Report on Union City

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New Jersey is nationally recognized for high student achievement among all categories of students. “Taking student demographics into account, New Jersey was the highest-achievement state in the nation by 2007.”¹ These results largely came about after the New Jersey Supreme Court Abbott II decision,² a “sort of a Magna Charta for urban schoolchildren.”³ Nevertheless, closing the achievement gap has been elusive for most of the Abbott districts.

According to Acting Commissioner of Education Cerf, “New Jersey ranked 50th out of 51 states (including Washington, D.C.) in the size of the achievement gap between high- and low-income students in eighth grade reading.”⁴ It is not that New Jersey disadvantaged students did poorly, but that non-minority students have improved as well. In fact, “Black and Latino students in New Jersey now outperform virtually all their peers in other states on national assessments; only black fourth graders in Massachusetts and Latino students in Florida do better.”⁵ Minority students just could not keep up with the gains with their fellow students. Ironically, it was the of success of all schools bringing up all the state's students that produced the second widest achievement gap in the nation. It is noteworthy that New Jersey

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¹ Linda Darling-Hammond’s The Flat World and Education: How America's Commitment to Equity Will Determine Our Future (Teachers College Press). P 122
² Abbott v. Burke, 119 N.J. 287, 386 (June 1990)
⁵ Gordon MacInnes, Schoolyard showdown: N.J. Gov. Christie criticizes giving urban districts so much aid. He should visit Union City, New Jersey Star-Ledger, February 20, 2011
schools were the fourth most segregated in the nation in 2000, yet minority students have improved on par with the non-minority schools.

In order to help close the achievement gap in all districts, the department of education will be setting up seven field-based Regional Achievement Centers (RACs) that will work with failing schools in 2013. Lakewood High School was listed as a priority school by the New Jersey Department of Education, a school that will come under the closest scrutiny. Priority school will implement the following eight turnaround principles to improve student performance:

1. School climate & culture
2. Principal leadership
3. Quality of instruction
4. Quality of standards-based curriculum, assessment, intervention system
5. Effective use of data to improve student achievement
6. Effective staffing
7. Academically-focused family & community engagement
8. Redesigning school time

These principles were adopted largely from the experience of Union City. Union City is the one Abbott district that significantly narrowed the achievement gap. The district has made great progress over the last nine years, lead by Superintendent Stanley Sanger, Assistant Superintendent Silvia Abbato, and Educational Director John Bennetti. HSPA proficiency went from 35-40% for the general population, excluding special education, to 75-80% for the total population, including special education, under their leadership. The administration worked closely with the state to help it develop the new RAC program that Lakewood High School will be using.

Success in Union City came though hard work, collaboration, and continuous monitoring. The team worked out the eight principles customized to the needs of Union City through experimentation, continuous improvements and refinements of that which worked, while discarding that which did not show success.

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7 Found at: http://www.state.nj.us/education/reform/PFRschools/Priority-Focus-RewardSchools.pdf

8 Found at: http://www.state.nj.us/education/rac/
Teachers, in general, have a tendency to pour through a curriculum and to fly through a pacing guide. Union City discarded courses driven by covering ground in favor of a climate driven by data, collecting, disseminating and acting upon its analysis to meet the state standards. It focuses on the “big ideas” of each discipline like the concept of ratio in mathematics. It does not just simply use test results as a cut-off for determining which students need to take a remedial course or for placement, but for continuous intervention. Each individual class is wrapped around the data, which is constantly updated. Instruction is then tiered to determine the appropriate instruction for each student. Classes are broken into three groups and those groups are constantly regrouped. Instruction is differentiated among the three groups in each class.

The Union City program is built on four principles: 1) solid curriculum, 2) good profession development, 3) constant formative assessment and 4) getting teachers involved. The central office team, the forerunner of the RAC, visits every school in the district at announced intervals, every month or so, to look at the implementation plan in each school for intervention and regrouping of students resulting from the data analysis, so that each school would not be on its own.

The district is 95% Latino, more from the Dominican Republic than from Mexico or any other country. The district uses the Point of Entry program, an online program given in their native language, to identify where students stand academically when they enter the school. This assessment tool is used for students who might have had little formal schooling in their native country. Then student interests are identified. For example, if a 15 year-old student found to be on a first grade reading level is interested in sports, then he is given a book about sports on a lower reading level, rather than a first grade book made for little children. The district maintains a library of high interest books written on different levels to intervene with immigrant children. The list of books is classified and included in the curriculum.

The district focuses on WHOTS, Writing Higher Order Thinking Skills. Every class has to spend at least 40 minutes a week on having students write, expressing
themselves, under timed conditions and using a rubric. All departments collaborate with language arts.

The district uses a standardized assessment in every grade. It uses the data to intervene with students so that student deficiencies are made available to the teachers. Say, for instance, the standardized test showed that students did poorly in number sense, the curriculum for next year would be modified to work on that one cluster.

