



Schools of Promise **Case Study Report**

**Noble Elementary School
Tiffin, Ohio**



Noble Elementary School Tiffin, Ohio

Noble Elementary School in Tiffin, Ohio was selected as a *School of Promise* in reading and mathematics for the 2004-2005 academic year. Table 1 summarizes the school and district characteristics for Noble Elementary School and the Tiffin City School District

Table 1. School and district characteristics

	Noble Elementary School 2004-2005	Tiffin City School District 2004-2005
Percent Minority	11.5%	7.0%
Percent Poverty	52.6%	32.1%
Years as a School of Promise (Reading and Mathematics)	1	
District Typology		Rural/agricultural
Student Enrollment	261	2,858
Attendance—All students	96.1%	95.4%
Attendance —Economically disadvantaged students	96.0%	96.2%
Attendance —Minority students	95.5%	94.8%
Student mobility: Students in building less than one year	11.1%	12.4%
Number of teachers	19	173
Average teacher salary	\$47,396	\$46,073

School history

Noble Elementary School is 75 years old this year (2006). Of the five elementary schools in the district, Noble is one of the oldest. Although the school has open enrollment, most of the students come from the surrounding community. As noted by teachers and administrators, there is a very low teacher turnover rate; many teachers grew up in the surrounding communities.

School mission statement

The staff of Noble Elementary School believes that all children can learn. Based on this belief, we will create an educational atmosphere that will guarantee student growth and success at their full learning potential.

School belief statements

- Students' mastery of basic skills is a priority.
- Children need to be provided a safe, positive atmosphere.
- Children succeed through positive school-family relationships.

- Students' progress needs to be continually monitored and assessed in order to provide the appropriate level of academic challenges.

Teacher characteristics¹

There are two teachers assigned to each grade level (Kindergarten through fifth), all of whom meet the federal requirements for highly qualified teachers (HQT). About 40 percent have masters' degrees. Most of the teachers have been at the school for more than 10 years, and teachers have on average twenty years' experience teaching. Only one teacher has less than three years of experience at Noble. The average class size is about 22 students.

Table 2. School and district performance on state indicators

Performance on State Indicators 2004-2005 <i>State requirement is 75%</i>		
	Noble Elementary School	Tiffin City School District
Third-Grade Achievement Test		
Reading	97.5%	94.2%
Mathematics	97.5%	91.8%
Fourth-Grade Proficiency Test		
Reading	97.5%	88.8%
Writing	90.6%	85.7%
Mathematics	88.9%	78.1%
Science	84.0%	77.9%
Social Studies	88.9%	79.6%
Fifth-Grade Achievement Test		
Reading	88.5%	87.8%
Attendance (<i>State requirement is 93%</i>)	96.1%	95.4%
Number of state indicators met	9 out of 9	21 out of 23
Rating	Excellent	Effective

Source: Ohio Department of Education

¹ Data provided by Noble Elementary School teachers in a teacher survey provided to SRG, January 2006.

Schools of Promise Case Study Methodology

On January 12, 2005, a four-person research team conducted a full-day site visit to Noble Elementary School. Activities conducted during the day were as follows:

Classroom observations

Strategic Research Group (SRG) conducted observations in six classrooms: three mathematics lessons and three reading lessons were observed. One mathematics class and one reading class were observed in each of grades three, four and five. Class sizes ranged from 17 to 22 students. One aide was shared among all mathematics teachers and was observed in each of the three mathematics observations.

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 86 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. 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 nine teachers on staff: two Kindergarten teachers, one first-grade teacher, one second-grade teacher, two third-grade teachers, one fourth-grade teacher, and two fifth-grade teachers. Interviews lasted 15-25 minutes, and followed a pre-determined discussion guide. Topics discussed included curriculum and instruction, professional development, school climate, policy and procedures, and characteristics of effective teachers. Teachers whose classrooms were selected for observations were interviewed, as well as three additional teachers

Administrator interview

An individual interview was conducted with Mr. Mike Steyer, Principal. The interview lasted approximately one hour. Interview topics included general school history and background, curriculum and instruction, characteristics of effective teachers, professional development, partnerships, school climate, policies and procedures, and teacher recruitment and hiring.

Teacher survey

A teacher survey was distributed to all classroom teachers (n= 19) 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 15 surveys were received, representing a response rate of 79 percent.

