

SPOTLIGHT ON SUCCESSFUL PRACTICES: LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE 2008 *SCHOOLS TO WATCH*

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In its 1997 manifesto for middle-grades reform, the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform concluded that “the entire school’s enterprise must focus intensively on establishing attentive school environments that strive for every child’s academic success” (Lipsitz, Mizell, Jackson, and Austin, 1997, p. 540). Initiated in 1999, the Schools-to-Watch program demonstrates this vision in its four criteria: “The truly high-performing middle-level school embodies the intersection of academic excellence, developmental responsiveness, social equity, and organizational structure (<http://www.schoolstowatch.org/OurCriteria/tabid/118/Default.aspx>). In these criteria, the hallmark of academic excellence in High-performing schools is that “they challenge all students to use their minds well” (<http://www.schoolstowatch.org/OurCriteria/AcademicExcellence/tabid/120/Default.aspx>).

The 29 Schools to Watch recognized in North Carolina since 2003 have documented academic excellence in many ways. In 2008, three schools were recognized: Kernersville Middle School, Rogers-Herr Middle School, and West Pine Middle School. Teams from Kernersville Middle School, Rogers-Herr Middle School and West Pine Middle School were responsible for documenting each school’s excellence in practice in their applications. This article summarizes from the 2007-2008 North Carolina Schools to Watch Applications and supporting documents.

Kernersville Middle School

Located in Kernersville, NC, in the Winston-Salem Forsyth County School District, Kernersville Middle School opened its school doors in 1998. The school currently houses 729 sixth, seventh and eight graders. Principal Debbie Brooks leads the leadership team and school faculty in a community partnership built on research based practices and a mission to continuously improve the educational experience for all stakeholders.

Meeting the needs of the ethnically and culturally diverse student body is a central focus of Kernersville Middle School. Site based management and a commitment to parents and community support helps Kernersville Middle School operate in an “outside of the box” fashion that best meets the learning needs of all students. Despite being part of a rapidly growing community, Kernersville has managed to maintain a small-town community feel. Kernersville Middle School has aligned its mission statement with the goals of *Schools to Watch* and *This We Believe* (National Middle School Association,

1995). The mission statement reads, “Kernersville Middle School will continually strive to provide a safe physical and emotional environment that promotes and values diversity, nurtures positive relationships among students and staff, and supports continuous improvement focused on the academic success of all students” (North Carolina Schools to Watch Application-Kernersville Middle School, 2008).

Since Kernersville Middle School’s opening, it has operated under the theme of a Project Genesis Academy. Continuity of the school’s vision and goals is possible because of the consistency of faculty on campus, with seventy five percent of teachers having worked on campus for the past five or more years and forty one percent having worked at the school since its opening. Strong partnerships with University of North Carolina at Greensboro and East Carolina University also support the school in research-based decision-making. Dr. Mark L’Esperance, professor at East Carolina University, is a theme consultant for Project Genesis who offers ongoing support to the Leadership Team and faculty in the form of quarterly school evaluation on a school report card that is available to parents and community members. He also provides monthly visitation, program evaluation, and suggestions for policies and procedures.

Interdisciplinary teams, consisting of the core and encore teachers in each grade level, plan the focus of instruction. Teams strive to get to know all students and set high expectations for ongoing improvement. Stakeholders put a focus on individualizing the curriculum and assessment to best match individual needs. A clear understanding of data helps direct learning goals. Teachers set clear expectations for themselves and their students. At Kernersville Middle School, there is a focus on a safe physical and emotional environment where diversity is promoted and valued. Social equity for all stakeholders as well as common vision and performance goals of interdisciplinary and leadership teams underlies the unique climate of academic excellence on campus.

Teams plan according to a school-wide clear academic focus, based on performance and standards that are task-oriented and measured periodically. Target areas for learning come from areas of AYP that have not yet been met. Teachers use a Prioritized Curriculum in language arts and math coupled with quarterly assessments to help students meet specific objectives in the curriculum. The professional climate of the school is conducive to excellence in teaching and learning. Teachers are offered Learning Focused training, Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP), and “Be Active” workshops to gain additional strategies for reaching all students. Other professional development initiatives that lead to student achievement are workshop overviews such as “Preventing Power Struggles in the Classroom”, and Ruby Payne’s *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*.

Clear expectations for work and behavior support student success. Teachers use rubrics to communicate expectations and assess students. Students are driven to move beyond the status quo. Twice a week, during planning periods, teachers work closely in implementing targeted objective tutoring in reading and math. During the remaining planning time, teachers host “success conferences” with students and offer parent contact and conferences, or meet with grade level teams to review curriculum objectives, identifying areas to re-teach for mastery learning.

