

Just 20 minutes east of New York City, the Howard T. Herber Middle School is an old-fashioned neighborhood school: all its students walk, often after dropping their younger siblings off at elementary school. Built in 1932 as a junior-senior high school, it is part of the tiny Malverne Union Free School District, with two elementary schools (about 275 students each) and a single high school of about 550 students. The resulting intimacy means, says Principal David Zimbler, “There is no child who we don’t know—his or her family, issues, home situation.”

#### Howard T. Herber Middle School Malverne, NY

537 students, 5-8

African American	65%
White	22%
Hispanic	11%
Asian	1%
Students receiving free/ reduced price lunch	38%
Students receiving SPED services	20%
Limited English Proficiency students	1%
Student teacher ratio:	11:1
Student turnover rate	9%

### Self Reflection

“Self reflection at all levels” is the key practice at Herber, says the deputy superintendent. At the heart of the school’s self reflective practice are structured (unannounced) observations of teachers, conducted twice a year by department heads and at least once annually by Principal Zimbler. The deputy superintendent observes the department chairs.



Non-tenured teachers are observed 6 to 7 times a year, and teachers also engage in peer-to-peer observations and coaching. A form of ongoing professional development, the observations are not evaluative, but analytical, seeking evidence of student learning and significant impact. Following the observation, the observers and teachers confer to debrief, offering reflections, asking questions. “Everyone is a coach; everyone is a teacher,” Zimbler says.

The district’s deputy superintendent mentored Zimbler in observation, modeling effective observation for him and sitting in on and critiquing conferences he conducted. She was herself trained under an “excellent superintendent” in

New York City and subsequently published a book on “supportive supervision.” A state-granted teacher center in the district offers additional professional development, with in-service credits.

During an observation of a fifth grade English Language Arts class, Zimble looks for “the Middle School Factor. Their attention spans are not long, so activities need to shift every 7 or 8 minutes.” He takes notes for his post observation

conversation, using a set of questions that are now second nature: “Did I see student thinking, engagement? What was the springboard to the engagement? How do we know that the child has learned?” During the conference, Zimble asks the teacher pointed



questions, “Why did you do that? What was the thinking behind it? What else could you have done?” If a useful resource comes to mind, he gets it for the teacher. His posture, he says, is, “How can I help you be the best teacher you can be?”

The observations seem to nourish the teachers. “I am always hungry for professional dialogue. Their support and guidance have made me the teacher I am,” says one teacher. Zimble conducts about two observations a week, as well as quick walkthroughs looking for specific things. A former teacher, he has not lost his passion for teaching, and willingly covers for absent teachers. “I try to teach at least every two weeks,” he says, adding that, “teachers respect that too.”

### Tightly Constructed Lesson Plans

In every class, teachers record the day’s goal and tasks on the blackboard. In a fifth grade ELA and Social Studies class studying the Civil War, for example, next to DO NOW, the teacher has written, “Write all the facts you know about the Underground Railroad.” Under AIM she has written, “How does the use of strong verbs make writing peaceful and memorable?”

Once the students—there are seventeen—are all seated, the teacher moves quickly into a book about the Underground Railroad, prompting students with questions like “What do you think this book is going to be about?” and affirming their responses with remarks like, “good; there you’re taking it from the literal to the figurative” and, “you’re so smart I can’t stand it!”

She reads through the section titles quickly and the students note that they all end in **ing**: “What part of speech is that?” To the tune of “Yankee Doodle,” the class sings a song about classifying nouns and verbs, then the teacher hands out copies of the books with instructions for small teams of students to find and record the verbs. Prompted by the teacher, a student offers “loudly” as a verb. “Loudly is a lovely adverb but is it a verb?” she asks, before steering the student to an actual verb.

By table, students read the book chorally while the other students raise their thumbs every time they hear a verb. “Find strong verbs; they really paint a picture in your head,” the teacher urges. “Imagine you’re writing your college essay, or an AP test. You will want to use really strong verbs.”

## High Expectations

High expectations for all students is now standard at Herber. All students are expected to go to college and the high school grants very few IEP, or special education diplomas: every student must graduate with either a Regents Diploma or Regents Diploma with Distinction. Teachers begin talking about AP classes in 5<sup>th</sup> grade, and each year the number of AP classes increases exponentially. “We want to stretch the kids,” says the district superintendent, who has seen former middle school special education students doing honors work at high school. “We want every child to take an advanced class in middle school. We’ll provide help if necessary.” Adds a fifth grade teacher, “It’s all about access and equity.” If a student wants to pursue robotics, for example, the school finds a way. “We can’t say no to a child who wants to do something.”