Student focus groups

To gather feedback from students, two student focus groups were conducted. One group was conducted with fourth-grade students and one group was conducted with fifth-grade students. There were six to eight students per group, and gender composition of the groups was mixed. School administrators recruited students from classrooms observed during the site visit. 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 randomly 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 participant. 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. Noble Elementary School shows evidence of all these components.

In addition to investigating ODE’s “Five Lessons Learned from Successful Schools” and how Noble Elementary 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. Noble’s principal, administrators and teachers consider effective teachers to share some common characteristics:

- Teachers create a climate of high expectations in the classroom
- Teachers differentiate instruction to meet the needs of students with different needs and learning styles
- Teachers are knowledgeable in the subject areas they teach and they know the Ohio content standards well
- Teachers have a good rapport with students but still hold high expectations for them
- Teachers possess effective classroom management skills and hold students to high standards in discipline and behavior

These themes are recurrent throughout the following Five Lessons.

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

Curriculum is aligned to the standards at the district level

The centerpiece of instruction at Noble is the alignment of its curriculum to the state content standards. Noble is active in a district-wide initiative to align curriculum and textbooks with state standards. "We follow the state standards," said a second-grade teacher. "They are posted in the rooms, and when I make my plans every week, I go through and make sure I am teaching in accordance with the state standards." Teachers are diligent about linking lessons to state standards and explaining the standards to the students. A third-grade teacher said, "Each time we start a lesson, I point to [the state standard]. This is our indicator, and this is what we are going to be doing for this lesson."

Knowledge of the standards was an important characteristic among teachers at Noble. In fact, on the teacher survey, 40 percent of teachers identified knowledge of state content standards as one of the most important characteristics of an effective teacher.

Horizontal and vertical alignment

Cooperative efforts among Noble's 19 teachers and regular participation in district meetings allow all teachers to learn from their peers and trade ideas for effective instruction that are in line with state standards. The cooperative approach on instructional issues is fostered and supported by the Tiffin City School District through the participation of Mr. Scott Urban, Director of Elementary Instruction and Personnel.

Several years ago, Mr. Urban brought together same-grade teachers to align their curriculum to the content standards. He continues to meet regularly with same-grade teachers from across the district to review curriculum and chose appropriate grade level text books. The exchange of ideas at these meetings is very important for district-wide curriculum alignment and teacher coordination. As one first-grade teacher puts it:

For first grade, city-wide, we meet once a month. First grade teachers get together, so we're on the same page, we know what we're doing, hey what are you doing here, how did it work... we feel that has really, really helped us,

Principal Mike Steyer said the change from a measure of proficiency to a standard of achievement was smooth, and the change has not been difficult or disruptive. He credits teachers' vertical alignment and attention to grade-level indicators in Kindergarten through second grade. "What has changed is all of the grade levels becoming involved," Principal Steyer noted:

Our fourth-grade teachers take the brunt of the proficiency; now it's third, fourth and fifth with achievement. But if the Kindergarten, first and second grade teachers aren't doing what they need to do, we would never make it.

These sentiments are mirrored by teachers, who recognize the importance of working collaboratively. As one teacher stated:

Everybody really cares about what they are doing and I think we work together really well with a common goal of doing the best for the kids. Everybody is really willing to share ideas and there just isn't that competitiveness among us as teachers, we all seem to work together.

Instructional time is extended in mathematics and reading

Extended instructional time in both mathematics and reading provides more time for teachers to focus on instruction. Instructional time is extended in mathematics with the use of the Accelerated Math program, which is a supplemental software tool for managing and monitoring individual student's mathematics learning. This program impacts 124 students in grades three through five. Classroom teachers set aside approximately 30 minutes of regular class time each day for Accelerated Math work sessions—this is in addition to 45-60 minutes per day of regular mathematics instruction. Students work at their own pace at their own level. The special education teacher works with classroom teachers and is available to assist students with mathematics to meet their individual needs.

