

Turtle Hook Middle School is one of two middle schools in the Uniondale School District in Nassau County, New York (Long Island). An unincorporated village in the town of Hempstead, Uniondale is one of three towns that make up Nassau County. The school's administration and staff talk proudly of their community, which they describe as still fulfilling the American Dream through hard work, a belief in education, and a "lot of heart."

School Setting

According to the 2000 U.S. Census, Uniondale's median household income is \$61,410. The community is about half African American, a quarter Hispanic, and a quarter Caucasian, with small numbers of other racial and ethnic groups. The



village's black community includes a large number of immigrants from the Caribbean. School staff members describe parents as caring and supportive of their children, but without much time to be directly involved with the school; most families are headed by two working parents. In recent times, the community has experienced a growth in gang-related activities, causing concern and eliciting greater attention on prevention strategies and security measures.

Uniondale Free School District comprises five elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school. The district administration includes a newly appointed Superintendent of Schools, an acting Assistant Superintendent for instruction, an Assistant Superintendent for business, a cadre of 20 directors and supervisors, and six administrative assistants. The district benefits from unusually high tax revenues generated by local businesses: per pupil expenditures exceed \$16,000, and teacher salaries are higher than surrounding towns, enabling the district to attract a sizable pool of qualified applicants.

In 2002-2003, Turtle Hook Middle School enrolled 728 students in grades 6-8. Students come from four feeder schools in the district. Enrollment data from 2001-2002 show that 68% of the students were African American, 30%



were Hispanic, and 3% Caucasian. Forty-one percent (41%) of the students were considered low-income: 9% were enrolled in special education. Not quite 7% of students were classified as limited English proficient.

The performance profile of Turtle Hook students has changed markedly in recent years. In May 2000, 42% of 8th graders scored at the lowest level (1 = serious deficiencies) on the state assessment in mathematics, and only 5% met the standards

(level 3). In May 2003, only 7% of 8th graders tested at level 1 in math, while 69% met the standard (level 3). Although improvement gains in English language arts were less dramatic, in May 2000, 64% of Turtle Hook 8th graders were performing below standard (levels 1 and 2), in January of 2003, over half (54%) met or exceeded the standards (levels 3 and 4).

The staff at Turtle Hook Middle School includes two full-time administrators, a principal and assistant principal, 68 full-time and seven part-time classroom teachers, five full-time and one part time special resource teachers, one full-time and seven part-time paraprofessionals, and six support staff. This year a new principal replaced the previous one, who helped to plan and implement the school's middle school model in 1999/2000.



Turtle Hook has an active Parent Teacher Association and partnerships with two major local companies. Steinway and Sons piano company donates materials and involves students in on-site learning activities at the Steinway manufacturing plant. Wal-Mart has supported the school through grant monies.

Curricular coherency plays an important part in school success

Two factors were instrumental in Turtle Hook's notable turnaround: a) well-aligned district and school curricula, coupled with a range of student supports, and (b) the design and implementation of a middle school model.

Seven years ago, a district curriculum audit pointed to the need for an aligned and coherent curriculum. With low math scores defining the most critical need, the district set out to create and implement a district-wide math curriculum, followed by uniform core curricula in all content areas, linked to district-wide final exams to provide ongoing assessment data. It also developed pacing charts in all major content areas, providing consistency across the district and reinforcing content and skills across grades. The curricula are thus "back loaded" from the state tests and "paced" so that important concepts and skills are sequenced and built upon year by year. This helps the district ensure that all students have the same opportunities for learning. Teachers described it as highly successful.



Pacing charts in mathematics provide teachers with key ideas for each chapter as well as vocabulary, available technology, customized instruction, and support for classroom activities. Each chapter is then "paced" by order and number of days. The literacy pacing document is thematically based and includes the topic and literature used, the objective, instructional materials, suggested learning activities, and assessments. An eighth grade teacher stated, "The pacing charts are good because they keep kids from different schools from having different skills and concepts. It also means no repetition." A sixth grade teacher said the pacing charts insure "Ownership for kids at all grade levels, not just certain grade levels." Teachers talked about how the pacing charts are used during common planning time to examine "where are we this week?" and "where do we see all of our students?" based on common test data. The principal and directors review plan books for coherency.

