

Western High School: Case Study Report

Executive Summary

The case study provides insights into school improvement at Western High School. This 7-12 school is one two schools in the Western Local School District in Pike County.

The case study, which was based on interviews, observations, and document analysis completed in the spring of 2005 revealed several practices that might be contributing to the school's success, and it also identified several possible concerns.

Promising Practices

- A legacy of strong community support for the school, which includes backing of levies, involvement with athletic and social events, and respect for the district's teachers.
- Clear academic focus, characterized by explicit use of Ohio's content standards and efforts to involve students actively in the learning process.
- Engagement in professional dialog with colleagues at the school and in other neighboring schools.
- Some experimentation with inductive methods of teaching.
- A productive combination of inclusion and intervention to meet the needs of students with disabilities.

Possible Concerns

- Curriculum tracking, which reflects a legitimate concern for the needs of individual students but which may nevertheless limit some students' opportunities to learn.
- Tensions associated with the education of children from families that are new to the community.
- Issues relating to the direct influence of particular community members on school and district decisions and policies.
- Possible over-reliance by some teachers on focused preparation for specific accountability tests rather than more generalized efforts to cultivate high-level learning among all students.

School Profile

Western High School occupies the western half of the district's single school complex. The school office is located immediately to the right of the main entrance; classrooms are arranged

along intersecting corridors that diverge at right angles from the main office. While there is a separate middle school corridor, administratively, academically, and physically, the middle school (grades seven and eight) is part of the high school. Hallways link the high school to Western Elementary School, but the high school maintains a distinct leadership, identity, and culture. The district superintendent's office is located to the rear of the complex, with its own parking area.

The new school building (completed in February 1998, replacing one reportedly constructed in 1937) strikes the visitor as organized, brightly illuminated, clean, and cheerful. When changing classes, the students transit the hallways in an orderly fashion, supervised by teachers who stand outside the doors of their classrooms.

Information about the school, its students and staff is provided in Table 1, and information about the district is provided in Table 2.¹

Table 1: Western High School Profile

School	Average Daily Enrollment	417
	Grade Levels	7-12
	Attendance Rate	92.6%
Students	Percent Minority	2.1%
	Percent Disabilities	22.6%
	Percent Disadvantaged	48%
Teachers	Number of Teachers	25
	Percent with at Least a Master's Degree	40%
	Average Years of Experience	13
	Average Salary	\$40,492

Table 2: Western Local School District (Pike County) Profile

ODE District Rating	Academic Watch
District Enrollment	888
Total Per Pupil Expenditure ²	\$8,462
Median Family Income ³	\$22,102

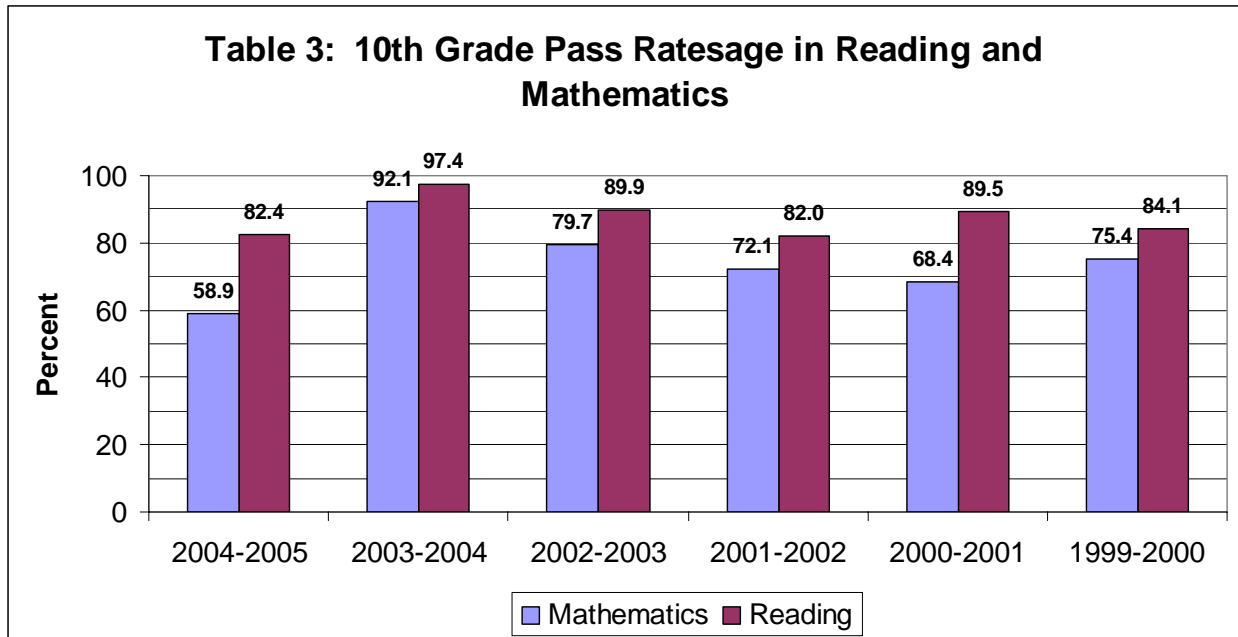
Table 3 shows six-year achievement trends—measured as pass rates on 10th grade tests—for 1999-2000 through 2004-2005. Pass rates for 2004-2005, however, reflect performance on the Ohio Graduation Test, so comparisons with pass rates from previous years need to be made with considerable caution.

