



ORCHARD MIDDLE SCHOOL

Principal: Michael Acomb

<http://solonschools.org/>

Solon City School District

Solon, Ohio

Superintendent: Joseph V. Regano

When asked what three factors contributed to the academic success of all students at Orchard Middle School, the principal, Michael Acomb, gave the following response:

“One, we really have a belief that all kids can learn. There’s a feeling that permeates our entire school culture that not only will typically-developing students perform well, but those students with disabilities and those with learning difficulties will also perform at high levels.

“Second is the value we have placed on collaboration between special education teachers and regular education teachers, as well as the collaboration among all the teachers. We know that teachers can make the difference for kids when they have collaborative opportunities to deepen their content knowledge and their understanding of best instructional practices. By doing that together, we are better able to meet the needs of all children, and that strengthens the whole school.

“The third thing that has really helped us is that we are very data-driven. We analyze data on a regular basis and monitor student progress weekly. We look at all the data, including assessments and report cards. For students with IEPs, we look at the data we’ve collected regarding how they are meeting their goals and objectives. We monitor the efficacy of the IEPs, and we monitor the efficacy of our program. We want to see growth in all students.”

Mr. Acomb continues, “I think the main thing contributing to the overall success, not only of our school but the school district as a whole, is that we view ourselves as a K-12 system. The work in each of our grade level buildings builds on the work done in previous grades, so as students progress through our

system, they are prepared for not only the Ohio Graduation Test (OGT), but also for life. They develop the critical thinking and problem-solving skills that they need to be successful in a changing global economy. It is this K-12 system viewpoint that has enabled our school district as a whole to be successful.”

Adding to the overview of the district, assistant superintendent Deborah Siegel describes the Solon City School District as a “learning organization” and the central office staff as being the “leaders of learners.” She talks about the consistency in leadership from the school board down through the system and stresses “the key to the district’s success is commitment and focus. Everyone has the same focus. We’ll do whatever it takes for all children to learn.”

Instructional Leadership

Mr. Acomb states that it is very difficult to balance the differences between being an instructional leader and managing the building. However, his priority is teaching and learning, as it is with other administrators in the district. He explains that it is the goal of the administrators to be available to staff members by regularly walking through classrooms and interacting with students and teachers as instruction or learning is in process. Not only does that help the administrators understand the day-to-day operations of the classroom and the things that the teachers are dealing with on a daily basis, but it also helps to understand the children a little better. This first-hand knowledge is very useful during discussions about how students are learning and when determining what needs to be done to increase performance.

The leadership of all of the teachers is another important factor in the strength of Orchard, according to Mr. Acomb. There is a distributive model of leadership, with each of the content areas in the fifth and sixth grade levels - math, science, social studies, and language arts - having designated teacher-leaders. The teacher-leaders work with district level personnel who are experts in content areas to develop meeting structures and to plan meetings, but the teacher-leaders facilitate the meetings. One interventionist is designated as the leader of the interventionists; she works very closely with the school psychologist

to develop meeting agendas and professional development opportunities geared toward increasing the learning of students with special needs. Mr. Acomb and the teachers believe this distributive model provides real ownership of the operations of the school from a teaching and learning standpoint.

Over the past few years, scheduling for common planning time has been a priority at Orchard. The administration believes that this collaboration is vital in order for teachers to provide a strong education program.

Supporting Student Learning through the Pyramid of Strategies

One way teachers support the learning of all students is through a process called the Pyramid of Strategies, based on the belief that when the best instruction is provided the first time around, students are most likely to succeed. The first level of the Pyramid is to implement best practices in all subjects: language arts, math, science, and social studies.

For those students who don't perform at the levels expected, the next level of the Pyramid is to increase communication with the parents. When teachers see any slide in the performance of a student, the parents are called immediately and the situation is discussed. Often just that initial communication leads to an understanding of what is happening in the student's life that could be contributing to the slipping academic performance, as well as to discuss strategies for improvement. If the child continues to slide, the parent, the student, the teacher and any other specialized personnel relevant to the child's difficulty are brought together to brainstorm solutions. Based on that discussion, the supports needed by the student, both at school and at home, are determined and performance goals are set. Progress is monitored on a three- to five-week basis to determine the efficacy of the intervention. In most cases, this additional intervention provides the support the student needs to make progress. However, if the difficulty continues, another meeting will be held to determine next steps.

Orchard staff members report that the Pyramid process has allowed them to meet the needs of more children than ever before. The teachers point out that working with a student and parents as soon as any difficulty surfaces is a way of preventing a child from getting lost in the shuffle. It holds teachers, parents, and the student accountable for the progress of the student and establishes a strong partnership of people working on behalf of the student.