Support for student learning is given in 40/80 hour tutorials after school, Intersession, LEP tutoring, sheltered instruction, tutoring, study skills and EC Inclusion. The focus on learning is delivered in core and encore courses, supported by meaningful

interdisciplinary curriculum delivery. Core and encore teachers incorporate reading, math and writing into daily lesson plans. Priority is given school-wide for collaboration through planning and teacher visits to observe one another's classroom strategies.

Academic excellence would not be possible at any school without an environment committed to meeting the needs of its student body. Kernersville Middle School's students' unique needs are met through quality relationships between teachers, students and parents, and program offerings that are innovative and tailored to the student population. C.A.R.E.S. (Citizens Accepting Responsibility Equals Success) is a volunteer program where parents, grandparents, business partners and other invested adults contribute to the safe and educationally sound school environment. The group focuses on providing support and supervision during school activities such as daily transitions, extracurricular activities - including sporting events and Open House, lunch, morning greetings, and assistance to new students.

The KMS Buddy Program offers mentoring between staff members and students. These positive interactions promote improvement in academic and behavioral performance. Student success is celebrated and rewarded on a quarterly basis through Honor Roll socials. There are a few tiers of Honor Roll success recognition: As, A/B and Middle School Honor Roll for students who do not fall below a C. Clearly, success is within every student's reach, giving many students an opportunity to shine. Parent support is invited at quarterly celebration breakfasts for students who earned an A in each subject.

Students and families are invited into success in the educational experience with additional support of partnerships with community resources. While there are many quality programs at Kernersville Middle School, the most notable are the North Carolina Licensed Day Treatment and the Alternative Learning Center (ALC). A licensed therapist works with individuals and small groups on campus during the regular school day, offering family counseling to siblings and parents of students in the Day Treatment program. The ALC allows students to remain at Kernersville Middle School as opposed to being referred off campus, which reduces transition issues.

Due to the large influx of Hispanic students over a period of ten years, KMS created an environment to support the needs of Hispanic students and their families. KMS offers Spanish signs in the hallways, language translators, and Structured Instruction Observations Protocol (SIOP). The school also partners with the YMCA's Hispanic Family Mentoring Program to provide evening workshops on the following topics: Parent Rights and Responsibilities, The Parent/Teacher Conference, School Structure and Function, and Going to College.

Enrichment opportunities are offered during the school day, offering leadership experience and teaching the value of community service and social skills. Some of the Hawk Opportunities include: Hawk Leaders, Student Board, Builders Club, Drama Club, National Academic League, National Junior Honor Society and the S.A.V.E. Step Team (which promotes non-violence). Students also participated in the African American Graveyard Restoration Project.

Kernersville Middle School offers tutoring, customized student learning and a Research Based Learning Focus. Each week tutoring is offered by each teacher/team, focused interventions support level I/II students and 40/80 hour after-school tutoring is offered for 8th grade students. As a result of the focused efforts in quality program

offerings and targeted tutoring, Kernersville has dramatically minimized the achievement gap for minority students and was consequently noted in several state and national education journals, books and conferences. (Editor's note: A detailed monograph on the success of Kernersville Middle School is forthcoming from the North Carolina Middle School Association.) In brief, between 2003 and 2007, a summary of closing the reading between subgroups of students and white students is as follows: the gap between White and African American students changed from 24.9 to 12.2, a reduction of 51.4%; the gap between White and Hispanic students changed from 46.5 to 20.6, a reduction of 55.9%; the gap between White and LEP students changed from 77.1 to 36.4, a reduction of 53.1%; and the gap between Hispanic and African American students changed from 21.6 to 8.4, which yielded a reduction of 60.6%. When comparing the increased number of students reaching a proficiency level III or IV, the increase for the following subgroups of students took place between 2003 and 2007: All students increased Level III or IV proficiency by 5.4%, African American students increased by 13.7%, Hispanic students increased by 26.9%, LEP students increased by 41.7% and White students increased by 1% (North Carolina Schools to Watch Application-Kernersville Middle School, 2008). Math data was not analyzed for 2003-2007 due to the change in scale scores at the time.

Middle school reform is a commitment that Kernersville has made in its approach to high standards for academic excellence and positive growth and for providing a quality educational experience for students. Substantial changes in teaching and learning are possible at Kernersville Middle School as a result of the capacity for change through strong leadership, a trusting professional climate and a commitment to teaming and ongoing professional development.

