
On the Front Lines: How No Child Left Behind Is Affecting Schools

A Profile of the Yough School District Herminie, Pennsylvania



YOUGH SCHOOL DISTRICT

- Superintendent Lawrence J. Nemeck, Jr.
- Student Population: 2,500
- District Grades: K–4; 5–8; 9–12
- Minority Population: Less than 1%
- Students With Disabilities: 12%
- Free and Reduced-Price Lunch: 34%
- Community: Rural

District Snapshot

The Yough School District is located in a rural community about 30 miles from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Once a strong farming community, the villages that the school district serves are now home to a few small manufacturing companies. As a result, many residents commute to neighboring areas for jobs.

The school district includes three elementary schools, one middle school and one high school, and has a superintendent with more than 40 years of experience in the district—as a teacher and administrator. Many families in the community share similar connections to the district, with multiple generations receiving their primary and secondary education in the system.

The district met adequate yearly progress (AYP) targets for the past two academic years after two years on the state’s warning list. Improvement efforts in the district focus heavily on the foundations of any good system: high-quality instructors and high-quality instruction. The use of data and a move toward charting the growth of individual students are key in Yough’s steady push to improve educational outcomes for its students.

Teacher Quality

Yough is in an enviable position: rarely is there turnover in the teaching force, and when a job does open up, it is not unusual to have 300 to 400 applicants. This is partly due to the number of teacher-training programs in the state. In fact, many other states actively recruit teacher candidates from Pennsylvania, notes former Superintendent Paul Rach, who now works for the state as a distinguished educator. It is also due in large part to a strong sense of commitment that permeates the school system. “We have a quality about this district that makes people want to be here,” says Joan Fogg, Principal of West Newton Elementary, one of the district’s schools.

Quality teaching at Yough is judged first and foremost by work ethic, says Superintendent Larry Nemeck, who jokes that he has to chase some staff members out of the building in the summer in order to clean the rooms. “They are very dedicated and caring,” says Nemeck. Teachers in the school district “put in a lot of time beyond

their contract,” Principal Joan Fogg adds. But other factors also contribute to being a good teacher in the classroom, notes Fogg, such as knowing the subject matter, being a good classroom manager and being able to communicate with parents and teachers.

“Going above and beyond” is a theme in this school district, and wearing many hats is just one of the ways the district staff does so. Dr. Fogg, principal at West Newton Elementary, also serves as the district’s co-director of professional development, coordinator of the teacher induction program and coordinator of the curriculum team leaders. “We do an excellent job with limited funds,” says Superintendent Neme. State-mandated mentoring and in-service training help provide teachers with much-needed support, as well as impart new skills and knowledge. The mentoring program is not funded by the state, but the district has been able to offer mentors a small stipend for working with novice teachers (although district leaders report that most mentors never submit a request for

“Our teachers look at each student and adjust their teaching to the style that a particular student really needs in order to learn—they differentiate their instruction.”

—Dr. Joan Fogg, Principal of West Newton Elementary

payment). Pennsylvania also requires teachers to participate in 180 hours of professional development related to the educator’s certificate or area of assignment every five years to maintain certification. The Yough system offers an upfront stipend for continuing education, with a promise from teachers to pass all coursework. Instructors also have access to local and regional in-service programs.

All 165 teachers in the school system meet the highly qualified definition set by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). With such low turnover, and many candidates to choose from when jobs do open up, NCLB’s teacher quality requirements have had little impact on how Yough goes about the business of staffing its schools. State certification also helps to ensure compliance with NCLB and set the bar for a well-prepared staff, requiring teachers to hold a bachelor’s degree in a content area and pass a content-specific test. Coursework in pedagogy and student teaching are also a mainstay of educator training throughout the state. NCLB requirements for paraprofessionals have gone largely unnoticed at Yough, however, because there are no funds to employ teaching aides.

The credentials and commitment of the teaching staff are a priority at Yough, where there is a clear belief in the link between quality instruction and achievement. While many measures were already in place in Pennsylvania and in the district to set the bar for highly qualified instructors, one noticeable change that is a result of NCLB is the use of data by administrators and teachers. Principal Fogg notes that NCLB has moved the district to look at individual student data as a means for improving instruction. Assessment data have provided principals and teachers with an important tool for identifying those students most in need of help and targeting efforts to those students. A great deal of teacher training has already occurred on ways to use data in the classroom to drive change, including the use of the Internet. Efforts are also under way in the system to foster collaboration among staff as a means to improve instruction.

Assessments

Like other districts in Pennsylvania, Yough administers the Pennsylvania System of School Achievement (PSSA), a standards-based criterion-referenced test given to students in grades 3 through 8 and grade 11 in reading and math. Students in grades 5, 8 and 11 are also assessed in writing.