The district also uses a lot of local district benchmarking, every 8 to 10 weeks. It is a multiple-choice test fed into a modern ScanTron that spews out data about which questions are missed. These district assessments are aligned to the state standards to modify curriculum which is scoped and sequenced to the standards.

On September 1, all teachers are given the reports from the most recent standardized test for all students in their class. The high school buys the full battery offered by NJ Ask to be used in every grade. The package includes a breakdown of scores into clusters for each student. Reports are disclosed to teachers and they are shown how to use them. The teachers analyze the patterns in the data. How should the classes be grouped? Groups are refined after the first when the teacher gives his or her first assessment. Coaches help teachers in the grouping. Additionally, course supervisors meet with teachers every week to help in the process. They give them mini-lesson to help teachers with ideas as how to present material to one group or another in different way depending upon what the data indicates. They then modify the curriculum electronically to help implement the results of the data and speak with teachers on intervention.

The first impression I got when I drove up to Union City High School was seeing students of color walking tall, holding their heads up, and radiating with self-esteem. There was no “gangsta” dress or pants down to the knees. Students carried an aura of confidence, a happy demeanor, respectful and beaming with pride.

The high school is located in a brand new $174 million building. It houses 2,400 tenth, eleventh and twelfth grade students. The ninth grade is in a separate building, in bridge academy. The district wants to acclimate students to the rigor of secondary school before bringing them into the rough and tumble of the big school.
Studies have found that ninth grade is a critical year in determining whether a student will finish school. "Nationally, more than one-third of the students lost from the high school pipeline failed to move from 9th to 10th grade."\(^9\)

Union City puts a lot of effort on early continuous monitoring and intervention by teachers, administrators and social workers. The drawback for Mr. Bennetti, the long time central office Educational Director and turn-around specialist, and now with the second role as the principal of the high school, is that he has only had three years to work on each student after they come into his building.

Mr. Bennetti has a strong reputation as a point man on transforming failing schools. His methodology, fitting for the district, is driven by data. Like the rest of the district, he uses assessment and its data for grouping students and tailoring instruction. For example, in an Algebra II class, the NJ Ask battery would indicate how the whole class did in each section of the previous course and how well each individual student did. The district benchmark assessments and the classroom teacher’s traditional assessments are also broken into the clusters and individual questions to help with intervention. Once a week, every class will work on a HSPA open-ended skill.

The teachers, supervisors and administrators live and breathe by the data. The school has a dean of discipline. Additionally the high school has six vice-principals, each assigned a “house” of 400 students. The vice-principals are in charge of attendance and other issues that arise with each student. They keep data on attendance and tardiness and then collaborate. If one house has exceptional attendance or behavior, as indicated by the data, he discusses with the other vice-principals what he did or how the success was accomplished. Needless to say, they use an electronic caller to parents when students are not in school or not in a class. Each “house” has social workers and guidance counselors, together with the vice-principals, who call the individual students into sessions to monitor their achievement.

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\(^9\) Sterling C. Lloyd, Ninth Grade is Key in Graduation Pipeline, Ed. Week, October 2, 2007
The high school has all kinds of social supports. ESL is used to bridge students into mainstream. The administrative supervisor for each subject is in-house rather than for the whole district. Unlike department coordinators, subject supervisors are not expected to count textbooks or guard the key to the storage room, but to serve as instructional leaders. They are the link between the program and the teachers. They spend six minutes in each classroom every day, as an almost constant presence, and attend meetings in which teachers discuss how they intervened and how they presented material to each group based on the data.

The supervisors know what is good teaching and what is not. They know best practices and help teachers in grouping and regrouping their classes. They help build the instructional capacity of the staff. Once the data indicates need for remediation for a group of students, they work with the technical staff to make professional development and electronic programs for the students to use. Professional develop is a constant every week or so, and is planned only after the weekly analysis of the data and is coordinated with the teachers.

The most important difference between Union City and all other schools is the abandonment of textbook driven curriculum. This is now required in all priority districts. Supervisors do not even look at the textbook when they write the curriculum, which is constantly updated, again driven by data. The principal and senior teachers and administrators know what will be asked on the HSPA and the curriculum is designed to build those skills.

The district maintains an electronic database of problems. It formerly posted their unique curricula on the internet, but now that scores of districts are required to do what they discovered, as districts all over new Jersey would copy their documents, they stopped posting the material to preserve their proprietary rights. Lessons are designed with cores to them as follows: How is the lesson introduced, how will the teacher know what students understand, and closure, how the ideas were synthesized. Data, good instructional support in the building and strong instructional leadership capacity make the high school into a success.

Teachers traditionally are content driven. Culture and climate in Union City High School have shifted to data driven decision making in which the student is at the
center. Collaboration is cultivated among the staff and faculty. These are twenty-first century cornerstone sills, so students have a long-term interest in seeing this kind of collaboration, and collaborating among themselves in the classroom to help them achieve in high school.