The Accelerated Math software program utilizes guided lessons. Students must master grade-level specific objectives. Teachers review student progress through daily reports, and control what activities students can access—they can “turn on” additional objectives for accelerated or gifted students, or limit student access to specific objectives they may need extra practice to master. Students may not move on until they have mastered the objective, and the program builds in review of concepts previously mastered so the information is reinforced at higher levels.²

Reading instruction is extended within the regular class time through the use of Title I reading specialists—one certified teacher and one aide. Along with general class activities, all students are placed in one of three groups based on their abilities. One group stays with the classroom teacher in their normal classroom. One group goes to with the main Title I reading specialist's classroom and the third group with the assistant Title I reading specialist (the aide) in her classroom. By organizing the class in this manner, students are able to receive reading tutoring and activities at their respective levels of ability and the certified Title I reading specialist is able to work more intensely with a smaller group of students with the greatest needs at that time.

2. The school provides leadership which results in the continuous improvement of instruction.

At the building level, Principal Mike Steyer provides clear direction for his faculty. Teachers recognize Steyer as a supportive leader. In the teacher survey, 93 percent of the teachers agreed Steyer is an effective leader who clearly and effectively communicates his expectations, along with those of the state and federal departments of education. They said Steyer supports them and fosters an atmosphere of mutual respect at Noble. “We have an excellent principal,” said a third-grade teacher. “Good leadership helps in a building because I feel comfortable going to him for anything, and the rest of the staff does, too.”

Teachers at Noble feel Steyer's strong leadership has a positive impact: 100 percent of teachers surveyed agreed that teachers are held to high professional standards for delivering instruction at Noble. Also, 100 percent agreed the faculty and staff have a shared vision, and school leadership makes an effort to address teacher concerns. Ninety-three percent of teachers agree they receive feedback that helps improve teaching and learning.

Although the district and school provide strong leadership through Mr. Urban and Principal Steyer, both involve teachers in the decision making processes. Principal Steyer holds regularly scheduled meetings so that teachers remain informed and can discuss teaching strategies. Mr. Urban provides the school district with instructional leadership by bringing together teachers to work on instructional issues.

² For more information, see <http://www.renlearn.com/mathrenaissance/>

Teachers expressed a meaningful sense of involvement in the decisions and encouragement to take some risks. The teacher survey found that almost all teachers agree that they are centrally involved in decision-making about important educational issues. The same percentage said they are encouraged to try new strategies and are supported when they take reasonable risks in their teaching methods. Thus, the survey showed the teachers have autonomy and play a role in setting school policy.

“Everybody really cares about what they’re doing, and I think we work together really well with a common goal of doing the best for the kids,” said a second-grade teacher. “Everybody is really willing to share ideas. There just isn’t competitiveness among us as teachers. We all seem to work together,” she added. The feeling of cooperation voiced by this teacher creates a supportive atmosphere among a group of educators that has been together for many years. Only one teacher has been at Noble less than three years, and most teachers have stayed for more than 10 years. Many teachers at Noble have deep roots in Tiffin and Seneca County; they have experienced lives similar to their students. Some of them attended Noble as children themselves.

Cooperation and collaboration are consistent themes at Noble. Teachers tend to come in early and stay late—providing many opportunities for discussion among teachers. Each grade level has two teachers. This allows teachers to talk to each other about issues that arise in the classroom, and discuss strategies that are successful. Collaboration throughout the school is a daily event.

Professional development

In recent years, professional development opportunities have been limited due to a lack of funds. All professional development activities must tie in with the building’s Consolidated Continuous Improvement Plan (CCIP). The school district limits the dollar amount per teacher per conference per year (\$300 maximum per teacher per year). The building principal and superintendent must approve professional development activities within these limits, allowing for each teacher to attend once every three years. However, many teachers take advantage of “free” professional development opportunities offered by ODE, or pay part or all of their own expenses to attend professional development programs not covered within the district limit.

On the teacher survey, teachers were asked about the primary and secondary focus of their professional development activities in the previous year. Teachers could select all that applied to them.

Professional development for teachers at Noble is centered on understanding and applying the state standards. More than two-thirds of the teacher respondents reported completing professional development related to the standards, and for 60 percent of teachers this was their primary focus. Sixty percent of teachers also participated in professional development for using assessments to gauge mastery of the content standards.

Two-thirds of teachers also indicated that their professional development involved differentiated instructional strategies. Collaboration is also an emphasis at Noble. More than half of teachers participated in professional development involving collaboration for improving instruction, and almost half participated in professional development related to the academic content of subjects taught (see Table 3).

