

Site Visit Findings: Harrison School District Harrison Middle School

Site Visit Overview

Harrison School District is located in Boone County in the Ozark Mountains of Northwestern Arkansas. As of 2004-2005, the district served 2,784 students in kindergarten through twelfth grade. The district is dedicated to “inspiring life-long learners” and states that with “our students, their families and our community, we share an uncompromising commitment to excellence for all.” Harrison Middle School, as of 2004-2005, served 397 students in fifth and sixth grades. The mission of the school is “to provide opportunities for all students to become proficient in all academic endeavors” and “will achieve this mission by adhering to best practice research, seeking qualified staff, and delivering the curriculum in an effective and efficient manner.”

Harrison Middle School has effectively implemented state requirements and shows consistent growth. The entire school is dedicated to a teaming approach. The administration and staff of Harrison Middle School are progressive thinkers who regularly attend regional, state, and national conferences and trainings in an effort to provide the best instructional models for students.

Student Demographics: (2004) *The school and district are notably less diverse than the state.*

	Harrison Middle School	Harrison School District	Arkansas
% White	96.5	97.7	70.1
% African-American	0.0	0.1	22.9
% Hispanic	2.8	1.3	5.3
% Other	0.3	0.9	1.7

School Support Services: (2004) *The school and district serve more students through Free and Reduced Lunch than the state.*

	Harrison Middle School	Harrison School District	Arkansas
% Free and Reduced Lunch	47.1	59.4	44.2
% English as a Second Language	0.8	0.2	2.8
% Special Education	N/A	8.8	11.3

Assessments by Grade: *The school has consistently outperformed state averages in 6th grade literacy and math assessments.*

	Harrison Middle School	Arkansas
Literacy % Proficient 2002	55.5	26.0

	2003	50.0	27.0
	2004	62.5	42.0
Math % Proficient	2002	52.6	31.0
	2003	53.1	36.0
	2004	53.8	41.0

Curriculum and Academic Goals

- ✓ The Arkansas State Standards are viewed by the district as a quality guide for curriculum.
- ✓ The school addresses the breadth and flexibility of state standards by working together to identify what they call “power standards.” Power standards are defined by the school as the standards that are most likely to have a positive or negative impact on a child’s measured achievement.
- ✓ The district has recently employed a director to oversee curriculum development. The director works with principals, subject level liaisons, and teachers in vertical and horizontal teams to establish academic goals and timelines. Curriculum-related decisions also involve parents, the community, and the district during the planning of the Arkansas Consolidated School Improvement Plan (ACSIP). Pacing guides are currently being developed by the district.
- ✓ Teachers at Harrison Middle School attended a training session for *Curriculum Mapper* with the district curriculum coordinator, which enabled them to learn about and create curriculum maps. Teachers credit the session with allowing them to see where important content was missing in their curriculum and where topics overlapped. This process allowed them to streamline the curriculum.
- ✓ Test data, state mandates, staff members, and the community inform curriculum revision at the school, and regular revision is a part of the ACSIP process.

Curriculum and Academic Goal Comments

The middle school has a very strong horizontal team in place.
 Experienced Administrator

The district hired a curriculum coordinator last year and I think that has really helped us to come together. We know that in sixth grade language arts, all sixth grade teachers are on the same page, they all have the same student learning expectations, and they’re able to share ideas of how to create curriculum maps.
 Experienced Teacher

The curriculum ties the standards together in a process that allows for meaningful instruction that can be measured in student success.
 Experienced Administrator

Test data and state mandates inform the revision process.

Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building

- ✓ The school views their strong horizontal teaming approach as a major factor for their success. Teachers have common planning time everyday and each meeting is guided by an agenda. They review each others' lesson plans, examine student data, discuss teaching strategies, and consider opportunities for content integration.
- ✓ Principals are officially hired by the school board, but the superintendent oversees the selection process and seeks input from the school staff. Principals are selected based on the perceived needs of the schools. An interview committee is established and prepared questions are used. New principals to the district join a collegial environment where they are encouraged to ask questions.
- ✓ The district provides annual training to principals on fiscal duties, leadership, data disaggregation, parent involvement, and crisis handling. The district seeks input from principals on needed training, and then provides funding and professional development credits to meet the identified needs.
- ✓ Effective principals are retained through a supportive and communicative relationship with the board, opportunities for training and development, and a competitive salary schedule.
- ✓ Teacher selection is primarily the responsibility of the principal, and may involve staff members as is deemed appropriate. When a team loses a teacher at Harrison Middle School, the principal may first consult the team of teachers to see what needs the team has or to see if they know of any teachers that will fit into the team. The interview itself is extensive and includes questions related to pedagogical knowledge, content knowledge, and communication skills. Two interviews typically take place along with a written component before and after the final interview.

Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building Comments

I know that when the principal hired me, it was the most extensive interview I'd ever had.
Experienced Teacher

Without teams, middle schools are going to flounder. With teams that do not function, they may not be any better, so the key is teaming.
Experienced Administrator

We've never been turned down when we asked to work together as a team.
Experienced Teacher

Effective principals are retained by consistent treatment by both the superintendent and the board.
Experienced Administrator

You've got to have that collegiality. You've got to have people working together towards a common goal.

Experienced Administrator

It has always been looked upon favorably for a principal to want to attend high level professional development activities, to come back and make things better.