## Walking the Talk

Around Herber, people say, “If you want to talk with Mr. Z, you have to walk with Mr. Z,” and Zimble and his assistant principal are in near constant motion. A warm “good morning” or quick “congratulations, heard about your math test,” or reminders to store hats and coats in their lockers gives students a sense of belonging and being



cared for. Zimbler seems to know every student and where he or she should be, and is quick to ask, “Why aren’t you in math class?” To a student running through the hall he murmurs, “Take your time, sweetie.”

He is also concerned about the secretaries, teachers, hall monitors, and security guards. A believer in “no wasted moments” he urges a teacher to get certified in administration when they pass each other in the hall, and it is not unusual for him to check in quickly with the guidance counselor about a student as he makes his rounds. Discreetly, he picks up litter as he roams the school. His approach rubs off on others. The security guards, who note that “We didn’t have a principal like Mr. Z when we were in school,” go out of their way to show the students they care, organizing basketball field trips or simply being there as “fathers or big brothers.”

Zimbler and the assistant principal often walk through the local neighborhood, just to stay in touch. “At first,” he says, “parents thought we were there because the kids had done something wrong. They couldn’t believe a school person would walk their streets.” Zimbler is not shy. If a student is continually late for school, he or the assistant principal visits the student’s home, wakes him or her up—turning on the shower and holding a towel, if necessary, and explains, “I can’t run my school without you.”

Although the school has no formal dress code for teachers, the men wear ties and there are no “dress-down Fridays,” says Zimbler: “Every day is a day to aim for achievement.”

## New Leadership

From 1998 to 2004, Herber had five different principals and the district superintendents rotated with almost the same frequency. Community trust in the schools was low. Teachers and parents were tired of district initiatives that went



unsupported, a teacher reports, and teachers despaired of committees that worked hard but could not act. Teachers were ready for a new start.

When the new superintendent and deputy superintendent were recruited for Malverne, they thought long and hard before they took on the challenge. “Malverne had strong teachers,” recalls the superintendent, “It only needed strong leadership.” Once on board, they recruited and hired seasoned leaders—principal, assistant principal, some department chairs, and a special education director—with strong, shared convictions and

the energy to move Herber forward.

Over the summer, they brought administrators, department heads, teachers, and staff together over “Bagels & Conversation” to find common ground. They involved the local community under the slogan, “Return to your Home

School,” and began hosting quarterly breakfasts for real estate agents, inviting them to bring clients to the schools. They also piggy-backed on a parent-run initiative, Project Enroll Now, which encouraged parents to enroll their children in public kindergarten, and as a result, added another kindergarten class.

The enthusiastic turnout for these gatherings was the start of a new era for the Howard T. Herber Middle School. Once the superintendent and deputy began connecting people throughout the district, they found, the superintendent says, that “Even though we had high expectations, people liked the unity we brought.” A teacher explains that, before, they worked in isolation and now are encouraged to propose ideas, as long as they can support them with clear plans and evidence.

The new middle school administrators introduced themselves to the community by taking a seven mile walk to become familiar with the neighborhoods and its members. They continue to be visible and accessible through community outreach, PTA participation, and after school community walks that include playing Frisbee and football with the students. Today, parent-teacher softball games are a regular feature of the school year. A parent academy, featuring sessions on *Conversational English, State Assessments, Parenting Adolescents, and Computer Based Technology* is in the works.



“This is an unbelievable team,” says the Deputy Superintendent, “They have the courage of their convictions. They can all argue on behalf of the students.” Blue Ribbon was just the start for Herber, she says. After the new team’s first year, the Superintendent gave Zimble a turtle figurine because, she says, “they move forward by sticking their necks out!”

### Building on Strengths

The new administrators began their academic reforms by identifying what the school was currently doing right. “The school was blessed with action-oriented leaders,” says the deputy superintendent. They found a very strong Math Department, whose department head had brought student assessment scores up steadily from 48% passing to 80% over three years. Malverne department chairs serve the whole district, so the math chair was able to take a global view of math education and ensure that students from lower grades entered the upper grades with the necessary math skills.