Data-Driven Decision Making

Mr. Acomb relates that the results of the state tests haven't surprised him or the teachers because they know how their students are performing throughout the course of a school year. Because the instruction and assessments have been aligned to the standards, he and the school staff can reasonably predict how their students will do on the tests. Thus, when the data from the results of the state tests arrive, the first thing that is done is to look for areas that can be celebrated. Mr. Acomb believes that it is vitally important to celebrate successes with the teachers, not only because he realizes that they are the ones responsible for the positive student test results, but also because he counts on the teachers to continue to work hard to maintain and improve that progress.

The next phase is data analysis, where staff members are asked to look at those one or two areas in each content area where performance does not meet expected levels. This data is thoroughly discussed during staff and department meetings, and goals and agendas for the upcoming school year are set collaboratively. During those meetings, individual student data from the previous school year is also considered so teachers are aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the students that are coming into the classrooms for the new school year. Grade level data is also analyzed. For instance, if the data indicates that an entire grade level of students seem to be weak on making inferences, improving that area will be the focus of an instructional program.

The end result is that there are three levels of data-based goals for student progress at Orchard: a school goal, a content area goal, and individual

teacher goals. The goals are monitored, revisited, and adjusted throughout the year.

Mr. Acomb stresses that “Continuous Improvement gets harder and harder every year.” He emphasizes that is why it is so important to be data-driven. Once school

staff members analyze the disaggregated data, the opportunities for growth become more

At Solon, the emphasis is on data-driven partnerships that say to parents, “We know your child. Here’s what we can do to help your child.”
Michael Acomb, principal

apparent. Then it is up to the principal and the district to provide the teachers the tools they need to take advantage of those opportunities.

An important tool available to the staff at Orchard is a data system with an interactive Web site format that was developed by Fred Bolden, the school’s assistant principal. Mr. Bolden reports that his biggest challenge was to figure out just what data the teachers really needed and would find useful. The end result is a system where users can view longitudinal data for each child. In addition to a color photo of each student, the system includes demographic and parent contact information, assessment results from every grade, a list of each student’s teachers, and a history of other information such a discipline events. Data can be sorted in many different ways such as organizing achievement results by standard and Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) scores by class. District common assessments are being incorporated into the system. Mr. Acomb believes that the data program is “a manifestation that each student is an individual,” and the staff members at Orchard agree.

Aligning Curriculum and Assessments

Standards-based standards education for all students is embraced at Orchard Middle School, as it is in all of the Solon City Schools. When the standards were released, staff members immediately analyzed, by content and rigor, both standards and indicators. Now instruction is always linked to the indicators and benchmarks, with every activity related.

When Solon City Schools began making instructional decisions based on data, there was a huge shift away from big summative assessments to a variety of formative assessments before and after learning. Classroom assessments are developed for the end of each unit, with the emphasis on matching the rigor of the assessment to the rigor of indicators. Common assessments that are developed within the clusters are aligned with the curriculum.

The value of the assessments, as told from a student's perspective, follows: "Usually the teachers give us a pre-test to show us what types of questions to expect on the yearly test so we know what to work on. In math they give us common

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A student

assessments. When I saw the state test, I felt prepared because I had seen questions like that before."

Staff members select classroom materials based on their rigor and alignment with the indicators. They note that many lessons on the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) Web site have been written into their units. They note, however, that since the math they use is very conceptually based and constructivist, they felt that the lesson plans pulled from the ODE website were too easy. However, the plans were still of value because they are aligned with the indicators, so staff members could see the design behind them and had a place to start.

Textbooks are rarely used. Trade books are used for many subjects, and real-world texts, rather than basal readers, are used for literacy.

Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities are served in the least restrictive environment; in most cases, that is the regular classroom. Staff members at Orchard say they know that having access to the general curriculum is one of the most important things that can happen for students with disabilities if they are going to make

gains in their academic progress. At Orchard, as well as in the entire district, the goal for students with learning disabilities is to accelerate their learning rather than just getting a year's growth for them. Staff members realize that, in many instances, students with disabilities start out somewhat behind grade level. In order to get students with disabilities to the levels needed, not only do teachers need to have the same high expectations for them as they have for typically-learning students, but in most cases, the expectations must be higher. An acceleration in their learning is needed so at some point in time in their school career, they will be able to close the learning gap that had previously developed for them, and they can begin to perform at the same level as their typical peers. This emphasis on high expectations and the acceleration of learning for students with disabilities led to Orchard being named a School of Distinction.