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

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

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

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

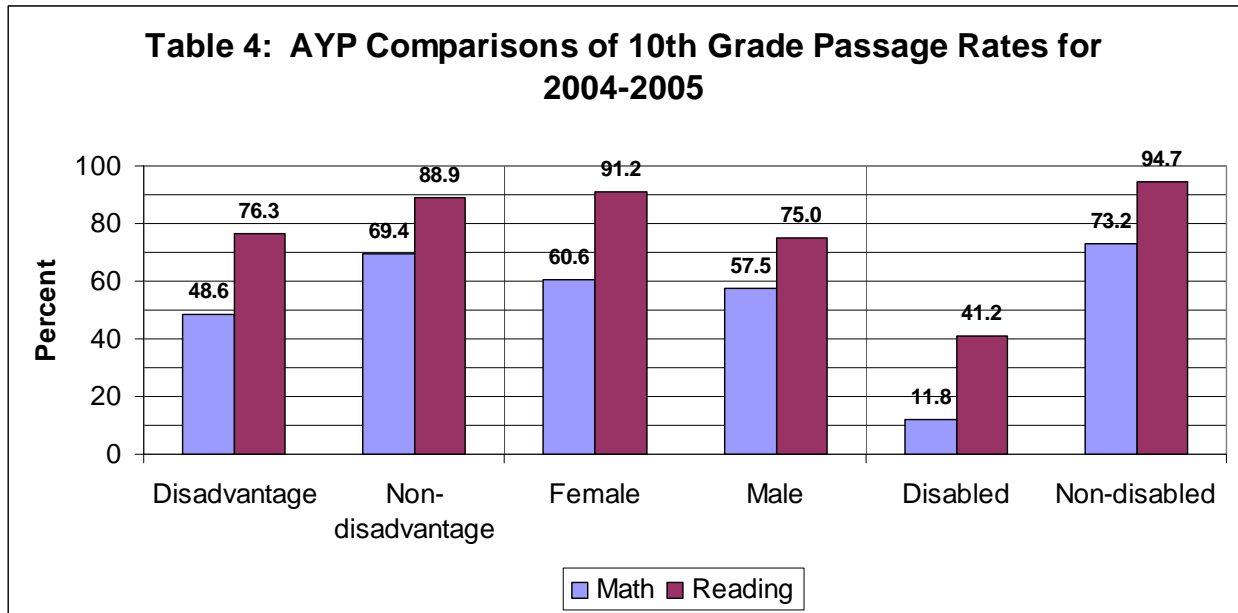


Performance data for the five years between 1999-2000 and 2003-2004 make it clear that tenth-grade students at the end of the time period exhibited somewhat better pass rates on the reading and mathematics tests than did their counterparts at the beginning of the time period. The data suggest an unusual trend, however. Whereas there was high performance in general, there was also a considerable dip in pass rates (20 percentage points in mathematics) in 2001-2002, with a return to higher levels over the subsequent two years. It is also important to recognize that pass rates for 2004-2005 reflect performance on a different test (i.e., the Ohio Graduation Test) and cannot be seen as representing part of the trend.

In general, Western seems to have been a school that achieved high performance on Ohio Proficiency Tests. But its performance as measured by new tests seems less robust. On the 2004-2005 Report Card, for example, the school was given the rating, “academic watch,” because it met two out of 10 indicators.

The implementation of the Federal *No Child Left Behind* Act, whose provisions require that separate test scores be reported for key subgroups of students, permits a finer-grained performance summary. Table 4 presents these data, which reveal large achievement gaps between disabled and non-disabled students and moderate achievement gaps between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students. The data also demonstrate that males are performing less well than females, both in reading and in mathematics.

