

Ravenswood Middle School

A Family-Oriented Learning Community

Ravenswood (WV) Middle School is located on a quiet residential street, adjacent to the high school, the town library, and a community park in the small town of historic Ravenswood, WV (population 3,900). The unassuming exterior of the building belies the school's record of continued academic growth and achievement and the warm, caring environment that it provides for the 344 middle school students in grades 6–8. The school has made adequate yearly progress for four consecutive years and was recognized as a West Virginia Exemplary School in 2006, 2007, 2008, and 2009. In addition, it was recognized as an Blue Ribbon School in 2008.

The key to Ravenswood's success becomes apparent within a few minutes of entering the building. Students, parents, community members, and graduates consistently confirm that the teachers care about and treat every student as an individual. When asked what makes Ravenswood stand out from other middle schools, a group of eighth-grade students agreed with the assessment of a peer who said, "It's the teachers—they know us as individuals and care about each of us." The district's director of elementary and middle schools concurred, "Ravenswood addresses the needs of the whole child; they do whatever it takes to help their students succeed." A school board member—a former principal in the district—expressed the belief that students respond to that caring when he said, "This is a Cadillac school; students want to go to school here."

Principal Gary Higginbotham and Assistant Principal Sharon Carroll have worked with the staff and the community to establish a culture that exemplifies a family-oriented professional learning community. Teachers have a daily 45-minute team time built into their schedule—a best practice that many middle schools have had to abandon because of budget and staff cuts—that is used to focus on student success. Teachers use this time to update a daily homework hotline that parents can use to keep track of assignments; to manage and





Ravenswood students receive individual attention from caring teachers.

track data for the schoolwide positive behavior support system; to analyze data on student progress; to hold meetings with students and parents regarding school progress; and on occasion, to develop interdisciplinary units.

As the staff members look back over the past five years, they are not surprised by the number of changes, adjustment, and special programs they have introduced and supported. Their goals have held and continue to hold constant, but they know that there is always more to learn and improve on as they work together as a community to support, stretch, and reach out to meet the needs and increase the learning of every single student. Teachers are able to nurture each student's potential by providing a solid foundational network of support that contains no cracks.



Never Accept Failure

The best piece of advice Principal Gary Higginbotham can give to other principals as they work toward school improvement is to assess their program's strengths and weaknesses, formulate a plan, and continue on course.

Never accept failure as an option as you create a culture that breeds success. After becoming principal at Ravenswood, I was informed that our students would never achieve adequate yearly progress. The administrators and faculty and staff members internalized that statement as a personal challenge and made achieving adequate yearly progress a professional goal. We created a culture to help our students embrace success. We became proactive in our strategies because we wanted to be leaders of change.

Collaborative Leadership

Leadership is shared with all stakeholders. Grade-level team meetings are built into the schedule, which enables grade-level teachers to collaborate each day. That 45-minute time is in addition to individual planning periods. During team time, teachers can meet with students and parents, discuss common discipline and curriculum issues, meet with administrators, and also serve as the student assistance team for their grade level. In addition, cross-grade-level department meetings are held with administrators to discuss curricula and schoolwide issues.

A local school improvement council made up of faculty members, parents, and community leaders has also been established. The council meets quarterly to discuss school issues, improvement, and successes. Teachers also serve on county textbook committees, giving input into textbook selection.

Many teachers are involved in leadership roles countywide: some have served as mentors for beginning teachers and others as subject-based teacher facilitators for all 13 schools in the county. Teachers have also presented sessions on differentiated instruction at state-level conferences, and recently, one of our teachers conducted two 1-hour workshops with the staff after attending a weeklong Ruby Payne training.

Ravenswood students are also encouraged take leadership responsibilities in the school. The Natural Helpers program—in which students are given two-day intensive training on conflict resolution and peer mediation—currently involves more than 35 students. Natural Helpers are also given leadership responsibilities throughout the school year.

Student Supports

It is our goal to serve all of our students. Programs are in place to meet the academic needs of those who struggle. Tutoring is offered to all students each morning and afternoon, and specialized math tutoring is also offered one day a week. Many teachers voluntarily give up their

lunchtime to meet with students in need, and an advisor-advisee program offers students a chance to meet with staff members in small groups to discuss the issues our students face.

During the day, we operate a one-of-a-kind program called West Virginia Achieves, a proactive approach to No Child Left Behind. Two retired teachers were hired to work with students who demonstrate skill gaps and scored below the Mastery level in reading and language arts or mathematics on the state's standardized test. Students attend two 45-minute sessions each week for intensive remediation in the areas of deficiency. The West Virginia Achieves teachers collaborate with classroom teachers to determine instructional goals for the week. The program has been recognized as a West Virginia Exemplary Program by the state department of education.

In addition to after-school tutoring, Ravenswood also offers a latch-key program called Patch 21, which meets two afternoons a week and provides students with an after-school snack followed by a series of enrichment activities, such as guitar lessons, calligraphy practice, newspaper production, computer games, physical activities, and many more. Attendance in this program has continued to grow each quarter.



Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

The leadership team explains how everyone keeps the focus on student achievement.

West Virginia's Instructional Content Standards and Objectives form the core of developmentally appropriate programs and services at Ravenswood. Academic core classes and exploratory related arts classes provide a rich, challenging curriculum, and higher-level math and English classes are available. Remediation is provided daily in academic classes, reading labs, social studies and science labs, basic skills labs, West Virginia Achieves classes, and before- and after-school tutoring sessions.