Administrators traditionally tend not to get involved in classes that might be difficult for them. Say, a teacher is teaching calculus. Few administrators are conformable talking to the teacher. But, if the focus is on delivery, they can report back to a teacher about his or her delivery and try to assists in different ways of teaching.

Lessons cannot be presented in cookie-cutter fashion and the status quo is insufficient, especially with ELL students. Supervisors start looking into the beliefs of the teachers. They ask why do kids fail? Students are given rubric exemplars and there is complete transparency in what is expected. Every few week, supervisors will concentrate on different activities, such asking question, holding discussion activities and making a word wall.

Lessons are tailored to student need. Although supervisors constantly assess staff and help to build them up, it is the teachers who are pulling the train. There are HSPA classes after school and peer tutoring by honors students, not just Seniors in PALS, but students who have excelled in a subject area. They are given students to tutor. What is important is not the data, but what you do with it. The data tells teachers how to target instruction. Assessments give the teachers previews of how their students will do on the NJ Ask and ultimately on the HSPA.

Teachers cannot wait until next year for the results from the standardized NJ Ask. That data comes in too late and can only be used for grouping and instruction over the summer and next year. The district uses data from its own benchmark. For example, at the end of January, an assessment is given based on that which might be taught in February, and over that which was taught since the last assessment. Thus, the assessments include problems not yet taught in addition that that which was already taught. Students are told that the material will be covered later on. Teachers are given lists of class percentages for each standard and questions answered correctly, and data on each individual student. The whole class is
regrouped after the next district assessment eight to ten weeks later. Data is hand delivered to teacher, emailed, and posted on a central district database. Teachers give their routine assessments and quizzes to modify the regrouping the students. Student are also placed into after school programs funded by the Supplemental Educational Services grants. They are given extra points, up to ten, on their grade average from attendance in this program. The after-school program is rigorous and is not used for an ad hoc homework help or drop-by help session. It is data driven with specific curriculum and goals.

The curriculum does not follow textbooks. In fact, Union City has done away with the reliance upon textbooks, which are now secondary and part of a wide range of instructional material. The curriculum is scoped and sequenced to the state core curriculum standards in each subject, going through them one-by-one. The curriculum has four components, core, bilingual, special need, and enrichment for highest achieving students. The curriculum includes sample problems for each of the components. Teachers design their lessons for the three groups in their classes

The bilingual curriculum involves teachers giving students problems by explaining the meaning of words in open-ended questions. As students get used to the kind of questions they need to answer HPSA style questions, they become more familiar with the vocabulary needed to help them pass the math section of the HSPA and need less support.

Algebra I material is introduced in sixth grade and all students take pre-Algebra in seventh grade. Smart Boards have been found to be especially conducive for ELL students, as the imagery has enhanced their understanding.

The model of Union City High School should be examined to enhance the success of Lakewood High School. “More than 90 percent of Union City’s 11,600 students are eligible for free- or reduced-price lunch.” However, Union City is made up of a community of residents and business of the same demography as the public schools. This is important because the “districts where Latino students preformed best tended to be those where Latinos has significant political influence. . . . Newark,

Elizabeth, and have visible Latino leadership at the school board and city level and have the highest levels of English-language learner proficiency (55 percent, 48 percent, and 58 percent respectively.)” Lakewood, of course, has a completely different community than Union City. Although 80% of Lakewood students are Hispanic, their parents make up a small minority of the Lakewood community and have almost no political, economic or social power or influence. Public school students in general make up only 18.5% of school children in town.

But in other ways, Lakewood is similar to Union City. The mayor of Union City is an influential member of the New Jersey Senate. Senator Stack, or any political player in New Jersey, recognizes the clout that Lakewood carries in Trenton. Anyone familiar with Lakewood High School realizes that we are already doing the PLCs, collaboration, data analysis and most everything mentioned in the report. We have revamped our curricula so that they are not driven by the textbooks. Curricula are now written and modified constantly, with eyes closed to the textbooks. But this is new, only recently introduced by state requirements. Coordinators should continue in each department, but we have to replace their leadership with administrative salaried supervisors in the building. We should use the SIG money to buy some of the data and intervention programs that will allow us to tier our students in the classroom so that they can be broken into groups and teacher have as many means of delivery as possible. We have to buy the full battery NJ Ask. We have to set up district user-friendly databases. Most importantly, we have to lobby the state to remove the cap on superintendent salary so we can get the right leader. Although we are a district of 5,000 students in the public schools, the cut-off for waiver of the cap, the superintendent is charge of a board that is

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12 When speaking to former governor Richard Cody last month at Rutgers, who probably will be running for governor, he told me of the ability of the town to deliver “50,000 votes” to a single candidate. Lakewood political leaders need to use this clout to get the Department to waive the cap on superintendent salary so that we attract people like those who have made Union City a success to our troubled district.
responsible for the welfare of 27,000 children and perhaps has the most difficult and challenging job in New Jersey. With the right leadership and a change in the political climate of “us-against-them,” we can achieve for all of our children.