Table 3. Focus of teachers' professional development

Last year, what was the focus of professional development activities you completed?	Which areas apply to you?	Which <u>one</u> area was your primary focus?
Understanding and applying Ohio content standards to student instruction	67%	60%
Instructional strategies to meet the learning needs of diverse groups of students or students with different learning styles	67%	13%
In depth study of the academic content of the subjects I teach	47%	13%
Using assessments to gauge student mastery of Ohio content standards	60%	7%
Using research results for decision making	7%	7%
Collaboration for improving instruction	60%	--
Strategies for engaging parents and families	33%	--
Strategies for creating and maintaining safe and orderly classrooms and schools	20%	--
Strategies for engaging stakeholders as active members of the school communities	7%	--

When asked how they selected professional development opportunities, the primary consideration was to strengthen instruction or keep current in the field. Another important consideration was Ohio content standards; professional development opportunities were sometimes selected on the basis of whether they would improve the teacher's understanding of the standards. Other key considerations were time and cost, and whether or not the professional development was required at the school or district level.

Additional results from the teacher survey show a high degree of consensus regarding teachers' views on professional development. Responses from the teacher survey show all teachers agreed they work together to improve teaching and learning, and more than 80 percent agreed teachers are actively involved in determining the content of professional development programs at Noble and professional development activities are based on state or national standards. Consistent with the school's focus on collaboration, 73 percent of teachers agreed they are provided opportunities to learn from one another.

Teachers were also asked about sharing their recommendations for preparing future teachers to be successful in schools like theirs. Teachers emphasized the importance of direct experience in schools working with students. This included early and ongoing exposure to classrooms from the beginning of the college education with supervision and guidance. "I feel strongly that future teachers need to be personally guided through routine observations as they are put in schools for their experiences," said one teacher.

Also important is exposure to a variety of classrooms—a "variety of placements" is considered significant. "[New teachers] also need to be exposed to any and all grade levels that they will be certified. Because of inclusion they should also have instruction and experience with special needs," said a teacher. Exposure to the classroom should begin as early as freshman year, according to a teacher at Noble. "They need to be in the field as much as possible," said another teacher.

They also said the more tools teachers have to reach all types of learners, the more likely a school will have a climate for success. Teachers need to know how to motivate students and

how to teach strategies for responding to writing prompts, said the faculty at Noble. For them, opportunities to learn about the newest developments and research are important and may help renew teacher motivation. “Teachers should set at least two goals a year, and the school administration should monitor these goals to be sure they are being met,” said one respondent.

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

All-day Kindergarten

Title I funds all-day kindergarten, an essential program for a school where 53 percent of the student body is considered economically disadvantaged. Because some students enter school lacking some skills, the teachers at Noble have to fill in the gaps. “I think they just need lots of experiences. Kids are kids, and most of them learn the same way. It is just that economically disadvantaged children haven’t had the wealth of background knowledge as other kids,” said a primary teacher.

Assessment data are continuously analyzed to improve instruction

Noble teachers constantly use assessment data such as observations and class exams to identify students who would benefit from intervention. Additionally, a special education teacher is assigned to work with classroom teachers for mathematics intervention while a “pull-out” program is used for reading intervention. The Title I reading specialist uses informal inventories and observations to assess the reading progress of individual students during the extending reading session.

Intervention

At Noble, the school day is organized to facilitate intervention by scheduling times when certain subjects are covered in each class. This allows time for the Title I reading specialists to work with students from every classroom. Intervention in mathematics is provided by resource [special ed] teachers as well, but students are not pulled out of the classroom; as mentioned earlier, a self-paced mathematics software program is used to customize mathematics instruction for an additional 30 minutes per day (see page 7).

Literacy is a primary focus for intervention. Of the 261 students at Noble, almost two-thirds have qualified for Title I reading intervention. To serve this need, the school has two Title I reading specialists (one certified teacher and one aide) who work closely together and with classroom teachers. Each of the specialists has her own literacy intervention classroom. Their classrooms are located next to the library and house an extensive library of books and other materials to assist students. The primary Title I teacher says she is fortunate to have many resources, including some she has purchased with her own money. “I have a wealth of materials here, things that I have purchased and things that I have made.”

As a first step to reading intervention, classroom teachers assess the reading ability of their students through observation and class exams. Next, time is set aside during the normal school day to work with the Title I reading team. When it is time for the classroom to work with the Title I team, the class is divided into three small groups for its daily 30-minute session. The classroom teacher works with one group while the main Title I teacher takes a second group to her classroom, and her assistant reading specialist works with the third group in her own classroom.