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



Methods

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

All interviews were transcribed; and transcripts, observation forms, and documents were collected in an electronic data base. Data coding and analysis was accomplished through the use of the software program Atlas-TI. Initial coding of data involved classifying the data in relationship to 48 *a priori* codes that identified a wide range of school policies and practices. Conceptually related codes were then combined to create broader categories. The final step involved the review of categorized data in order to identify emergent themes with potential explanatory power.

To develop the case study, the researcher drew on the data relating to four salient categories: parent and community engagement, academic focus, school structures and culture, and leadership. Discussion of two emergent themes revealed meaningful linkages across these categories.

Parent and Community Engagement

Parent and community engagement with Western High School is both an old and evolving story. Located in the village of Latham, Ohio, Western High School, like many schools in rural areas, looms large in the economic, historical and cultural life of its community.

Latham, a village that meanders along the north side of Rt. 124, consists of a couple of gas stations, a general store and one restaurant. Private residences occupy the rest of the settled areas. Farmland spreads out beyond the village, to the south of Route 124. Space for Western High School, constructed just to the west of the village center, was cut out of a hillside; room for track, baseball and other sports facilities have also been constructed there or planned for the near future.

The school complex serves as the geographic and cultural center of Latham. Speaking of the extraordinary level of community support for the levy to build the new high school (the levy was approved by 83%), one community member said,

I think it's just because people here really love and support their kids. They feel that they should have the best they can afford. And they appreciate what the school and the teachers do for the kids. At the old school there just wasn't room for anything. Now, they go there for basketball and baseball or sports and they just felt we all deserved a good building.

At the same time, Western Local considers itself frugal and hard-working. The superintendent relates with the pride the fact that,

The law changed and if you had enough money in the general fund, you didn't have to pass a bond issue. And so this elementary [school] was built, you can't say free, but at no cost to the taxpayers here because we had the money in the general fund to take out and put our share in and the state put their share in...

At Western, administrators as well as classroom teachers wear many different hats. (The principal, for example, is also the varsity basketball coach, and many teachers are of long tenure in their jobs.). Several of the younger teachers attended Western when they were students and have returned there to teach. Community members make reference to this fact when they reflect on their connection to the school. One parent explained:

I was a student of [a teacher] and now my son has him for [math]. So I pretty much know what he expects of students and the kind of math he teaches. I feel like if there's some kind of problem I can just go over and talk to him.

A teacher of long tenure at the high school, reflecting on community and school relations, explains that because she has attended sports events and social events,

I see a lot of [people] there...I've been to a couple of churches here and I go to weddings and funerals and that kind of thing so I just see [community members] all those different places...I am now teaching the students of the kids I started out with so I'm on my second generation....Some people will come and ask me questions and talk to me because they feel comfortable with me because they had me as a teacher or they are ... parents of my students.

Parents and school employees often describe the school and its community as "just a big family." Parents by-and-large believe that teachers are working hard to help their children, and they in turn support the teachers and judge them to be "as good as you'd find in a lot of the big towns." Those parents who were interviewed for the study reported that, at one time or another, they had direct involvement with the school—assisting in coaching sports teams or advising the

cheerleading squad—or that they were married to people who teach there, work there, or serve on the board of education.

As the largest employer in Latham and the surrounding area, the school has (or has had) direct or indirect economic connections with a large portion of the population. This includes custodial and cafeteria staff, bus drivers, and, of course, teachers. The principal explains the economic choices open to students after graduation as yet another connection to the school.

There's nothing but logging if you stay here and even if you get an education, about the only job open to you is teaching. A lot of the kids who go away to school come back here to teach. I did...I mean in a lot of places school teachers are some of the poorest paid people in the area, when in our particular district...[teachers] are some of the wealthier people in the district.

In discussing education in the area, parents and community members often relate experiences that tie them to the high school: sporting events, the prom, beloved teachers. Western teachers, however, frequently lament that it is difficult to get parents into the school, for academic reasons. And even though, typically, parents are diligent in maintaining close ties with the school while their children are of elementary school age, by the time the children reach high school age, parent attendance at PTO meetings and even at baseball and basketball games has fallen off. One educator provided possible explanations for limited parent involvement:

I think number one we do have a lot of poverty in our district and I think we have a lot of people who are not educated and for them education is not necessarily that important...On the other side, it is a fact that everybody has gone through life working. And working, you do not get home in time [to meet with teachers]. When you get home you are tired.

If educators at Western equate attendance at teacher conferences or visiting classrooms with a concern for education, parents and community members often see this issue in a different way. Asked to name the ways they are engaged with the school, parents and community members tend to cite attendance at sports events, greeting teachers outside the school, voting for the new school buildings, and naming educators with whom they went to school as youngsters or with whom they have a good relationship now.