The district also administers two other local assessments. The Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills test (DIBELS) is used to measure early literacy skills in kindergarten through grade 2. The 2006–2007 school year will be only the second year the district will administer the test. The other assessment the district uses is Foresight, developed at Johns Hopkins University, which tests students in grades 3 through 11 to gauge whether the school is on track to meet AYP targets set by the state.

While district administrators are hopeful that the long-term impact of assessment and accountability will be positive, there is concern about how realistic it is to expect proficiency for every student. “At some point every school district is going to come up against a block wall,” says Superintendent Nemeć. The question for leaders at Yough is what happens when the district hits that wall. Part of their answer has been to focus on the growth of individual students. This focus has helped the district target efforts at improving the achievement of students with disabilities. Yet district leaders express the frustration of seeing students achieve some success in the classroom, only to be faced with an assessment that is measuring achievement far above the student’s level.

Another concern among educators at Yough is the impact of assessment on the curriculum. “I think high-stakes testing has created a problem that our emphasis is on reading, writing and math, and other subjects take a back seat,” says Superintendent Nemeć. Fogg also expresses unease with the impact of assessment on the district’s curriculum.

Both Nemeć and Fogg are concerned about the assessment and accountability components of NCLB. Notes Nemeć, “It should provide some accountability, but it should become more realistic.” Fogg agrees: “It is hard to be penalized for trying your hardest when you have some factors working against you.” These factors mainly stem from limited funding, according to district leaders.

Data Systems

The use of data by administrators and teachers in the Yough system is clearly being embraced. Teachers and administrators being trained on how to use data, and they are using it to make changes in the classroom. “We know what we have to do in the classroom by seeing the data,” says Fogg, noting that teachers use assessment results from the previous year to gauge student learning and to target students who need greater attention. Yet the idea of using data to improve learning is not new to administrators and teachers in Yough. “We were doing longitudinal studies before NCLB,” Former Superintendent Paul Rach notes.

“We know what we have to do in the classroom by seeing the data.”

—Dr. Joan Fogg, Principal of West Newton Elementary

State-developed Web sites also aid the district and its teachers in making good use of data; however, “data overload” is becoming challenging as more and more information is made available to teachers and administrators. Fogg feels that schools can make better use of the data by taking the time to examine results

and determine what they mean. To accomplish this, the elementary schools have set aside at least a one-hour period of time every six days to meet as a team and discuss assessment data.

Accountability

District leaders point out that accountability has pushed the system to look at different aspects of each child, instead of just those children with individualized education plans (IEP). As Former Superintendent Paul Rach

notes, standards “force you to be a little retrospective. . . . For a long time when I was in the classroom, you just plowed ahead.” NCLB, Rach adds, “made you speed up your bicycle; you couldn’t coast anymore.”

Accountability is providing Yough teachers with a mechanism for improving learning by helping teachers see what each student needs. Teachers are also more focused on being accountable for what happens in their classroom. Yet district leaders stress the challenges of needing and wanting to make improvements, while being stymied by monetary constraints. “It becomes difficult to do what a larger district, with more money, can do. Some of our parents don’t have money to put gas in their car to pick their kid up from tutoring after school,” notes Fogg. “We need more reading specialists, but we can’t hire them because we don’t have the funding. . . . It is sort of like unfunded mandates.” Administrators are working hard to apply for grants to accomplish some of the tasks, though, especially focusing on extra tutoring and beefing up technology.

AYP targets are also troubling to district officials. “When it’s one small subgroup that causes you to not make AYP, I don’t think that is an accurate measure of school performance,” says Joan Fogg. Larry Nemeec agrees: “They are not looking at what the school systems do, they are just putting a label on things.”

Yough is in a particularly tough position at the high school level, where some students spend part or all of their day at a vocational school. Even though these students are receiving instruction in core subjects like math at the vocational school, the students are being counted in their home school’s AYP figures. District officials feel strongly that problems like these should be fixed to more accurately reflect what is going on in individual schools.

The way schools are measured is also a point of contention. Joan Fogg stresses the importance of measuring the individual growth of the child, as opposed to measuring one group of students against another. “If we can move an individual child ahead, then that should count for something. Right now they’re measuring one group of kids against an entirely different group of kids the next year,” Fogg says. She stresses the importance of research in the area of growth models, calling for studies to examine the course of a child’s educational experience to gauge growth from one year to the next.

School Improvement

The Yough School District met AYP in both 2005–2006 and 2004–2005 after two years on the state’s warning list. Only one of the district’s schools—the high school—did not meet AYP in 2006. Changes in the state’s accountability policy helped to alleviate some of the problems the district faced before the 2004–2005 school year. Now the district is no longer on the warning list as a result of one school’s inability to meet AYP in a single subgroup, says Fogg.