Throughout the year, the reading intervention specialists continue to keep a close eye on

progress and retain continual communication with the classroom teacher. “I use informal inventories and observations as I’m teaching them,” said the main Title I reading teacher. Based on the evaluations and reviews examples of student work provided by teachers, the intervention groups are regularly reconfigured as the needs of the pupils change.

Teachers seem pleased with the results of this system, and almost 100 percent of fourth graders have passed the Ohio reading proficiency test.

Beyond the classroom time, two other types of formal intervention programs are available to assist students who have deficiencies.

- **After-school study table**—Approximately 15 students stay after school for one hour to work on homework and receive tutoring/assistance. This program, led by a Noble faculty member, is available Monday through Thursday for students in the third through fifth grades. Volunteers from Heidelberg College assist with the program and participate in the tutoring.
- **Summer school**—The district provides a summer intervention program for students in grades one through five. For five weeks, 15 – 25 students receive 2.5 hours per day of reading intervention

In addition to academic assistance, an intervention assistance team meets twice a month to work with students who have behavioral or emotional problems. Consisting of the principal, school psychologist, primary teacher, intermediate teacher and special education teacher, the intervention team invites parents to attend when appropriate. The elementary school guidance counselor is a vital part of Noble’s intervention team. She is at school two and a half days each week, often addressing friendship and divorce issues through group discussions. Students who participated in focus groups said the counselor works with children who have sudden declines in grades or who are experiencing problems at home. She helps the students through the problem, assisting them in trying to work out a solution. “If you are doing really, really good and all of a sudden your grades just drop, then you come here to see what the problem is,” said one of the students.

Teacher sensitivity to student needs

Almost all of the teachers interviewed in Noble mentioned that being sensitive to the needs of students is particularly important when teaching lower income students. They feel that teachers must understand that these students may need extra help to understand materials. To accommodate this need, 47 percent of teachers at Noble say differentiated instruction is one of the most important strategies of being an effective teacher.

Data from classroom observations showed teachers exhibited sensitivity to student needs. Through constant monitoring of the students, teachers were able to keep their classes on task and could offer assistance while work was in progress. Mathematics classes in particular offered the support of an additional aide. By using the aide as part of the educational team, the teacher could provide a lesson while the aide checked on the students and their work. Or, the aide and the teacher could reverse roles to teach a lesson. Both of them seemed to anticipate and address student questions almost before the questions even arose. In several situations, the teacher would check to see if the students grasped the lesson up to that point before progressing any further.

In interviews, parents were asked about their overall rating of the school. Ninety percent of parents interviewed said the school was “excellent” or “above average.” Parents were asked

why they chose that rating, and the teachers were the most common reason. The teachers were often described as “caring” and having a good relationship with both the parents and the students. In particular, a few of the parents said that the teachers work well with children who had special educational needs such as ADHD. Several parents also reported that their children are happy attending Noble. Parents said they like that the teachers have an open door policy and are available any time for the parent’s questions.

Several parents commented that Noble teachers are compassionate and patient with the students, and “willing to teach them what they need to know.” The most effective teachers are patient and provide different ways for children to learn. “They have a lot of teachers that take time that my child needs and they are willing to help with anything,” said one parent regarding Noble.

In interviews, parents noted teachers at Noble work with students who have different learning styles. Several parents mentioned that effective teachers “understand how a child learns” and are “not afraid to put the books away and try something else” when the students need a different approach. One parent described an effective teacher as “one that draws the attention of the child and make them want to be part of the class. One that will bring examples in the class and gets involved.”

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

School-to-home communications are encouraged

The school encourages school-to-home communications by providing each child in the third grade and above with a homework notebook so that notes can go back and forth between parents and teachers every day. Teachers mention that they are always available to parents through telephones located in each classroom. Conferences occur twice a year. Teachers reach out to the parents early in the year through fliers and newsletters, and if a problem arises anytime during the year, teachers contact parents immediately. In some classrooms, a teacher newsletter supplements the school newsletter. One teacher starts the year by sending home positive comments about their child:

I try right away in the beginning of the year to send something positive home with everybody. My first parent communication, even right from the first day of school, I start sending things home. Then if you have to contact them about something negative you've at least started out on a good note. I nip it in the bud and get the parents in right away.