She worked with elementary school teachers to rewrite the elementary school math curriculum (student scores went up), then turned to fifth grade teachers, some of whom did not have strong math backgrounds, and developed lesson plans with them. "I never gave a teacher a lesson unless I'd taught it," says the math chair, who team-taught with teachers and worked with the Special Education director to give all students the supports they needed. She brought skeptical teachers along by raising the bar for student achievement little by little, and today intends for all Herber eighth grade students to master ninth grade work.

When asked why Herber is successful, a teacher replied, "because we share and work as a team." Monthly Cabinet Meetings allow department chairs to collaborate from one content area to another. Department chairs also encourage their teachers to share strategies and resources within the department. "The size of the school lets us be



personal. The staff is strong about knocking on doors, reports one teacher.

The school's support system is comprehensive. Getting help with study skills and academic subjects is encouraged and available both before and after school. If a student needs breakfast in order to attend extra help sessions in the morning, it's provided. One teacher believes, "what happens in the morning and after school makes the difference." A master list of all extra help subjects and times

is posted throughout the school, and each classroom has extra-help times posted outside the door. "Everyone is part of the team here," says the deputy superintendent, "teachers go above and beyond" their union contract.

In addition to extra help given by teachers, an Athletes Assisting Athletes program is available every morning. Older athletes, some in their late twenties, tutor the middle school athletes in their academics. Currently, there are at least ten such students who have improved academically to the extent that they need less extra help. Student agendas are reviewed regularly and students are taught to stick to their agendas.

## Everyone Reading

An early commitment, affirms the deputy superintendent, was "no more kids who could not read." Last September, a district Committee on Reading studied options, recommended three supplemental reading programs and chose Read 180, a Scholastic reading intervention program. Geared to students who can decode text but struggle with fluency and comprehension, Read 180 provides 90 minutes of whole and small group instruction, aided by computers and listening stations and guided by ongoing self-assessment. The English Department chair sees the program as

especially useful for students entering Herber with out-of-district backgrounds. After six months she's seen a full grade level growth in most students, who may have entered Herber reading two or three grades below grade level.

Zimbler attributes the growth in part to the weekly progress reports: "The students are taking ownership over their own learning." Astonished parents report their children are reading well, declaring: "I don't know what you did." At the reading stations, students record themselves reading, says the English department chair: "They know how they're doing" without being told, although they receive weekly progress reports.

Future ELA plans include writing classes co-taught by Special Education and ELA teachers to maximize each discipline's strengths; four Special Education and two English teachers have been trained and are currently planning lessons and small group arrangements.

### Teaching the Whole Student

Herber shifted how it handles student discipline, too. School administrators looked at the suspension data and set a goal of reducing suspensions by 60%. "We questioned why students were getting suspended," Zimbler said, and they began reviewing each case to see if the behavior merited the suspension. In the past, he says, the attitude was, "get the bad kids out;" today suspension hearings include both the student and parents and typically cover not only the student's behavior, but counseling and parenting. Zimbler cites an example of a student who accidentally harmed another student by using an art tool carelessly. Rather than face expulsion, the student was given due process and ultimately allowed to attend Twilight School—after hours—and assured that if he maintained an 80% average, he could graduate.

A Saturday Assessment Prep Academy runs from 8-11 a.m. for students to prepare for assessment tests. In addition, Saturday mornings are reserved for students serving detentions or needing extra help. Help for students centers on what they need at the time, which may range from organizing their lockers or notebooks, finishing homework, or completing assignments.

Some 25 athletic and enrichment clubs are open to students, as well as a Student Council and Junior National Honor Society. There are no after school programs in the community so the majority of Herber students stay after school to participate. One parent reports her fifth grade daughter is willing to cut back on her dance lessons four times a week in order to join some of the after school clubs. Sport coaches always look at grades, off season and on.

### Giving Up on No One

Students at academic risk are mentored by peers or teachers. Teachers typically check in with two or three students every week. Thursday afternoons, the teachers take on at-risk students in a basketball game. The students return week after week in hopes of beating the teacher team.

Older students are encouraged, when possible, to help out in classes with younger students. They serve as helpful coaches, for example, in science labs, preparing Petri dishes, managing live goldfish, and helping focus the microscopes so fifth graders can examine blood vessels and capillaries in goldfish tails.



An Instructional Support Team meets regularly to review the progress of struggling students who have been referred to the team by their teachers. The Team comprises one teacher, guidance counselor, school social worker, and psychologist, in addition to Zimble, and for the initial meeting, parents and the referring teacher. The team goes through a list of students, identifying patterns, figuring out what the problem is, generating solutions.