Rogers-Herr Middle School

Rogers-Herr Middle School is a year-round school and a "school-of-choice" in Durham Public Schools, serving 631 students in grades 6-8. Entry into Kernersville is competitive and there is a waiting list to be admitted into the school that is directed by Principal Drew Sawyer. The school's diverse student body, from all socioeconomic backgrounds, remains stable from year to year. The diverse faculty and staff has a commitment towards the Strategic Direction of the school that targets student needs in a way that makes this continuously improving school a School to Watch.

Rogers-Herr strives to be the highest performing middle school in the Triangle Area. The faculty and staff work collaboratively for middle school reform. They recognize the increased focus on accountability, and as a result use data to drive many important decisions about teaching and learning. In addition, they see a need to adequately prepare students with 21st Century job skills to handle competition from other countries in a global economy and be ahead of the curve for a new and ever changing job market.

The Strategic Direction, including the school's vision, mission, core values and goals, envisioned and implemented by the stakeholder-focused faculty and staff, provides the foundation for teaching, learning, and creating a rich school experience for students. The mission of Rogers-Herr is to provide each child with the most effective education by working and collaborating as a team, setting high expectations, and basing

all decisions and actions on what is best for all students (North Carolina Schools to Watch Application-Rogers-Herr Middle School, 2008). Roger-Herr's "blueprint of building and maintaining a highly effective middle school" is building student success with research based best practices supported by Professional Learning Communities (North Carolina Schools to Watch Application-Rogers-Herr Middle School, 2008).

Data supports Rogers-Herr Middle School's ongoing academic improvement. For the past few years, students in both reading and math have shown significant progress. School-wide, proficiency for all students from 2005, 2006, and 2007 has improved from 83.9 percent proficient to 86, and 87 percent proficient, respectively. Focusing on individual learner needs, and responding to AYP data, Rogers-Herr has also made gains in its subgroups of students. African American students have improved from 83.1 percent proficient to 84.4, and 86.6 percent proficient. Economically Disadvantaged students have improved from 71.4 percent proficient to 76.8, and 77.9 percent proficient. Students with disabilities have improved significantly from 47.4 percent proficient to 66.2 percent and 68.1 percent proficient. While these strides certainly mark positive trends, Rogers-Herr is not satisfied with these numbers alone, rather, they strive to help each student achieve a year's worth of growth and to become lifelong learners.

Academic support is provided for students during the school day throughout classrooms and in faculty and staff planning time as teachers focus on student learning. Rogers-Herr takes advantage of the Durham Public School's computer-based *Riverdeep Instructional Organizer*. *Riverdeep* aligns the goals and curriculum so teachers can work systematically and collaboratively to see how students are responding to the curriculum. Using *Riverdeep*, teachers have each area of the curriculum paced out with standards, essential questions, key vocabulary, suggested resources and sample lesson plans. *Riverdeep* drives daily instruction, and teachers use common assessments, and quarterly and semester benchmarks to either enrich or remediate instruction on an individual student basis during the daily 45 minute Core Plus period.

Core Plus is a program where teachers use data to plan small group instruction for students. Students use Core Plus time to make up missed assignments, learn organizational skills, have concepts re-taught, or enrich concepts that they have already learned. Teachers, in an example of the school's collaborative culture, meet at least one time weekly during a 90 minute common planning time to plan instruction, and during another time each week to discuss data as it relates to individual students' learning needs. Core Plus is not the only academic support offered during the school day.

Students who achieve at a Level II or I on the North Carolina End of Grade Reading Comprehension test are enrolled in the Academy of Reading Class. Students use a computer-based program to practice basic reading skills until they progress to a higher level of mastery and independence. At this time, students are moved into the Reading Bridge class where they receive support in small group instruction.

As core teachers, AIG, and EC teachers meet in grade level and departmental teams, to plan classroom instruction for students and Core Plus individual learning goals, three questions drive their focus, a strategic approach that allows the teachers to ultimately focus on results.:

“What is it that the students need to learn this week?;

How will we know when they have learned it?;

What are we going to do when they haven't learned it (North Carolina Schools to Watch Application-Rogers-Herr Middle School, 2008)?"

Effective school transition is an important aspect of the middle school experience. The counselors play an active role in responding to the needs of the students in grades six through eight. Rogers-Herr Middle School continuously works towards creating and maintaining a learning environment where students feel happy, successful and cared for. As students begin their middle school experience, Rogers-Herr holds a separate 6th Grade Orientation. Parents and students meet with their teachers and walk through the daily life of a beginning middle school student, visiting each classroom, the cafeteria, practicing where to report each morning and what do during transitions and dismissal. Counselors visit classrooms regularly and give talks about middle school life. Parents are also invited into the school experience through routine two-way communication in a Friday Folder. Exceptional and other individual student learning needs are met through the inclusion model, through the Academically Intellectually Gifted teacher working with small groups during Core Plus, and through AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination).