Parents discussed their involvement with Noble and their impressions of the teachers and administration in telephone interviews. They all agreed that teachers care about the students, and they feel they are welcome to visit the classrooms. They said teachers encourage parents to learn about the progress their children are making. “I know all of the teachers, and they know me. I can always talk to them,” said one parent. The same parent said the administration is open to meeting with parents.

Teachers speculate that family economics may prevent parents from providing much volunteer support during the school day because of a need to work. Most parents who were interviewed had not volunteered at the school. However, Principal Steyer said parents know what is expected and support the school as time and other responsibilities allow. “We don’t have a lot of hands-on parents,” he said. “Our parents are involved in ways that they can be or that they know how to be. They are supportive if you call them. They work with us even if you don’t see

them.”

On Parent Day, parents are invited to school for breakfast and visit classes in progress. Parents also said they are aware of opportunities to join the PTO or assist with field trips. Grandparents have their day to visit as well.

Partnership with Heidelberg College

Noble has an ongoing partnership with local Heidelberg College. The college provides student teachers and many tutors to the school. In fact, classroom observers noted student aides were fully integrated into the classroom at Noble and were effective in small-group instruction.

According to Principal Steyer, the relationship with Heidelberg College has been ongoing for many years. Outreach in the community is part of Heidelberg’s mission, and representatives from the college initiate contact in various ways. “They reach out to us, and every year is different,” Principal Steyer said. Sometimes sororities and fraternities complete community service projects by working with Noble students, and even the Heidelberg Athletic Department has been to the school to tutor and work with students. Over the years Principal Steyer has built personal relationships with individuals who formerly worked at the school and district but now work at the college, and if either party has an idea or needs some assistance, help is just a phone call away—in keeping with the “small town” feel of the school, college, and community.

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

High expectations in a supportive environment

Noble is located in an older neighborhood that faces many economic challenges. Throughout the building, the teachers are aware of the challenges facing students from poor families. “I think you have to be a very caring individual,” said one fifth-grade teacher. “You can’t be too rigid. When you have our [students’] family dynamics, we know there are things that go on at home, that they are never going to get their homework done, so we try to be flexible with that.”

However, flexibility does not mean the teachers have low standards in the classroom. Instead, the teachers say, children need rules, no matter where they are in the school building or on its grounds. “They need high expectations and good behavior because a lot of them don’t have a good family structure and don’t have rules at home,” said a kindergarten teacher.

On the teacher survey, 53 percent of teachers said high expectations are a key characteristic of an effective teacher—in fact, this was the top-rated characteristic by teachers at Noble. Teachers’ high expectations for students were evident in classroom observations, where lessons generally focused on concept development. Teachers encouraged students to engage in higher order thinking, prediction, and analysis. For example, one English teacher asked the students to use the behaviors of characters from a story to infer their personality characteristics. Another English class engaged in a discussion about the accomplishments of Martin Luther King Jr. and his importance for today’s society, and the teachers encouraged students’ independent thinking. In one of the mathematics classes, students learning about the metric system had to independently determine the appropriate unit to use when measuring various distances in their classroom. Generally speaking, in mathematics classes observed, teachers encouraged students to determine with their own solutions to problems first before solutions were shared with the class.

According to Principal Steyer, teachers expect all students do work hard. All students are expected to complete their work on time, and all students are expected to pass the proficiency tests. "The expectations are the same for all students," Principal Steyer said, "The outcomes teachers expect are the same, even with resource room [special education] students."

Positive reinforcement on tests or in other activities is a major theme at Noble. All staff members stress respectful behavior everywhere in and around the school. For behavior and achievement, many of the teachers use age-appropriate reward systems. For example, second-graders can earn a sticker each day for following classroom rules. In a different classroom, "If you earn enough stars, they give you a pizza party," said a student. "That's what Mr. B. does." Students said parents sometimes offer similar rewards for good behavior and good achievement at Noble.

Culture of respect among students and staff

Noble's teachers uniformly stress cooperation, responsibility and respect. "We treat our children with respect, and in return, they treat us with respect," said the Title I specialist. "For the most part, anything I ask them to do, they are willing to try and give me everything they can,"

In the teacher survey, one respondent mentioned that colleagues who work well together with the support of a good principal could accomplish almost anything. Sharing the common goal of student success has united the faculty and administration at Noble. "We not only teach academics but positive character building as well," wrote the teacher.