Experienced Administrator

Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements

- ✓ Students are divided into classrooms as heterogeneously as possible. This helps the teams and the administrator evaluate student performance across the school, and determine what is working and what is not.
- ✓ The school utilizes “Literacy Lab.” Through the program, classrooms become communities of learners using a workshop approach. Emphasis is placed on strategic reading with comprehension instruction, writing instruction, vocabulary instruction, word study, and assessment. The program is currently being piloted and utilized throughout the state and is supported by the Arkansas Department of Education, primarily through regional educational cooperatives.
- ✓ Academic coaches are the newest instructional support mechanism for the school. The academic coaches assist the principal in providing teachers with instructional guidance and have already provided much needed support to the school.
- ✓ At Harrison Middle School, teachers strive for high quality instruction that engages students, meets curricular objectives and frameworks, challenges students at the appropriate level of difficulty, and uses relevant assessments.
- ✓ The school views state and national accountability as having a positive impact on instruction. It has allowed schools to expect higher levels of professionalism from teachers and has improved instruction overall.

Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangement Comments

We’ve even gone so far as to say this: If you’re a math teacher and you’re having a difficult time teaching something, and you’re talking to another math teacher, and they say “Hey, I really do a good job of that,” sometimes I tell them it’s okay to switch for two or three days.

Experienced Administrator

The academic coach is a high-powered instructional leader, like a high-powered assistant principal for instruction and curriculum.

Experienced Administrator

Accountability has ratcheted up the focus on instruction in an unbelievable manner.

Experienced Administrator

It seems like every time we find something really good we want to implement, our principal is there with the funds.

Experienced Teacher

When selecting an instructional program, our curriculum coordinator has us use a standardized rubric. This year, we have implemented into that rubric some ideas that lend themselves toward a standards-based type program: Is the program student centered? Is it investigative? Does it bring out higher level thinking?

Experienced Teacher

Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data

- ✓ The school tries to provide teachers with as much student information as possible in a format that is readily available and easy to use. The school also closely monitors student performance. Teachers are given a “heads-up” and asked to closely monitor students who have shown excessive absenteeism in the past.
- ✓ The district monitors goals at the school and district level primarily through curriculum and instructional program assessment, student test scores, and archival data. Perceptual data are also collected and analyzed to examine parental and community expectations. The district test coordinator, superintendent, curriculum director, and building-level administrators all assist in school and district monitoring.
- ✓ The school measures success as it relates to adequate yearly progress (AYP). The academic coach, counselor, and teachers assist teachers in grade level monitoring.
- ✓ Teacher evaluations are conducted by both scheduled and non-scheduled classroom visits. The number of classroom visits is dependent on teacher experience. The principal frequently visits classroom and focuses on leading by example rather than being overly dependent on teacher evaluation tools. Testing data are not included in teacher evaluations, although test data are regularly analyzed by teacher teams and are viewed as a tool for improvement.

Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data Comments

We try to improve what is working and fix what is wrong by looking at the data.

Experienced Administrator

We try to get as much information into the teachers’ hands as we can.

Experienced Administrator

I try to improve performance by leading.

Experienced Administrator

Data are going to be what drives our instruction. We’re going to start looking at the data more.

Experienced Teacher

Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustments

- ✓ Students are identified for remediation by their performance on state benchmark exams, and are served in intervention classes for 30 minutes per day. Students not needing intervention are placed in enrichment classes. The district also offers an alternative school, which follows well-defined admission criteria.

- ✓ At Harrison Middle School, teacher teams develop plans with parents to prevent grade level retention. If a child fails a course over a 9 week period, teachers are required to meet with parents in order to determine possible causes and develop a plan for intervention.
- ✓ High achieving students are honored at Harrison Middle School, but the school places special emphasis on honoring the achievement and successes of all students. Teacher teams are encouraged to do small recognition programs on their own.

Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustment Comments

For student interventions, we meet with the parents and do an improvement plan to list what the teacher can do, the child can do, and the parents can do.

Experienced Administrator

Influential Factors

- ✓ The school views the Literacy Lab approach as the most effective “school-wide reform effort at HMS in the past three years.” It has been fully in place for two years and students are showing consistent growth in literacy. A challenge to the approach is ensuring that all teachers are properly trained.
- ✓ Challenges for the school and district include dealing with “overwhelming change with finite resources” and trying to instill “standards-based philosophies.”
- ✓ The Harrison School District is supported by the Harrison Public School Foundation. Every fall, the Harrison Public School Foundation awards grants to teachers for creative projects. Last year, Harrison Middle School was awarded between \$8,000 and \$10,000 in grants.
- ✓ Parents of Harrison Middle School students are able to access detailed information about their student’s assignments and homework on-line through the website www.schoolnotes.com. All teacher teams post their daily schedules and several teachers submit detailed information about their class, noting important dates and projects.
- ✓ Harrison Middle School attributes its success to a variety of factors, some include utilizing Carnegie research, via the “Turning Points” model, attention to data, utilization of the entire school day for instruction, double periods for math and the “Literacy Lab” approach, a great staff, strong professional development, and good parent and district support.

Influential Factors Comments

I think the administrator of the school is really good at always challenging us to look at new ways to teach, encouraging us to use best practices.

Experienced Teacher

Priorities at HMS are simple. The priorities are a safe learning environment, learning, and the ongoing creation of a school designed, staffed, developed, and coordinated to serve young adolescents.

Experienced Teacher