Each grade-level group of teachers operates as an interdisciplinary team. At the sixth-grade level, a team of five full-time teachers and one half-time teacher delivers core subjects daily. A parallel block schedule with three academic blocks of 90 minutes and two 40-minute blocks for exploratory related arts provides the best method of covering required content areas for the sixth-grade curriculum. In both seventh and eighth grades, two teams of five teachers deliver the core curriculum in five 55-minute periods. These students also have two 50-minute periods for related arts or exploratory classes rotating every nine weeks. Students choose a 27-week focus class in one of the related arts areas. This focus may be in choral music, band, advanced art, physical fitness, computer applications, or agricultural science.

Learning-focused instructional practices are implemented schoolwide to improve student learning. Every day in every class, teachers reteach, make connections to prior knowledge, preview, and review content and skills. Then they do the same things in tutoring sessions before and after school. Essential questions are recorded in teachers' plans, on boards, and in student notebooks. Vocabulary word walls are in every classroom. The link between vocabulary development and reading for understanding is reinforced constantly. Most core classes and some related arts classes require notebooks

for maintaining notes in an organized, coherent manner. Not only does this practice support content, but it also provides practice in organizing thoughts for writing. Graphic organizers aid in teaching students how to organize information for more efficient study.

West Virginia Achieves is a vital part of our curriculum delivery. Students meet twice a week with those teachers during their related arts time to receive the additional help. Teachers in collaborative inclusion classes share teaching responsibilities and provide modifications as needed. Students in those classes often receive double doses of instruction when they report to a small-group reinforcement session with a special educator following initial large-group instruction.

Our school improvement process is driven by multiple methods of assessment that provide data about individual student's progressive achievement, grade-level and course curriculum strengths and weaknesses, program effectiveness, and progress toward meeting state goals. At the beginning of each school year, teachers and other staff members examine state test results to identify students at each grade level who are not achieving at the Mastery level. Using those data, classroom records, and teacher recommendations, students are referred to the West Virginia Achieves program or a collaborative class. Individual plans are developed for students on the basis of their specific weaknesses to help them master the West Virginia standards.

Teachers use assessment data for each class period to determine any general class weaknesses. Instruction is planned to address the areas of weakness from the previous grade-level curricula as well as to address the standards for the current grade level. This process of reviewing data, planning effective instructional strategies, teaching, assessing, and reteaching is an ongoing practice at Ravenswood. **PL**

Ravenswood Middle School

Principal

Gary Higginbotham



Grades

6–8

Enrollment

356

Community

Rural

Demographics

98% White, 1% Black, 1% Asian/Pacific Islander; 53% free and reduced-price meals eligible



Key Elements

- Professional learning community
- Data-driven instructional goals set three times a year
- Tutoring before and after school
- Daily team meetings
- Curriculum committee
- Grade-level teams
- West Virginia Achieves
- Collaborative teaching
- Grab 'n Go snack break
- Ninth period for reteaching, catch up, and reading
- Related arts rotations to enable students to explore skills and interests
- Local school improvement council



Meeting Individual Needs

Sometimes it takes an additional effort to meet the needs of all students. Nourishment may be needed in the form of emotional support, academic assistance, safety, or even food, and Ravenswood has developed ways to meet all of those needs.

Feeding the Mind

“You can’t teach a child until you learn them.” This statement from one of the retired teachers who run the West Virginia Achieves program emphasizes the attention that Ravenswood places on the individual. Developed collaboratively by teachers and two retired educators, this program focuses on students who fall into the gray area—those who are capable but have gaps in their learning. Twice a week, identified students are pulled from physical education or a related arts class to receive targeted instruction in language arts or mathematics. Teachers credit this program for making a difference in student success.

A newly added ninth period is designed to give students time to reflect on and manage homework assignments, receive additional instruction, build literacy fluency and skills, make up for missed work, and work on schoolwide initiatives. This year, teachers and students are working in advisory groups to learn about and apply Stephen Covey’s *Seven Habits of Highly Effective Teens* in the academic setting as well as to their personal lives to become more responsible for their own growth and learning.

Patch 21 is an enrichment program for latch-key students who need direction and after school supervision. This program is community-run and funded by a 21st century school grant program. A variety of mini-courses are offered after school and many Ravenswood teachers participate as instructors and encourage designated students to participate. Regular attendance at this program was 90 students last year.

Feeding the Body

Picture this: a grade-level team of students is brought to the cafeteria by their teachers; some sit on one side of the room to visit and others go through a line to choose a mid-morning breakfast, then sit to enjoy the meal. At a signal from a teacher, everyone gets up, tosses their trash, and goes back to class—all within 10 minutes.

Called Grab’n Go, it is another unique program that was designed by Ravenswood to meet the needs of growing adolescents. The program was developed after teachers consistently remarked that students tended to be more disruptive and less focused during the middle of the morning. Working with the cafeteria staff, they created a program whereby each grade level team is scheduled to take their students to the cafeteria for a snack break. The cafeteria provided a mid-morning breakfast that students can purchase or receive as an alternative to the before-school breakfast that is offered for those who receive free and reduced-price lunch.

Teachers provide supervision and feel that the program is worth it. Data collected by the school indicates that when this program was initiated, not only did the number of breakfasts that were served jump dramatically, but test scores increased as well.