Results from classroom observations revealed an overall positive climate, teachers who are sensitive to students' needs, disciplined and productive classrooms, and lessons that involved a high degree of concept development. In the classrooms observed by researchers, students were willing to work and participated in the lesson. They were at ease about raising their hand or approaching the teacher for help. Teachers frequently praised students for giving correct answers. In one case, a boy who remembered a concept taught earlier in the year was given a round of applause for his explanation.

As for students' perspectives on their class work, students said the teachers make learning fun and work to help every student succeed. Hands-on activities were a favorite among Noble students who participated in a focus group. "Our teachers turn studying into fun activities," said one student. "Instead of just making us learn it, she makes it fun, and she plays games that help us learn it." Other students mentioned the teachers repeat explanations, find other examples to reinforce a concept or pair students up so they can help each other out. One student mentioned humor and the occasional joke help with the learning environment. Practice is perceived as effective for learning. "Today we were learning about negative numbers, and that was kind of confusing, but we kept practicing," said a student.

Principal Steyer noted that his teachers are committed to their work. "Dedicated teachers, willing to do whatever it takes," he said of his staff. This dedication and enthusiasm was visible during 30-minute observations in six classrooms. All of the teachers observed were enthusiastic about their subject and although they encouraged independent thinking, teachers carefully monitored students to make sure the children understood and followed the material.

Emphasis on structure, discipline, and management

In addition to dedication and flexibility, teachers at Noble say it is important to be sensitive to the needs of students who live in poverty. They must accept the culture and avoid being

judgmental. Understanding and accepting these backgrounds is essential, according to the principal. Keeping the students' backgrounds in mind, teachers maintain high expectations for both behavior and performance. They are viewed as experts who devise the best strategies for working with their students.

Teachers were asked how well-prepared they felt to teach this population of students when they first began working at Noble. More than half (57 percent) reported they felt "very well prepared." An additional 14 percent said "prepared." Teachers said experience in the classroom, experience working with at-risk populations, and experience in the school (or a similar school) was the most important preparation, because it helped them better understand the students. A second important source of preparation was content knowledge—having a strong foundation or a high degree of educational attainment. Among those who felt less prepared when they began teaching, the primary reason was lack of experience with their grade level or with the at-risk population.

Students said they liked teachers who were nice but they also liked teachers who were "tough" or rigorous, because they help them prepare for the next grade. Two students' comments from the focus groups summarize their feelings about their teachers:

I like Mrs. R because she is a hard teacher and she'll put pressure on you to try to get this done and then when you grow up you understand why she did that because it's to make you learn and to get you ready for fourth grade. She's really nice, she turned out to be real nice to us and now I understand and I just like her.

I like all my teachers, but some of them, like there's always a teacher that's really nice and one's just a little tougher. That's what I like about teachers because the one that's tougher it's better for you—you might not want it—but it's better for you because it really gets you ready for [your next grade level].

Classroom observers noted that posters with class rules were on the walls of many rooms at Noble, emphasizing good behavior and structure. However, the better method for managing the classroom seemed to be the teacher's constant monitoring to make certain students remained on task. Observers noted even minor instances of misbehavior were rare.

When asked to describe what makes a good teacher, parents interviewed said it is important for the teacher to be effective at managing the children's behavior and keeping them motivated and on task. "Classroom management, knowing what to expect from the level of what they are teaching and know how to teach it effectively," one parent said.

Summary

The success at Noble is primarily tied to four main factors: strong, effective leadership, collaboration among teachers, early intervention and differentiated instruction, and close adherence to state standards. Teachers at Noble work well as a group to support each other and the needs of the pupils. Leadership sets a tone that encourages collaboration and reinforces the importance of adhering to the state standards. Finally, time is committed during normal classroom hours for reading interventions and targeted instruction.

The district-level leadership provided by Scott Urban (Director of Elementary Instruction and Personnel) is critical to setting standards, sharing teaching techniques and selecting textbooks. His work helps to keep teachers involved in the decision making process and coordinated in

their teaching approach. At the building level, Principal Mike Steyer provides clear direction for the faculty, fostering a climate of mutual respect between the administration and the teachers.

Leadership has fostered a learning environment that is rich with positive reinforcement. Children receive praise for contributing to class discussion or volunteering to be part of an activity. Good behavior is important outside of the classroom as well. Age-appropriate reward systems support good behavior and achievement. Noble's students say their parents will often add an incentive for high marks from the teachers.