Inclusion of students with disabilities into the regular classrooms where all teachers hold high expectations for all students is well established at Orchard. Administrators (past and present) continue to facilitate discussions with the regular education teachers, the interventionists, and the school psychologist that good instruction is good instruction, and the instruction needed by students with disabilities is the same as needed by their typical peers. The regular education teachers understand that concept and realize that they have the support of the interventionists and the administration. Mr. Acomb believes that this acceptance by the regular education teachers is a huge part of the success at Orchard. "We all believe all students can learn, so everyone keeps looking for ways to push student performance higher."

A highly collaborative relationship exists in classes where students with disabilities are included and both a regular education teacher and an interventionist teach. The interventionist will sometimes take the lead in lessons, sometimes the supportive role. When it is time to meet in small groups or provide individualized conferences to students, both the interventionist and the regular education teacher are involved. Both types of teachers are viewed as equals, with each having specialized knowledge, strengths, and talents as teachers that are capitalized on for the benefit of all students.

Parent Mentor

An important addition to the Solon City School District is the parent mentor, a person who has the role of working with families of students with disabilities to help them understand and navigate the processes related to special education. For instance, the parent mentor is available to help parents understand the aspects of the Individual Education Plan (IEP) meeting and to provide suggestions on the best way to work with a school team. The district reports that miscommunication has diminished because the parent mentor has succeeded in strengthening their partnerships with parents.

Professional Development

Solon City School District emphasizes to prospective teachers that “teachers work hard here” but also have high levels of support. The district is committed to job-embedded professional development. Every year there is a specific professional development focus that is supported by data. All resources and time are directly related to that focus. This philosophy has proven to support improved results. For example, when data revealed that there was weakness in the use of nonfiction texts, professional development was provided through the language arts cluster meetings, and the students scored much higher the following year.

The district offers a master’s degree program in affiliation with Ashland University taught primarily by district school personnel on the district campus. Based on research and theory that places a huge emphasis on practical application, the whole goal of the master’s program is “learn it in the evening, take it into the class the next day.”

For nine years, there has been a commitment to literacy at Orchard. Every teacher is considered a teacher of reading, since each teaches both literacy and one other subject. During their first year, teachers hired to teach literacy K-8 or English 8-12 are required to take a six-hour class with the Literacy Coordinator in order to establish consistency among literacy programs. New

teachers are also assessed on the technology indicators and are required to take courses from the district technology staff on any weak areas, such as the ability to manipulate a database, set up a spread sheet, develop PowerPoint, etc.

When discussing professional development, Mr. Acomb spoke highly about one particular workshop. “Max Teaching was a workshop that our teachers went to, and it really served our needs well. Over the past couple of years we have been trying to do two things: increase our facility in using nonfiction reading and writing in the content areas, and help ourselves to understand how to best motivate students who may not be engaged with their learning. Through Max Training we realized that the two goals were intertwined. We have worked very hard to learn what those structures are within a classroom that can allow us to better use a nonfiction text in our classes. Teachers are reporting an increase in student engagement and an increase in student motivation.”

Student Behavior

Because the staff members at Orchard believe that overall behavior can make or break a school, they endeavor to talk to students about the kind of environment they would like to have. The staff members remind the students that it is the student’s responsibly to build the kind of school where all are safe and secure, comfortable in making mistakes and putting themselves out there, and taking risks in learning.

On the first day of school every Orchard student receives an agenda book to keep track of daily assignments, long-term projects, quizzes and tests. Included in the front of the book is the Student Handbook with sections titled Orchard Rules, School Dress, Money and Valuables, and Bus Conduct. The purpose of the Handbook is to communicate the expectations for behavior clearly in order to avoid student violations.

Positive behavior is reinforced on a daily basis when students recite the Orchard pledge during the morning announcements. The pledge reminds

students that are they are expected not only to learn but also to realize that when they work hard and do that which is expected on a daily basis, they can learn. It is a way for students to pledge themselves to behaving positively and to working hard on their academic subjects.

A school-wide program called the Good Apple Program reinforces the pledge by using coupons to encourage positive behavior. Teachers present coupons to students who are making good decisions such as helping other students. Students put their names on the coupons and drop them in their team's box for a drawing for prizes held every Friday. Names of winners are read during the morning announcements. The prizes can be notebooks, pencils, bookmarks, candy or even gift certificates to local restaurants – all provided through partnerships established with many members of the Chamber of Commerce. Students are enthusiastic about this program.