Both community members and educators agree that a sense of community is one of the most important reasons that they work or live in the district. One parent explained:

It's quiet here; it's a peaceful place. Now I know it's not the most exciting place in the world, but we don't have the problems you find in Columbus here either. Oh, there's a little of that kind of thing now and then—it's everywhere I reckon. But this is a good place to raise kids.

This sentiment is echoed in one form or another by most members of the community. A veteran teacher at Western, speaking of his reason for teaching there, explained: "We don't have a lot of really bad kids. You know in this small country school, kids are pretty respectful. That's nice."

Students, in naming those things they liked most about attending Western, referred to the sense of community in various ways:

Student 1--I like the small amount of students.

Student 2--I like getting to know your teachers.

Student 3--Like she said, like a real close student-teacher relationship

While most teachers and parents spoke of poverty as one of the important issues that the school was forced to confront in educating the community's children, they often viewed its impact on the role of the school differently. Teachers tended to view poverty as a limitation, not on the individual child's prospects necessarily, but rather on his or her experiences in life. One teacher explained:

We are trying to broaden the kids' interests. The guidance counselor takes them on field trips to colleges just so they get a chance to look and see that there are places out there, to go outside of Pike County.

Teachers tend to describe their responsibilities to educate poor children as a simple need for more in-depth work on their part, to spend more time with poor children on homework and acquiring skills. One teacher commented, "I think our kids feel very comfortable about [seeking extra help]." Asked why this was so, the teacher was of the opinion that it was "because we have so many [students who need such help.]" Another teacher, however, expressed the opinion that poverty and academic difficulties were not always linked, and pointed out that in the 2004-2005 graduating class the two top students academically were on the free and reduced-lunch program.

Some parents agree that the teachers at Western work hard to encourage economically disadvantaged students to succeed, and they express appreciation for the help teachers provide their children. But others seem to think that there are subtle social class biases. As one parent put it,

I just think that people there at the school have their picks. [Speaking of math classes] they decide up front what kind of student you're gonna be and they put you in that class. If you're the kid of one of them then you go in the upper class; if you're not, then you get the lower class. That's the way I see it.

In fact, the issue of a social divide in the community is one that surfaced repeatedly in the interviews with parents and community members. But the superintendent expressed a different view, explaining that historically,

What I really liked about [Western Local School District] was you didn't have to have money or you didn't have to have the right last name to become somebody...But the last ten years it's deteriorated because we've got such an influx of people coming from Dayton and Middletown...

It seems that while parents and community members tend to see a social divide between the economically advantaged and disadvantaged, educators tend to see such a divide between long-time residents and newcomers. For example, several teachers spoke proudly of the fact that they once knew all of the students who attended the school and even their families. "When I came here and for the first probably better than 20 years, it was really good because everyone grew up here and stayed or whatever. And everyone knew everyone," commented one educator. "But the last ten years [we now have] the urban type kids that will have gangs." And in

fact, the superintendent related that "...this past fall, we really worked hard, and I expelled eight outside kids that were starting a gang."

Students, commenting somewhat ironically on this incident, remarked,

[The principal] got rid of the gangs. Well at least they think they're gangs. They really did need punished. Just real winners! He got rid of them, and that's good.

Academic Focus

Western High School has a strong academic focus with a curriculum that centers squarely on the Ohio content standards. Instructionally, the school is geared toward achieving strong results on Ohio's accountability tests. Culturally, the concepts of accountability and a narrowly focused curriculum are ones that receive clear support and allegiance from the faculty. Western High School is a traditional community-based school that seeks to engage its students in the development of skills that will later serve them in the workplace or in higher education. Moreover, parents and community members also seem to understand and largely support the value of a traditional curriculum focused on practical knowledge and skills.

As at many small schools, the Western curriculum is rather limited, but focused. In grades 9-12, for example, there are no study halls. As a result, elective courses are few and frequently over-enrolled. While the teachers' individual lesson plans are designed to address specific standards, the actual design and delivery of the school's curriculum show signs of evolving. Speaking of findings from a recent curriculum audit, for instance, the principal said,

I think our teachers are serving more in a role as facilitators now as opposed to just standing and lecturing...A lot of [the more veteran teachers] were people who wanted to do lecture, but I think that we have done a lot of professional development [to change that].