The teaching staff at Noble has been teaching together a long time, which has created a strong network of relationships. Most of the teachers have been at the school for more than 10 years. Because they know each other so well, they do not hesitate to look to each other for instructional ideas and suggestions on new ways to deal with classroom challenges. Much of this information exchange happens at lunch time or after school, and has become a natural part of the school day for them.

The long-term commitment of the faculty also gives them a strong understanding of the Tiffin community and the backgrounds of the children. The teachers have gained considerable respect from parents for understanding the children and are supported by most parents in their efforts to provide high standards of behavior and achievement in a caring atmosphere. A combination of high standards and respect for the students is important to creating a climate where achievement is valued. Teachers believe they can raise achievement to a high level by demonstrating they appreciate a child's effort and building a student's level of confidence.

Reading instruction receives major emphasis at Noble. Two Title I specialists spend 30 minutes a day in each classroom. The class is divided into thirds with one group working with the classroom teacher and the other two groups split between the Title I specialists. This gives an opportunity for constant observation and informal assessment. The school administration relies heavily on assessments in reading and other areas to provide timely intervention for the students. As a result of this approach, almost 100 percent of fourth graders have passed the Ohio reading proficiency test. Instruction is also extended in mathematics with the use of a self-paced computer program that allows teachers to customize instruction and monitor students' mastery of the concepts.

State standards are posted in the classrooms, with teachers referring to the standards as they begin a lesson so that the students know what they are expected to accomplish. Teachers constantly check their lesson plans against the standards so that classroom activity is aligned to measures of achievement. Whenever teachers meet, they want to discuss applying the state standards to student instruction. The Summer Institute for Reading Intervention received frequent mention from teachers as a valuable professional development tool.

The dedicated staff at Noble Elementary School is making a difference in the lives of the 261 students they see every day. These teachers have embraced Ohio's education standards and receive support from their principal, the school district and the families of their students. Through collaboration and cooperation, they have made Noble Elementary School a *School of Promise*.

Summary of “Lessons Learned” at Noble Elementary

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

- Curriculum and textbooks are aligned with state standards at the district level; the district’s curriculum director meets regularly with same-grade teachers from across the district to review curriculum and chose appropriate grade level text books
- Instruction is aligned horizontally and vertically to meet the standards; teachers feel that student success is a common goal shared by all grade levels.
- State standards are visibly posted in classrooms and teachers explain to students how the material they are learning relates to the standards.
- Instructional time is extended in both reading and mathematics; Title 1 teachers work with classroom teachers on reading and the school utilizes the Accelerated Math program to extend and customize mathematics instruction.

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

- The principal communicates expectations to staff and students clearly, and is seen as a strong, supportive leader who fosters and atmosphere of mutual respect among staff
- Decision-making is shared between administrators and teachers; Teachers expressed a meaningful sense of involvement in decision making, and feel they have autonomy in their classrooms.
- Teachers collaborate, share responsibilities, and coordinate lessons. Collaboration is a natural part of their work day.
- Professional development supports the instructional process and emphasizes collaboration, understanding and application of state standards, and differentiating instruction to meet student needs.

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

- The school day is organized to facilitate reading intervention; Title I specialists work with classroom teachers, and students are segmented into groups depending on their needs and learning styles so they can receive more individualized instruction.
- Other forms of intervention utilized at Noble include:
 - After-school study tables providing individualized tutoring with volunteers from Heidelberg College.
 - Summer school for district-wide intervention.
 - All-day Kindergarten to increase readiness to learn in first grade.
- Teachers are sensitive to student needs but hold them to high academic standards.

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

- School-to-home communications are encouraged, although parent involvement in the school is described as moderate.
- A long-term partnership with local Heidelberg College provides the school with student volunteer resources for the school and a training opportunity for college students; this relationship also fulfills the college’s mission of outreach and community service.

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

- Teachers hold high expectations for students in a supportive environment; expectations are high for each and every student at Noble, even special education students.
- Sharing the common goal of student success has united the faculty and administration at Noble, and they form a cohesive group.
- A school-wide emphasis is placed on structure, discipline, and management.
- A culture of respect exists between students and teachers; teachers utilize positive reinforcement to encourage good behavior.