Another change is that students are beginning to take the assessments more seriously, says Fogg, who added that teachers in the school system have noticed a difference in how students are applying themselves on the tests. Fogg also sees more focus on using assessment results in the classroom to determine strategies for improving learning.

Parents are involved in many aspects of school improvement, from parent advisory committees to strategic planning and professional development, say district officials—an observation that community members share. “Parents are engaged and involved in decision-making at the school level,” says Linda Croushore, executive director of the Mon Valley Education Consortium, a community-based education fund that works with the district. “The community is proud of the schools.”

Yet there are difficulties with some parents, especially those who feel unwelcome or uncomfortable in a school setting. Administrators acknowledge the challenges of getting these parents into the schools and engaging them in their child’s education. “We offer tutoring, and the Title I students—the ones that really need to get it—are the ones with a ton of excuses as to why they can’t participate,” says Fogg. To tackle the problem, the school system is trying innovative ways to reach parents, often before the child is even enrolled in the schools, by raising the comfort level of parents with the school, its staff and the goals of education. Through a grant from the local education fund, the district is working with a broad array of stakeholders to target parents of preschool-aged children to help them develop literacy skills.

Some school improvement efforts are stymied by funding constraints. Grants have made some programming possible; however, the district still struggles with daily obstacles to providing the necessary help to some students. “We can’t tutor kids after school if we don’t have the money for buses to get home. . . . We’re in a rural area, so they can’t walk home,” says Fogg.

And while Yough does not currently have any academically low-performing schools, it was clear that leadership and the ability to make necessary changes rank high on the list for turning around low-performing schools. District leaders believe that in the short term, AYP targets are driving school improvement; however, the long-term effects of how AYP measures success are unknown. The goal, say Nemec and Fogg, should be to ensure that each student is improving as he or she moves through the system.

Other Components of an Effective Education System

The district is moving full-steam-ahead on school readiness, offering full-day kindergarten in one of the elementary schools for the first time. The other elementary schools currently offer half-day programming. The district is also testing the waters with the use of the Metropolitan Readiness Tests (MRT), which are designed to assess the development of the cognitive skills necessary for success in beginning reading and math.

The push for an increased focus on school readiness grew out of a concern that children were not prepared to enter elementary school. “We did a pre-K assessment of all our children enrolling, and we found that we had fewer and fewer kids entering at the level that was appropriate,” says Former Superintendent Paul Rach. “We had kids that didn’t know their colors,” adds Rach. Teachers began conducting their own assessment of what entering kindergartners should know and be able to do, and with the supporting data began programming targeted to disadvantaged students. Next steps involve gathering data and comparing the full-day program with the half-day program, says Fogg.

In all, Yough administrators have seen some positive changes as a result of No Child Left Behind. Yet there is a strong sentiment that the federal government and NCLB need to focus on measuring students individually and on providing the funds needed to make improvements.

MISSION STATEMENT OF THE YOUGH SCHOOL DISTRICT

The mission of the Yough School District is to provide an equal educational opportunity for each student to become a productive member of a pluralistic society and to reach his or her fullest potential. Our resources will be used to create and sustain a caring environment that promotes quality education and provides:

- Positive student self-esteem and pride in accomplishments
- Development of communications and analytical skills
- Lifelong learning habits and skills
- Respect for oneself and the environment in which we live

About the Commission

The bipartisan, independent Commission on No Child Left Behind is examining the strengths and weaknesses of the No Child Left Behind Act and will make concrete and realistic recommendations to Congress, the Administration, state and local stakeholders, parents and the general public to ensure the law is an effective tool in spurring academic achievement and closing the achievement gap.

In seeking to accomplish its mission, the Commission is guided by these principles:

1. All children can learn and should be expected to reach high standards.
2. Accountability for public education systems in the United States must improve to enable students to excel.
3. The achievement gap between disadvantaged students and their non disadvantaged peers must be eliminated to ensure that all children have the opportunity to succeed.
4. Education results for all students must improve in order for the United States to remain competitive in the global marketplace.
5. Parents have a right to expect their children to be taught by a highly qualified teacher. Teachers have the right to be treated like professionals, including access to sound working conditions and high quality preparation and ongoing professional development opportunities.
6. Education reform must be coupled with additional resources, but federal, state, and local resources must be used more efficiently and effectively to ensure results in return for the increased investment.

The Commission on No Child Left Behind is funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, the Joyce Foundation, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Carnegie Corporation of New York, and the Spencer Foundation. This document is published to communicate the results of the Commission's work. The findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in the Commission's documents are entirely those of the author(s) and should not be attributed in any manner to the donors.