
being used to drive instruction or determine professional development. Little or no student work was posted on the walls of classroom or hallways. Worksheets appeared to be a dominant instructional tool. The most stated need for professional development gravitated around solutions to classroom management (student behavior) problems. There was no evidence of systematic planning based on data from formative or summative assessments.

Instructional leadership and shared leadership behaviors were not observable during middle school observations. Principals noted that their role in the discipline process severely hampered their ability to demonstrate instructional leadership. Teachers complained about special education students being assigned to their classes without their knowledge. Evidence of common planning appeared limited to the development of the student discipline code and consequences. Morale was an issue among some teachers.

A textbook-driven curriculum was observable in both middle schools, as evidenced by concerns around new science texts or outdated social studies texts. During observations and interviews neither teachers nor students made any references concerning alignment of curriculum with state standards.

There was no discernable rationale for resource allocation relevant to student performance. Issues of resource allocation and use of time seemed to fall outside the locus of control of both teachers and administrators. As stated previously, there is a lack of awareness of a school budget.

Minimal parent or community involvement was observed. Although Dr. Leonard was present at a scheduled parent information event, few parents were present at that time. Some teachers complained that parents are hard to reach and suggested that some parents do not care about their children's education. There was no evidence of efforts to involve parents in decision making around educational issues in the middle schools.

In summary, observations of the middle schools confirm that the low levels of school performance indicated on each middle school's 2003–2004 State Report Card matches the evidence witnessed in this visit without disparity. In our view, uncertainty of vision and goals and lack of clear direction has resulted in poor student performance. Low expectations, poor instruction, and the absence of shared leadership and ownership of student outcomes appear to be among the root causes of each school's failure to elevate student achievement. The middle school program needs an infusion of enthusiasm, innovation, new ideas, and strong instructional leadership.

Recommendations

Given the apparent state of the middle schools in Mansfield, we are offering both short- and long-term recommendations.

In the short term, the middle schools should focus on three primary agenda items:

- From an instructional and curricular perspective, both middle schools should focus heavily on Communication Arts (Reading and Writing) and Mathematics. We recommend that further program implementation involve two schoolwide efforts:
 - Development and implementation of an approach to Reading Across the Content Areas and Writing Across the Curriculum.

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- Implementation of a strong, standards-based Math program aligned with Ohio’s Content Standards, such as Chicago Math.

Implementation of these instructional programs should involve all teachers and be reflected in the future allocation of time, resources, and the focus of professional development at the middle school level.

- A comprehensive improvement plan should be developed for each middle school that is based on performance data, client surveys, and teacher input, relative to each school. An instructional leadership team inclusive of teachers, administrators, and parents should be organized and trained for the purpose of gathering and analyzing data, overseeing implementation of the improvement plan, and addressing implications of future formative and summative assessment data. We recommend that the middle school principals be provided with an executive coach to assist them through this process until they are able to institutionalize it in the school’s culture.
- School leadership and school staff need further training in the implementation and staffing of the special education inclusion model. This recommendation also includes providing appropriate staffing patterns for inclusion of special education students. Beyond this, however, we recommend that a forum be organized for middle school teachers and central office administrators to engage in an open exchange of information and viewpoints on this issue, to be followed by the Superintendent issuing clear direction on the placement of special education students at the middle school level, to be monitored and enforced by each principal.

For the longer term, choice and innovation may prove to be the most powerful stimulants in ratcheting up the quality of middle grade education in Mansfield. We recommend two courses of action, either individually or collectively, for further study and development:

- A number of Mansfield elementary schools are currently underenrolled relative to their capacity, and the district will likely be facing the closure of several schools as an efficiency measure in the near future. Another alternative that may serve the interest of improving middle grade education would be to gradually devolve and consolidate to a single middle school by providing parents, where possible, the choice of sixth through eighth grade in their current elementary school. This could be accomplished gradually by allowing those elementary schools with adequate excess capacity to opt to grow their own sixth, seventh, and eighth grade classes incrementally over a 3-year period. We feel the competition for middle grade students would have a positive effect on the quality of middle grade instruction in both elementary and middle schools. Current research suggests no significant positive effect of grade configuration in and of itself for students in the middle grades. Several urban districts in Ohio and throughout the nation have seen benefits of K–8 elementary schools.
- Program innovation relative to the learning needs and styles of students in transition between childhood and adolescence is an important factor in middle school education. Active, high interest learning activities have been found to be particularly effective with students in this developmental stage. We recommend serious examination of “whole school designs” for adoption by middle school houses at each consecutive grade level.

A number of whole school designs have been approved for implementation funding by the U. S. Department of Education. They include designs such as Accelerated Learning, America's Choice, and designs of the New American Schools Development Corporation such as Roots and Wings, Co-Nect, The Modern Red School House, and Expeditionary Learning. (See *An Educators' Guide to Schoolwide Reform*, American Institutes for Research, 1999.) The designs are comprehensive and prescriptive and may be extremely helpful in bringing about improvement where the need for change is comprehensive and the initial capacity for change is relatively low. A middle school could be organized in two or three houses per grade level with a specific design strand available at each grade. For example, an Expeditionary Learning house could be offered at Grades 6, 7, and 8. Students and their parents would have a choice of programs, and these strands would serve as small schools as well as program and team alternatives within the structure of one middle school.

MANSFIELD ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

On November 21–22, 2004, Drs. Libia Gil and Deanna Burney conducted instructional “walk-throughs” and interviews at six Mansfield Elementary Schools: Brinkerhoff, Prospect, Newman, Sherman, Carpenter, and Hedges. The AIR Observation and Data Collection Protocols, developed by Dr. Gil, were applied during these visits. (Protocol criteria are appended to this report.) A debriefing with the Superintendent and K–8 Curriculum Director followed these school visits.

On December 1, 2004, Dr. Harold Doran visited three Elementary Schools—Richwood, Springmill, and Woodland—for discussions with principals regarding their use of student assessment data to identify instructional strengths and weaknesses. In addition, Dr. Doran provided for each elementary school an analysis of Grade 3 Reading Assessment data in the form of scale score comparisons, performance by content strand, and school-specific strengths and weaknesses in reading instruction.

During visits to the elementary schools, reviewers observed clean, friendly, warm buildings with positive climates. However, the instruction observed was characterized by a preponderance of busy work, relatively low expectations, and little alignment to state standards. Ongoing assessment to monitor and adjust instruction to meet individual student needs was weak. The Literacy Coaches were most knowledgeable and enthusiastic. However, there was a significant gap between their articulated knowledge and classroom practices. There are four computers in each classroom. Their utilization to support teaching and learning appeared limited.

Findings at the elementary level mirror a number of the general findings and recommendations discussed in Section I of this report. They include:

- The need for a distinct vision for improvement and implementation of strategies to meet measurable goals
- The need to establish an accountability system that differentiates the level of district supervision of schools on the basis of their need and capacity
- The need to need to redesign and expand district professional development, particularly in reading and math