Creating a Safe School Climate Program

The issue of bullying is taken very seriously at the fifth and sixth grade levels at Orchard. For all fifth grade students there is a program called Creating a Safe School Environment or CASS. It involves high school students who have been identified as mentors going to Orchard Middle School to work with students. The mentors role-play bullying situations, facilitate discussions to help students identify bullying behavior, and then problem-solve how to get safely away. In addition, the CASS coordinator trains parent volunteers to support the high school students in their efforts.

CASS started out as a program for girls as a way to recognize and deal with the issue of relational aggression, often hidden compared to the physical aggression usually engaged in by boys. The program was expanded to include boys, and male high school students were recruited to be their mentors. Both programs are monitored on an ongoing basis.

Because sixth-graders don't participate in the CASS program, information about a variety of related topics is provided to them through school assemblies

and classroom guidance lessons. Each month the guidance counselors go into classrooms to present a lesson on a topic such as bullying. The counselors are also available during lunch periods and any other time of the day to meet in small groups with students who may be having difficulties with friendships, with adjusting to the school – whatever their concerns might be. The focus of all of the interactions is to help students problem-solve so they can develop the thinking skills they need in order to be independent as they engage in different types of social situations.

Staff members report that they are identifying bullying at a higher rate than they once were because they now have a heightened awareness of the different types of aggression and the impact aggression can have on student learning. Staff members continually work to create an environment where the troublesome situations can be eliminated,

Communication with Parents

The course of study for the year is shared with parents at the beginning of each year during Orchard Curriculum Night. Orchard staff members make ongoing efforts to keep parents informed about the progress of their students. In addition to report cards every quarter, interim reports are sent out at the midway point of each quarter. Hence, parents should never be surprised about the grades on a report card. The communication involved in the Pyramid of Strategies discussed earlier also prevents report card surprises.

Parents are also kept aware of dates when common assessments will be given. When the results of those assessments are sent home, descriptive feedback on how performance can be improved is included, and parents are welcome to meet with teachers about the results.

All of the teachers have the school Web site available where they can post announcements, assignments, test dates, and news about other important events. In addition to being useful for parents, the Web site provides a means for community members to be aware of what is happening in the school.

Culture

The culture of Orchard Middle School is characterized as open, caring, and collaborative. The teachers see the value in working with each other to improve the performance of their students as well as to grow professionally. Parents comment that they value the efforts of the teachers to keep them up to date on the progress of their children and appreciate their willingness to provide extra support to students when it is needed. Students report that their teachers guide their learning by helping them understand how what they are learning relates to the standards, by being open to their questions, and by being willing to help them when they struggle with a subject or topic.

Many parents move to Solon due to the strong overall reputation of the schools, with parents of students with disabilities reporting that they live there specifically because they want their children to benefit from the programs to accelerate the academic progress offered by the schools.

***“My parents moved here
because of the schools.”***
Student with an IEP

School officials report that through their strategic plan, they have a commitment to frequent communication, engaging with the community on an ongoing basis, not just every three or four years when money is needed. The officials also believe that if a great job is being done in the classrooms, parents get that word out and the community will support the schools.

Orchard Middle School Data

SCHOOL PROFILE	
2004-2005 Building Rating	Excellent
Enrollment	827
Grade Levels	5-6
Economically Disadvantaged Students	4.1%
Limited English Proficient Students	1.2%
Students with Disabilities	10.7%
African-American Students	11.6%
Asian or Pacific Islander Students	7.1%
Multi-Racial Students	2.7%
White Students	77.5%

OLON CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT PROFILE	
2004-2005 District Rating	Excellent
District Enrollment	5145

Schools of Distinction

The Ohio Department of Education (ODE) named 21 schools to the first (2004 – 2005) list of Schools of Distinction, celebrating high-achieving schools that have significant numbers of students with disabilities. To make the cut, schools must:

- Have at least 75 percent of students with and without disabilities score proficient or above on a combination of all proficiency, achievement, and Ohio Graduation Tests administered during the past three years;
- Have at least four percent of their students identified as having a disability;
- Serve students of varying disabilities;
- Earn a combined performance index score of 100 or more out of 120 for the most recent reporting period;
- Meet adequate yearly progress (AYP) requirements for the last school year; and
- Not be involved in any investigation that would call their test scores into question.

The 21 schools earning the award during 2004-2005 included nine elementary buildings, one middle school, one junior/senior high school, and 10 high schools located in both large urban and small town settings. At 13 schools, students with disabilities made up 10 percent or more of the student population.