A student who failed social studies twice, but passed it during summer school probably thought that was the end. But Zimble felt the school had let the student down, he says, by not planning well enough. He contacted the student's parents and recommended the student be placed in an honors social studies class. The parents hesitated, afraid their child could not manage an honors class, but Zimble urged them to give him a chance, offering to give the student whatever kind of help he needed. "I tell parents I have 524 students – two at home and 522 here," says Zimble, "I treat your children as if they were my own. That's how much I believe in them." The student is now making an 84 in the honors social studies class.

Says the deputy superintendent, "Kids this age are going to dig themselves into holes. You have to throw them ladders."

## Student Voices

Student voices are welcome at Herber. Regular Principal Forums bring students and the principal together for 45-minute meeting after school. Students raise concerns, such as healthier lunches, and a place to hang out with comfortable seating; Zimble takes notes. When students wanted to change the recycling bins in the lunch room, they ran a pilot to test their idea first; some students become so involved with an issue that they have applied for grant

money to bring their ideas for Herber to fruition. No issue or question is summarily dismissed. A teacher agrees, "They want to be part of the solution; this is their school; this is their building."

An eighth grade student who feels prepared for high school but reluctant to leave Herber says, "I'd rather be in school than at home. People will help you here. This school makes me feel smart and successful." Another student adds, "There's lots to do. You are guaranteed to succeed. "

Students know they matter: "If you get past one teacher, the next one will get you," a student notes, "They stay on top of you." A parent echoes the same feeling, "the school does not let problems get by." In addition, "Parents know we will not let their kids fall flat", says one teacher. The school tries to give every student a sense of recognition, and rewards good behavior with things like a student luncheon, where teachers cook and serve lunch to a handful of students who have displayed great character. This will be the 32<sup>nd</sup> year that all sixth graders who keep up their grades and behavior attend a week-long field trip to the Frost Valley Environment Camp in New York's Catskill Mountains.



Everyone has a hand in school beautification: the secretaries have painted or stenciled the school mascot (a Viking) all over the school, and Zimble is overseeing efforts to hang an 8 x 10 portrait of every student on the school walls. This year's graduating eighth graders leave their marks on the eighth grade hall, decorating it with colored hand prints.

## Assessments and Data

All schools in the district follow the New York State Standards Curriculum. Over the summer teachers map curricula based on the state's. Each teacher has a "bible" of state standards, curriculum, and supplemental materials. Herber teachers use the textbooks as springboards to instruction. Department chairs review all lesson plans. The

superintendent says, "Once teachers understand we want them to be the best teacher they can be – when a teacher is good, the job's a joy."

The students are tested from Day 1 of school and tested frequently to reduce the test-taking fear factor. Over the course of a school year, students are asked some 800 assessment questions from the DO NOW assignments posted in each class each day.

Nassau County BOCES created a county data warehouse five years ago. "It's one of the best things that ever happened with data," says a teacher, "If we have to test our students, let's use the information to teach them better." "The tests are not for the kids. They're for us. If you don't analyze the data, how can you alter instruction?" adds Zimbler. Online communication with other Warehouse members allows for sharing data across districts.

The Warehouse provides Herber with grade level item analysis. This allows department chairs to examine wrong answer distributions for each test item, identify problem areas, and revise the curriculum with the department teachers as needed. For example, during a Math Department meeting, teachers review why so many students chose one incorrect multiple-choice answer over the correct one. By talking together about the possible reasons why students were misled or distracted by irrelevant information or missing steps to solving the problem, they reflect on their own teaching of the topic.....to work together to fill in the gaps.

**“Teach Them Well”**

In the entryway of Herber Middle School, Principal Zimbler has had a quotation painted on the wall so everyone entering the building can see it. It says, "I believe children are the future; teach them well...." The greeting lets visitors, teachers, and students know they are entering a school where students are cherished and when the high expectations are met, we can "let them lead the way." Herber's commitment to this precept seems secure.

Howard T. Herber Middle School: New York State Tests (Passing: Level 3 or 4)				
8 <sup>th</sup> Grade Math % Passing				
	2002	2003	2004	2005
All	68	74	85	88
Similar schools	60	61	68	63
African American	58	67	81	82
8 <sup>th</sup> Grade English % Passing				
	2002	2003	2004	2005
All	47	51	62	75
Similar schools	52	51	52	55
African American	34	34	58	71