As this comment suggests, ideas and methods that teachers encounter through their attendance at professional development seminars have translated into changed classroom practices. Furthermore, dialog about learning and teaching extends beyond the district's boundaries. Department heads and teachers often collaborate with colleagues in similar, neighboring districts to decide on what works for their students. Through a grant from Rural Education Aligned for Learning (REAL), for example, math teachers discovered in an analysis of their performance data that there was a misalignment in their curriculum, which they went on to address.

In addition, 21st Century grant enabled teachers to establish an after-school program to help students who were struggling. Transportation is often an important issue for rural schools, and the 21st Century grant enabled Western to run a bus after school hours to take participating students home. Even after the grant ran out, however, several teachers continued to help students after school, or to come early in the morning to address their needs.

Teachers at Western are serious about their work. They communicate and consult with one another and with colleagues beyond the school, especially through their involvement in project REAL and the Literacy Curriculum Alignment Program (LCAP). Referring to their experience with LCAP, a teacher remarked,

It started out in the elementary, and what it amounts to is teachers have developed pacing charts, where they work the content standards, the grade level indicators, and they design when each grade level indicator is going to be taught.

Another veteran teacher added,

I serve on the state Ohio Graduate Test [OGT], academic and advisory committee, and apart from developing the test, I also serve on the science advisory committee. So we have lots of input from those committees towards curriculum.

Teachers also exhibit great concern and knowledge about the needs and education of individual students and groups of students. By developing pacing charts and using them to plan lessons and units, teachers are able to follow one another's progress, across subject areas and grade levels. A math teacher explained, "We use these charts to track groups of students from one grade to the next. By looking at each other's charts we can see what has been done or what we need to emphasize."

By analyzing data from state examinations, moreover, teachers are able to "see where [they] have weaknesses, [they] can see where [they] have strengths." Western teachers are serious about using these state-generated data as tools for examining their own practices and student outcomes.

We can see where maybe there's a ...lower functioning class and we can follow them through. [Teacher's name] is very good about doing all those charts and graphs to make it easy to see what we're doing and what we're not.

But following the standards exclusively, even though it is supported by most teachers, does prompt certain regrets.

In the time I've been here I've seen a big difference in what kids know. And I support that—I mean kids leaving Western should be able to take whatever that next step might be. But there's more to education than just algebra or nouns and verbs.

The state requires us to align our curriculum to their standards. I understand that and accept it. But there are times in class when a kid might ask about this or that, and it's important, but you just don't have time to do it. If you do, you might not get something taught that's on the test, or their teacher next year might not teach and so they miss out. It's a shame though. Kids should know more than just what's going to be on the test.

The superintendent agreed:

Field trips—some people think that's a waste of time. I think kids need field trips. I remember taking a group of kids to Grand Dam, to watch the folks move the rocks. I don't know how aware you are of Portsmouth—[some of our kids] look out the [bus window] saying, "Look at those skyscrapers!" So as far as I'm concerned, hopping on a bus and just riding to Columbus and back is pretty educational. And we don't have time to do all of those things any more.

As part of their focus on academics, educators at Western take seriously the idea of working with new teachers to help them understand and work with the community's student population.

A number of teachers, moreover, emphasized the need to strike a balance between hiring teachers from outside the community with new ideas, and finding teachers who understand and are effective in working with Western's students.

Our kids here many of them haven't been outside of the county. They might come from homes where the parents didn't finish high school, and so they don't see the reason for education—I mean, they work and get by. So their kids can't see anything beyond that. Teachers who grow up here understand all this; teachers coming in from the outside, if they don't, then they're just not able to work with our kids.

One of the dangers of just hiring from around here is that the teacher growing up here might think there's no way to change things—might just accept that's the way things are. I think we've got to shake things up too. New people bring new ideas, and that's important too.

Instructional Design and Delivery

As mentioned above, the Ohio content standards have had a direct impact on Western's instructional design and delivery. Instructional routines seem to be well-established even if these routines appear to have evolved in the recent past. Referring to the newer instructional methods of teaching, an eleventh grader reported,

I think [the teacher] has a unique way of teaching. Instead of teaching it to... you try to catch it yourself so he can keep it—so you know how to do it longer. You remember more if you figure it out yourself and that's a way of looking at it so you don't forget.

In fact, this inductive method of teaching is not unique to this particular teacher. Across a variety of courses, teachers were observed to employ more problem-based methods of delivering the curriculum, requiring students to think critically about the process for arriving at an answer, as well as finding correct answers. At the same time, it must be pointed out that there were other teachers whose classroom instruction followed the more traditional approach of addressing questions in the book and strictly following the books' formulas for arriving at a the answer.