The final component of highly effective transitions at Rogers-Herr is the transitional support for moving to high school, which begins early in the 8th grade year. Counselors go into classroom to conduct interest inventories with students in order to help them begin thinking about the appropriate course of study for high school. They coach students and parents in helping to understand school requirements and completing a four-year course selection. Rogers-Herr also hosts a High School Night where principals visit and answer questions about particular area high schools.

The faculty and staff at Rogers-Herr are committed to the social equity for all students, evident in the Strategic Direction, the core values and the daily practices of focusing on students' individual needs. In order to provide the best possible education, students are taught by highly qualified professionals. One third of the teachers hold advanced degrees and four teachers are National Board Certified. ILTs are supported with a full time mentor who observes, counsels and supports new teachers. Working in Professional Learning Communities provides opportunities for shared expertise and improved school experiences for learners.

Rogers-Herr recognizes the importance of students being in school in order to be active learners. Rogers-Herr has the lowest district-wide middle school out-of-school suspension rate, which can be attributed to the school's commitment to finding positive alternatives to out-of-school suspensions. Over 75% of the faculty is trained in Capturing Kids Hearts, a program that focuses on building positive relationships with students. The Positive Referral system also supports referring students to the office for positive behaviors such as showing leadership, helping someone out, or celebrating improvements in grades and behavior. The school also offers the Positive Alternatives to School Suspensions (PASS) program directed by a certified teacher. In PASS, students can spend assigned time working on class assignments, reflecting on choices or receiving counseling on how to make better choices in the future.

In order to make the educational experience best for students, the faculty and staff work together with a common vision and towards continuous improvement. Together, there is an ongoing focus of: "Where are we going? How do we get there? And how did we get these results (North Carolina Schools to Watch Application-Rogers-Herr

Middle School, 2008)?” Reflecting on past successes, the interventions and strategies that made a positive impact on student learning become part of Rogers-Herr’s continuous improvement cycle. Looking at the investment of effort, time and money going into a particular teaching practice, staff development, and remediation or acceleration program, teachers evaluate whether the payoff was worth the effort compared to achievement. If the payoff was not worth it, time, money and effort then are reinvested into something more productive, a decision the faculty and staff make together. Rogers-Herr Middle School is never satisfied with the momentum they have built in their accomplishments, rather they are driven by the notion that their school and their students will only continue to get better and better.

West Pine Middle School

West Pine Middle School is a School to Watch that breaks the mold on its path to excellence. Located in the Sandhills Region of North Carolina, West Pine Middle, a school whose population has nearly doubled to 815 students is in Moore County Schools, a district serving 12,500 students. West Pine Middle School is led by Principal Jeffrey Maples.

West Pine Middle School has a record of success, guided by the fundamental principles of teamwork and the quest for excellence. Since the school opened in 1997, it has earned the High Growth status each year. In the 2005-2006 school year, West Pine Middle was designated a School of Distinction. In four of the past five years, West Pine has achieved the rating of Honor School of Excellence with 90.7% of students demonstrating proficiency. The teachers and administration attribute the high ABC ratings and making AYP for five years to the intense professional development and collaboration that enhance the teaching and learning at West Pine Middle School.

Teachers working in Professional Learning Communities, meeting twice weekly, collaborate rigorously in planning, implementing and assessing curriculum. Teams create learning targets aligned to the North Carolina Standard Course of Study. Instruction is framed around target-based essential questions so that curriculum is delivered to students with focused consistency (North Carolina Schools to Watch Application-West Pine Middle School, 2008). Common assessments and quarterly formative assessments support concerted instructional efforts.

Success of the academic strategies at West Pine Middle School is a direct result of efforts towards meeting individual learning needs. Instruction is customized for students during a weekly enrichment/remediation block that allows all students to achieve mastery of standards-based targets. Students participate in school-wide small group instruction for enrichment and remediation each Wednesday. Varied assessments indicate the level of student mastery and inform the need for either enrichment or remediation. All staff members participate in enrichment and core teachers provide remediation in flexibly structured skill-based groups that exist until mastery is achieved on a particular skill. Enrichment involves students collaborating on solving math problems, analyzing demographic data as it relates to particular geographic regions, responding to particular writing prompts and making connections between the music and art of a given time periods.

