverished urban area. The entire district puts considerable resources of time and staffing into caring for emotional and physical needs of the children. The administration and teachers know that basic needs must be met first; only then is real learning possible.

As an extension to the desire to meet the basic needs of the students, the district applied for and received a Safe Schools, Healthy Students federal grant which led to the hiring of guidance counselors and social workers who work with the Maple Leaf students. These staff members are an important part of integrating school services and community services to assist school children and their families through difficult periods. Knowing that many of the parents grew up in disadvantaged circumstances with limited resources, the social worker and counselor try to open options up to the families to give them choices about addressing problems.

Another critical part of the Maple Leaf success story is the commitment to diagnosis and intervention. To assist in the process, Maple Leaf obtained a two-year Enhancing Education through Technology (EETT) grant. Teachers who assisted in applying for the grant must use the computer laboratory for 90 minutes each week during the school day, but all teachers in the school have access to the lab and computer software, and students and parents can access the programs outside of school from home or the local library. Through the grant, the school obtained Compass Learning software, which is used to assess language arts skills. The software then creates an individualized learning path based on each student's strengths and weaknesses. The school also uses EasyTech to teach computer skills, including keyboarding and spreadsheets, in preparation for achievement tests. Teachers use these resources effectively to enhance student learning and bring the parents into the learning process.

For intervention, Maple Leaf offers Extended Learning Opportunity as a form of after-school tutoring. Funded by a grant, the program engages about half of the staff in assisting students. Some teachers who were interested in the program were denied an opportunity to tutor because the funding was exhausted, showing that the tutoring program appealed to a majority of the faculty. While intervention frequently is thought of in regard to at-risk students, Maple Leaf offers a form of intervention to its high-achievers through a gifted program. Garfield Heights recently faced a major budget crisis, but the district maintained its commitment to the gifted program.

Maple Leaf teachers work well together to support each others efforts to provide the students with the curriculum and instructional methods that best reach the students. They are supported by an administrative group who cares about student success and the teachers as individuals. The people at Maple Leaf show a great deal of creativity and energy as they constantly look for new ways to engage students and to catch students who are having difficulties before they fall too far behind. Parents, while not as active as many would hope are very appreciative of the Maple Leaf staffs efforts and recognize the importance of educational standards.

In sum, success at Maple Leaf stems from high standards, high expectations, and a rigorous curriculum that begins with strong preparation in the district's elementary schools. Administrators and teachers use data frequently and strategically to set manageable goals. The principal empowers teachers to take active leadership roles, and is a warm and pleasant presence in students' classrooms every day. The school is united in a desire to provide a nurturing environment where every student can learn, and in so doing they exemplify the title "School of Promise."

# Summary of "Lessons Learned" at Maple Leaf Intermediate School

#### 1. The school delivers rigorous instruction aligned to the standards.

- Alignment begins at the district's two elementary schools, which both emphasize the use of data to identify student needs and enhance the effectiveness of instruction.
  - Teachers structure lesson plans to reflect standards and post standards visibly inside and outside their classrooms.
  - o Kindergarteners receive intensive early intervention.
  - o Grade-level meetings are structured around improvement of instruction.
- Under guidance from the district, the schools increased student achievement by setting manageable goals and approaching change incrementally in a series of small steps.
   This has paid off with enormous gains in proficiency rates, particularly among at-risk subgroups.
- At Maple Leaf, content standards in mathematics, reading, and science are integrated into special area classes like art and physical education, reinforcing and supplementing grade-level teachers' emphasis on standards.

#### 2. The school provides leadership that results in continuous improvement of instruction.

- At the district level and at the elementary and intermediate schools, leaders emphasize
  use of data for continuous improvement but empower teachers to take the lead in
  planning and developing effective instructional techniques.
- Teachers take ownership and leadership roles in the school both in grade-level issues and four core curriculum areas: reading/language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies.
- Professional development opportunities are limited due to budget restrictions, but key training opportunities have included training in Ruby Payne's Framework of Poverty, methods for incorporating technology into the classroom, and spontaneous and structured collaboration among teachers.
- Teachers frequently collaborate both spontaneously and during scheduled meetings, to share resources and improve their own instruction.

#### 3. The school designs instruction to ensure every student's success.

- Intervention begins daily in Kindergarten and the district's elementary schools work hard to "close the gap" before students leave the school, and enter Maple Leaf as fourth graders.
- District-wide, students in need of intervention participate in Extended Learning Opportunities (ELO) after school with tutoring provided by classroom teachers.
- Intervention is also viewed as important for gifted and talented students, and the district provides a gifted/talented intervention specialist on staff at Maple Leaf.
- Technology enhances instruction at Maple Leaf. In particular, a grant provides access to high-quality web-based programs that assess student learning and provide options for teachers to customize activities that build skills in particular areas. Teachers participating in the grant attend special trainings to increase their ability to integrate technology

- effectively. These teachers also train their colleagues at Maple Leaf to use the programs.
- Teachers share a common goal of improving student performance, and are self-reflective in improving their teaching. They enjoy working with students and collaborating with one another, and are constantly evaluating their own effectiveness and seeking ways to improve.

#### 4. The school engages parents and the community to support student success.

- Parent engagement in the school is described as fairly low, but teachers and administrators reach out to parents through multiple methods.
- Standards are communicated through parent guides and handbooks, on student grade cards, and on the school website.
- The school provides newsletters to inform parents about how the school's technology program operates and how parents can access online resources.
- The school district employs a social services director, and Maple Leaf employs both a social worker and a school counselor to meet student and family needs.

#### 5. The school creates a culture where every individual feels valued.

- Administrators at the district and school level share a deep commitment to students' well being, and feel it is their mission to "meet the needs of the heart."
- District-wide programs support student and family needs; a primary goal in the district is to "meet the needs of the heart." Programs supporting this effort include:
  - o Total Community Solutions (TCS),
  - o Safe Schools, Healthy Students grant, and
  - o Garfield Youth, Family, and Teen Services (GYFTS).
- Teachers and administrators emphasize the importance of understanding students' perspectives, and found Ruby Payne's training on the "culture of poverty" to be particularly effective for their student population.
- The school culture emphasizes mutual respect, discipline, and good character, and teachers and administrators use praise and positive reinforcement to reward students' accomplishments.
- Teachers and administrators take students' success personally and care deeply about them and their well-being, creating a sense of family in the school.