While a constructivist or inductive approach was not universally employed by teachers, overall the standards themselves appear to exert considerable influence on instruction. Even in classes where a follow-the-textbook approach to teaching was employed, teachers frequently asked students, after supplying the correct answers to questions, to explain their thinking in arriving at their conclusions. This expectation of "process" was clearly one that students accepted and were usually prepared for.

In addition to being required to understand, apply, and analyze (following the tenets of the standards), students were often asked to demonstrate their learning in other venues. A social sciences teacher observed,

I often bring materials in from outside our immediate lesson—something from the newspapers or the television news. Or I just get things off the internet. If we're talking about the role of a certain branch of government, say, then I might ask them to give me an example from what is happening that day in the news. I think this varies things for them; makes it more entertaining. It also shows me if they've really understood.

The inclusion of special needs students has also had an influence on teaching methods, requiring teachers to practice differentiated approaches to instruction. Rather than relying on the text alone to provide sufficient practice exercises for these students, for example, teachers craft expansion exercises that take into account the skills and abilities of various levels of learners. And many teachers believe this approach enriches their lesson planning as well as their appreciation for the impact of varied pedagogy on learning. Some teachers, however, complained about the impact that inclusion was having on their own teaching. As one explained,

I just feel sometimes like I don't have time to work with all of the students. Some of the kids get intervention help of course but still you're forced to kind of gear the level of the class to the middle. I know that some kids at the top and at the bottom get left out that way. But I don't see there's much else I can do.

Other teachers however, viewed the school's combination of inclusion and intervention more positively.

We have resource centers where the kids can go to get help. I think our kids feel very comfortable about going. I know some places—kids [do] not want to leave the classroom to get help because they were embarrassed. And our kids don't feel that way; they just say, "Hey, don't fail—go get help."

School Structure and Culture

The culture at Western High School focuses on respect for authority, compliance and care for individuals in the school community. Western invites the participation of students, parents and teachers, even if the actual structures to enable this participation are not always available or clear to everyone. Sitting in the school office, for example, one immediately observes how comfortable parents and community members are in bringing their concerns to the attention of the principal, teachers, and staff. Much of this, one also sees, however, is based on the social and historical connections school personnel have with community members. Those community members without such connections seem less comfortable.

For the most part, Western runs smoothly and efficiently. Its organization and lines of authority enable teachers, students, and staff to have their issues and concerns voiced and addressed. These lines of authority and responsibility are present at every level: individual teachers create the expectations for their classes, and these are prominently posted in every classroom. School-wide expectations for students are spelled out in detail in the student handbook, just as expectations for teachers are spelled out in the faculty handbook. The principal asks that teachers address student discipline at the classroom level; he also requires them to submit weekly lesson plans. They are also to engage in individual and collaborative planning, even as they cultivate their professional competence through professional development offerings.

Respect for Authority

Respect at Western is expressed in the ways community members interact with one another as well as in the way they comply with the demands of authorities. First, hours of observation and interviews confirmed that students, in their interactions with one another and teachers were, though playful and boisterous at times, consistently deferential, polite, and mindful of their formal roles in the school. This is no less an expectation and custom amongst adults. Students, when asked to name those things at Western they would like to see improved, most cited issues

such as a lack of a football team or permission to leave campus for lunch. Students may balk at disciplinary measures at the school but they do not act on their feelings.

Teachers are unfailingly polite and helpful with one another, and expect this same behavior from students, both towards them and amongst themselves. Teachers were observed to quickly and pointedly discipline students when they used inappropriate language or failed to show courtesy towards others. One teacher explained,

I've taught in other schools and I have to tell you, the kids here are for the most part no problem at all. I have the [disciplinary] rules put up there on the wall and if they go outside those rules, then they know what's coming. I very rarely have to send anyone down to the principal's office. When I taught at [names another school], I had to send kids to the principal all the time.

Phil Howard, in his first year as principal of Western, directly connects school discipline to academic achievement.

The single most important role I perform here is to make sure that we—I provide an [atmosphere] conducive to learning in terms of discipline. You know, I think that it is my job to make sure that the teachers can teach and the other kids can learn. So if we have a few kids that are causing discipline problems and it is my job to make sure that we take care of those.

Several parents, if not so directly as the principal, concur with his assessment of the role of discipline in academic work. One parent explained,

I've seen school where the classes were rowdy and students pretty much ran things. I don't see how kids can learn in places like that. I expect my son to act at school the way he acts at home. And I expect his teachers to hold his feet to the fire.