Teaming occurs between Encore and Core teachers. Expectations for learning are clearly communicated through the use of rubrics. Teachers welcome feedback from students to further clarify expectations and improve learning experiences. In addition, school wide daily silent sustained reading is a research based instructional strategy that contributes to the academic progress at West Pine Middle School. Students who are served in the Exceptional Children's Program receive inclusion services supported by supplemental instruction in Corrective Reading groups and Mastery Reading groups.

Adolescent developmental needs are in focus at West Pine Middle School. To specifically meet the developmental needs of students at each grade level, each grade is given ownership of their corner of the school. Each grade level has its own hallway to decorate and take ownership of, enabling them to bond as grade-level teams of teachers and students. The collaboration between teachers and the weekly small group instructional setting allows the students to make connections and have trusting relationships with many adult advocates. Student interest and motivation is also a priority in course offerings. Students can choose from the following encore choices to enhance the middle school experience: studio art, digital photography, computer technology, band, orchestra, keyboarding, exploring technology, and life skills.

The counseling department offers individual and small group counseling to target many of the needs of adolescent learners. Programs offered by the counseling program are New Student Group, Anger Management, Girl Power, Boy Power, and Study Skills and Organization. In addition to career counseling, counselors also administer a learning styles inventory. Counselors regularly facilitate home-to-school communication between parents and teachers to build transparent relationships. Classroom guidance, offered to all students, focuses on Internet Safety and Bullying. School-wide, the counseling department facilitates the character education program and students enjoy the recognition of character nominations where their pictures are posted on a bulletin board and a t-shirt is awarded.

In addition to efforts of the counseling department there is an emphasis on school spirit and individual recognition. Upon entry to West Pine Middle School, a large television monitor displays a slideshow of the daily events. Students enjoy receiving newsletters and viewing student broadcasts. Individual recognition and celebration are a part of the climate of the school. Students receive monthly incentives at each grade level and each team sends home weekly post cards for diligence and persistence in work.

"West Pine recognizes the connection between the student interests and motivation to learn, and encourages students to stretch beyond the parameters of any label (North Carolina Schools to Watch Application- West Pine Middle School, 2008)" towards individual potential for academic excellence . AIG teachers not only teach the 220 students in the program, but they provide opportunities for nurturing a variety of learning interests, including: debate, Quiz Bowl, global issues discussions and stock study. In addition, the criteria for taking advanced placement courses was changed from an achievement test score of 93% to 80% to build on student interest and motivation and allow students to rise to the challenge of higher level academic achievement- and the enrollment almost doubled. Despite the changed standard for entry, and the enrollment rising from 81 to 131 students in Algebra I, the passing rate was still 100% on the exam.

Students are encouraged to participate in academic clubs and competitions such as Math Counts, Future City Competition, Science Olympiad, Battle of the Books,

Students Fueling the Future, Art Olympics, Geography Bee and Technology Student Association. In addition, writing and speaking competitions are offered throughout the year. After school clubs and activities include: Beta Club, Debate Club, Eco Club, athletic teams sporting events and grade level dances.

Several opportunities are offered during the school day as West Pine Middle School recognizes that not all students are available for after school activities. Discovery Clubs, facilitated during the school day by administrators, teachers and community members, offer a range of activities that students can participate in to capitalize on student talents as they explore unique areas of interests. Discovery Club topics range from chess, Math Counts, fitness, stock market simulation, knitting, community service and technology. Students participate in one club each semester, meeting one time monthly. In this arrangement, students who are unable to attend after school clubs are still able to participate in academic competitions. Working lunch and homework help are two programs where students can catch up after absences or receive additional remediation, beyond the already scheduled enrichment and remediation blocks. Students who do not have support at home in the form of help with homework or a quiet place to work enjoy having the time and space at school.

West Pine Middle School is unique in that its staff and many students have lived in various places throughout the world. While the student body does not appear to be culturally diverse, the climate of the school supports appreciating one another and invites students to share the unique qualities each individual brings to the larger school community. Teachers build on the diverse life-experiences of students to integrate into lessons and activities in order to create an accepting culture and a rich educational experience.

Conclusion

In their own way, each of the three schools recognized as *Schools to Watch* in 2008 embody the intersection of academic excellence, developmental responsiveness, social equity, and organizational structure. Kernersville Middle School, Rogers-Herr Middle School, and West Pine Middle School address these criteria in ways that meet the unique needs of their students. In many different ways, they challenge all students to use their minds well and have been successful accordingly. Each of these schools has embraced *Schools to Watch* as a process for growing stronger. To learn more about them and about the Schools to Watch program, please visit these websites:

<http://www.schoolstowatch.org/Home/tabid/80/Default.aspx>

<http://www.schoolstowatch.org/OurCriteria/AcademicExcellence/tabid/120/Default.aspx>

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