The school uses multiple assessments to set new goals or adjust instruction. To address gaps in the district curricula, the Uniondale district content directors conduct annual item analyses of the TONYSS (test of NY state standards). They study examples from the state to determine how students should be performing and where to set targets for Uniondale students. Principals receive these data for building planning, and the content directors work with subject area teachers by grade, using disaggregated data to analyze where the teachers' students will need support or enrichment in the coming year. The teachers and school also look at quarterly, mid-term, and final exams that the district developed or adapted from the standards aligned textbooks adopted by the district. The teachers can add open-ended response questions through use of a software program the district provides. All assessments are aligned not only to the state standards but also to the state tests. Sixth grade teachers said that they also look at teacher-created tests. The disaggregated data allow teachers to "get to know students before you teach them," according to a sixth grade teacher.

Turtle Hook offers students numerous structures and strategies for success. The English Language Arts class is scheduled as a double block, for example, giving teachers and students more concentrated time to focus on literacy. Students who scored in the ones or low twos on the state tests may take Academic Instruction Service classes in reading



and in math. Teachers also tailor instruction to student needs. A sixth grade teacher said, "We don't always do whole group instruction. We have students share with partners, work in cooperative groups, and we also do flexible grouping." Teachers said they gave students choice, used graphic organizers, made reading strategies transparent, and taught note-taking.

During an observer's visit, two eighth grade classroom teachers began a comprehension lesson by asking "what do we do when we begin a reading passage?" "Skim first," students replied, "highlight key

words," and "look at the action." After the students used these strategies, the teachers directed them to "look back over the key words you have underlined and answer the questions below," and prompted students to "look at what words you used to answer" each question. In the ensuing dialogue, students reviewed the key information and talked about what that evidence showed. They also discussed how some of these strategies were helpful to them.

Sixth grade students described cooperative groups as a way of learning and sharing ideas, reporting that they learned social skills and how to work with other people. One student noted, "before, when I worked by myself I had things my own way," and went on to reflect on how he negotiates with others now. Sixth grade students also discussed reading strategies that helped them, such as "we take notes and picture stuff in our head." About homework, they said, "we get a lot . . . but it helps you not to forget what you just learned."

Every day after first period, teachers conduct an advisory period with a planned curriculum that reinforces learning strategies and teaches study skills. On Fridays, the period is extended five minutes to accommodate the Second Step program, a violence prevention program that teaches anger management and social skills. Students work together (sometimes in role-plays) to solve problems. A sixth grade student said that the Second Step program helped him understand that "I can't make assumptions."



Another support for students is the Learning Academy, a twice-weekly hour-and-a-half program which runs ten weeks. Teachers apply to teach at the Academy, offered to students who made high twos and threes on state tests. Homework centers are also available, enabling students to work with teachers after school. Tuesday, Wednesday, and Friday mornings before school, National Honor Society students voluntarily tutor students who would like help from a peer. Students seeking even more support can go to the computer lab, where a software program gives them a diagnostic test, then generates an individual remedial skill program. Some of these students may also have an aide. Students report that teachers are always available and that they feel supported because guidance counselors stay with them the three years they are at Turtle Hook.

One teacher summed up the student support at Turtle Hook by noting that it's "at the kids' convenience, not the teachers'." Teachers are helped in their success because they are supported by the principal and district content directors.

The academic subject directors meet with teachers and discuss student progress based on assessments, and pacing of the curriculum. Directors meet with teachers once a month and the principal and content directors use the curriculum pacing charts when they are doing a classroom observation. Academic subject directors also supervise teachers.

Leadership in implementing the middle-school model

Four years ago, the district moved to a middle school concept for sixth through eighth graders. The previous principal at Turtle Hook was responsible for developing and implementing this model. The implementation of student and teacher teams, along with other components of the model, has provided an important structural system for faculty collaboration and problem-solving. The current principal, in his first year at Turtle Hook, works to focus his efforts on supporting and building on the successful work of the school to date by developing and fine tuning systems of accountability and focusing on classroom instruction. He routinely reviews teacher lesson plans and exams in order to ensure consistency in setting clear learning expectations for students.



Teachers at Turtle Hook meet as teams daily.

Teachers at Turtle Hook meet as teams daily. Four days a week, grade level teams meet; the fifth day, content area teachers meet and plan for particular content area issues. Each team is led by a teacher, who organizes agendas and facilitates the meetings. Agendas include reviewing results from student assessments, planning for individual student needs, meetings with parents, sharing and co-planning

curricular and instructional strategies, and organizing school events. Sixth grade teachers said the common planning time allows them to be consistent in their approach with students, as evidenced by the messages students receive, their homework, and follow-up at home. Teachers share materials and approaches and discuss “everything.” This consistency holds from classroom to classroom across the school. The math team meets weekly to prepare for upcoming chapters—discussing methods and “tricks or short cuts that work for kids.”