Paddling is still a feature of Western's disciplinary policy. Students may be paddled only if their parents give written permission. And, up to 50 percent of the school's parents do so. Often paddling becomes a function of expedience, for both students and their parents. Rather than serve after-school or Saturday detention, students often prefer to be paddled, and their parents frequently agree. A parent commented,

Kids got paddled when I went to school and we all turned out pretty well. I paddle my own kids. I think it's important for them to know there are consequences to their actions. I'm not saying it's all right to injure them or anything like that. I just think it's the embarrassment as much as anything else.

Care for Individual Students

Even though publicly the teachers and administration at Western work hard to hold students to a high standard, they are also alert to the needs and circumstances of individual students. One educator explained,

I just know there are kids here who arrive in the morning hungry. Or there are kids who haven't been able to do their homework because mom is fighting with the boyfriend. It's impossible to hold these kids to the same work and the same deadlines as others. So I

talk to them: I put the assignment over a longer period of time. And if the student needs help then I make sure he gets it.

Because so many of them either live in or are members of the local community, teachers are often familiar with the circumstances of students. And thus they are able to adjust their help to the individual.

Living here you pretty much know who needs a little extra help. Poverty is a real issue in this community, and there's just no way of getting around it. Some kids might not have a good winter coat or there might not be any food in the house. Just lots of these families are on the check [referring to public assistance], and sometimes it just doesn't stretch to the end of the month. Those are the kids you need to reach in special ways.

Students are appreciative of the extra care and encouragement they receive from educators at Western.

[The principal] you know he works real hard to make sure that if you want to run track or play basketball or whatever that you can get to practice. If you can't get a ride, he takes you home after a game. I know I couldn't play if he didn't.

Another student added,

[The principal] comes to all the sports. He comes to the games whether it's girls or boys and usually it's all about the boys but he has made the effort to come and watch us girls. His wife makes a lot of stuff for our winter sports banquet.

Focus on individual needs, however, also translates into the practice of homogeneous grouping, which is no longer widely endorsed among educational researchers as a productive approach for providing differentiated instruction. Curriculum tracking begins at Western in the eighth grade. In mathematics, for example, one teacher explained,

We have one class of Algebra for our eighth grade and two classes of Pre-Algebra which is more of a general math. Eighth grade is where they split. Eighth grade is where they are allowed to take Algebra I and usually the seventh grade teacher will assign who will take that Algebra I, unless there is a parent who really wants their child in the Algebra I class.

The students who take general math rather than Algebra study from a series called *Math Matters*, in eighth, ninth, and tenth grades. After these lower track students take the Ohio Graduation Test (OGT) in the tenth grade, they may then take an Algebra I class or geometry, but the focus remains on passing the OGT. One parent complained,

My daughter, when she went into eighth grade, they were going to stick her in the low group for math, but I insisted she take Algebra. If I hadn't, when she finishes high school she wouldn't be able to go to college—she wouldn't have the necessary math. That's the problem I have with the way they teach math there.

Leadership

Leadership at Western High School is largely “top-down,” although teachers and others in the school community with special expertise or interests have room to practice a more “bottom-up” approach. Because the principal is new to his role this year, he has not yet moved to make

many changes. (Phil Howard had been Principal of the elementary school before assuming his current position.) The majority of the staff members, however, are veterans with deep ties to the community and individual families. As a result, no matter who is principal, they continue to move forward with the academic reforms and instructional practices that began in the late 1990s.

Top-Down Leadership

Western is a community that is comfortable with a “top-down” model of leadership, largely because it is consistent with the values of the greater community. Teachers are accustomed to consulting with the principal or superintendent before making decisions. The superintendent recalled,

For the first sixteen, seventeen years I did it all. I interviewed; I hired. This just kept growing and growing, and this desk kept getting worse and worse. I couldn't keep up, and so now ... the principals do the interviewing, recommend to me, of course, then I recommend to the board. That's helped me in some aspects, but then it's hard for me because I was never a delegator.

The principal also believes in “top-down” leadership even though he describes his role as being one wherein, through enforcing discipline, he enables teachers to do their work. In fact, he is a constant presence in the school and acts as the filter through which most actions and permissions must pass. The principal meets the buses in the morning, greets parents as they leave off their children, discusses any early-morning issues that might arise with teachers, and walks the halls to insure order. In addition, he frequently drops in on classes, looks over lesson plans, and rules on requests made by teachers.

Far from feeling restricted, however, most teachers support and depend on the guidance that the principal provides. One teacher explained,

He's got answers. You might not always agree with them but he's certainly not wishy-washy. I most appreciate the way he handles discipline here: if you've got a problem with a kid then he's right there. He's strict but fair. Discipline doesn't get in the way of teaching. Same way with the teachers: you have a chance to say your piece.

This same sentiment of “strict but fair” is one that also finds expression, and support, among most parents.