Going the extra mile for students—and each other

This school community conveys a palpable sense of the respect all community members have for one another. “There is a professional etiquette here—everyone pulls together,” a teacher observed. Staff members see each other as resources to solve problems on behalf of kids. Teachers spoke of the collegial atmosphere within which they work. As one said, “we are relentless with the children. . . we get right to work.” Another added, “no one is afraid to give and no one is afraid to take.” One relatively new teacher said, “This is the professional environment I was looking for and I am happy I found it.” A veteran teacher stated “I don’t have a problem being a 24-year veteran and learning from my younger counterparts.”

This collaborative work ethic and practice gives students clear and consistent messages about what is expected of them and confirms their knowledge that they have support across the school. The president of the school’s PTA said the “kids give us 100% because they know that we are there for them.” A teacher said “we are involved in the kids’ lives—we treat these kids like our own and they respond to us.” Students interviewed appreciated the staff for setting high expectations and enforcing rules. “We know how much teachers care. They go the extra mile for us,” one student said. Another noted, “the new principal helps a lot—he expects a lot of us.”



Extracurricular activities also include year book, international life, and fashion and talent shows.

According to an 8th grade AIS (Academic Instruction Service) Literacy teacher, extracurricular activities, which are open to all students include not only the usual offerings (sports, band, and orchestra) but also year book, international life, and fashion and talent shows. Both students and teachers talked enthusiastically about their involvement in one or more of these activities. Asked what she liked about the school, one sixth grader said, “they have contests, a talent show and dances” and added with pride, “I help out with the dances.” Students were not just involved with extra curricular activities; many served as student lunch monitors during their own lunch periods. The PTA president praised the involvement of not only parents, but the entire community through partnerships and volunteering.

The successful collaboration embodied in the middle school operation at Turtle has contributed to a sense of efficacy and respect. "All children must learn," not "all children can learn," is the expectation Turtle Hook staff members hold; the school's main goal is that "our students are successful." Turtle Hook is described by everyone as a family. The hallway across from the school office is covered with yellow and green paper turtles. Each yellow turtle has the name of a PTA member and each green turtle has the name of a school staff member. The principal called the turtles "a symbol of the Turtle Hook Family." This sense of family is the result of different factors all working together.

A helping hand, a family, the world

Interviewed as a group, eighth grade teachers were asked to think of a metaphor or an artifact that demonstrated what they believed made Turtle Hook successful with students. One began, "an artifact would be a picture of the staff



because" they put in extra time with students. Another added, "people at the school are a family. We take care of each other and we take care of kids." The metaphor "would be an extended hand because we are involved in kids' lives," added another, "it would be children coming together to take that hand because we treat our students as we would treat our own kids." Another teacher suggested "a globe of the world because students and staff are culturally diverse but while we are here we have one value (respect). Diversity is celebrated, not just tolerated." One sixth grade teacher described this climate

as "we have a job to do, let's do it together and without ego trips." Another sixth grade teacher said it differently by saying, "We all have a desire to do something great for kids and we do it like a family."

Sixth grade students reported that at Turtle Hook, "students do work, they don't run the halls." Quick to describe the school as strict, they were also quick to say that everyone in the school wanted what was best for them. Eighth grade students said, "Teachers do more work than we do." They stated that teachers "prepare meals for us and tell us 'don't let it get cold.'" They explained that this meant that they had to work hard too. The eighth grade students also stated that "the new principal helps us too. He tells us that we 'should focus because this is your life.'" These students said the message to them overall was that life was more than just about "fitting in." Turtle Hook holds high expectations for all

of its students, not just some. One 8th grade student said, “teachers really care for us, and if they can care then I can care.”



This climate of high expectations was evident in an eighth grade Academic Instruction Service (for students who have scored ones or low twos on the TONYSS) reading class. Asking higher order questions, the teacher urged, “let’s take this discussion of theme to another level,” and modeled the next level of the discussion. She demonstrated that she believed in the students and, in an unthreatening manner, let them know she wouldn’t let them off the hook. Students in this class were actively engaged in the discussion and appeared comfortable and confident of their contributions.

Teachers all talked about how they feel respected at the school and by the district, concluding that this gave them a sense of confidence and empowerment. The district curriculum directors substantively involve teachers in curriculum and assessment design, setting a tone, they said, that motivates staff, gives them confidence, and allows for collaboration.