You read about schools [in other towns] where kids are just out of control, drugs and such. Now I'm sure that goes on here as well—I mean it's everywhere. But you don't hear about it in the high school. That situation with those kids starting a gang. They should have been expelled: school's not the place for that. He keeps the lid on there.

Phil Howard views discipline as necessary, for the whole Western community, in order for the school to function. He commented,

I have certain rules that I expect teachers to enforce at the building level. Obviously, the district has more policy that I have to follow. So it is. I mean it's a chain of command; it goes down.

Bottom-Up Leadership

If the principal takes a direct, and often authoritarian, role in issues of discipline at Western, he usually leaves the more academic and instructional issues to the teachers. Teachers have taken the lead in turning state standards into actual practices and routines. Because a senior math teacher sits on the Ohio Graduation Test committee, the state academic content advisory committee, and the state science advisory committee, teachers rely on this teacher and others to interpret reform measures coming out of the Ohio Department of Education. Teachers, working in groups, are also responsible for establishing the LCAP grade level indicators. In short, they determine what to teach: what content to leave in and what content to reject. Speaking of that process, one teacher commented,

All the cohort has decided this is the way we are going to do it and then at the end of the year we sit down and might make some adjustments to it, but it works out pretty good.

Another feature of bottom-up leadership at Western is the school's responsiveness to parents and the greater school community. Because the school is perhaps the most prominent official institution in the village, it occupies a larger public role than do schools generally. A teacher explained,

I think a lot of the community looks for the school to be the leadership for them. Because, see we don't have like a mayor and we don't have political figures like that, so I think they do look for the school to be their leadership people.

As a result, community members and parents, as constituents, often expect direct access to the principal as well as the power to influence school decisions and policies. The principal commented on this fact,

I grew up here; I went to school here...Because I have a lot of students that I went to school with their parents and sometimes it is good and sometimes bad...It can be bad because people [believe] that because they have a relationship with you that they can manipulate you to do something in their favor that otherwise wouldn't [happen].

Similarly, many parents and community members expect to be able to take their issues directly to the superintendent and school board members. And because of the close interpersonal relationships that exist between the school and the community, they frequently get a hearing.

Emergent Themes

Across the schools that were part of our study of Schools of Promise, we saw two issues with particular relevance to the school improvement process. Because these issues were also highly salient to participants, we took them to represent "emergent themes." The first concerned the character of the curriculum work undertaken by school participants. The second described the character of the relationships that were fostered in smaller schools.

From Deep Curriculum Work to Teaching to the Test

Western High School, over the last five years, has been engaged in changing both the design of the curriculum and its instructional delivery. In addition to the main approaches to curriculum

and instruction described in previous sections, many teachers, and particularly those teaching at the grade levels at which standardized tests are administered, use more explicit techniques to prepare students to perform well on the proficiency tests. One educator commented,

I take the test results from the previous groups, I look at the types of questions they ask and then I look through our textbooks. You can't just follow the sequence the book gives you. I select from what the book offers, I pull materials from lots of other sources, colleagues and even from other districts. Then I just make sure that they are able to answer those kind of questions. It's drill, drill, drill.

Other teachers, however, feel that while these specific skills may be a necessary part of the greater content they offer, they want their students to be engaged more broadly and experientially in understanding the concepts. As a result, they try to fold the content from the tests into larger curriculum frameworks.

A greater emphasis in recent years on teachers' professional development has resulted in many teachers moving away from the strict "teach-to-the-test" curriculum and toward a more conceptual curriculum wherein students are required to think more deeply and critically about concepts. At the same time, teachers, again as a result of professional development, are moving away from lecture as the primary method of instructional delivery and toward a more experiential approach to critical inquiry.

Smallness Makes Schooling Personal

Because Western High School has but 417 students distributed in grades seven through twelve (which means that on average classes contain around 69 students per grade), the school has the feel of a small, close-knit community. This is especially the case because the school, located in a very rural area, is the only public institution that engages most constituencies of the greater community. As one parent commented,

Practically everything our kids do happens at the school: like the ball games and art shows— that kind of thing. So of course you get to know the teachers and the principal— everybody, even the school board members. Any time I go up [to the school] I run into just lots of people I know. It sometimes feels like we're just a big family.

For teachers this circumstance often means that they have the opportunity to get to know the parents of their students. "You might meet a parent when you're out doing something else," one teacher explained, "and later that helps, that connection, if you have her student in class and you have to talk to her." Another teacher, commenting on the close proximity in which they all lived, said, "It just personalizes things. They know we're all working toward the same thing."