

Like many cities in the northeastern rustbelt, Utica has experienced a major decrease in manufacturing activity in the last several decades and is in serious financial trouble. Public services have been curtailed to save money, and Utica's schools have felt the pinch. This solidly working class city has lost population as its manufacturing base has declined. From more than 100,000 in 1960, its population now is an estimated at 59,000. An influx of Bosnian immigrants, who now make up about 10% of the city's total population, has recently staunched that loss. Seventy-nine percent of the city's population is listed as white, 13% as African American, and 6% Hispanic or Latino.

<b>Watson Williams School</b> www.uticaschools.org/watson/ 480 students, K-5	<b>Utica, NY</b>
African American	57%
White	23%
Hispanic	14%
American Indian, Asian, Pacific Islander	7%
Students eligible for free/ reduced price lunch	96%
Students with Limited English Proficiency	11%
Student mobility (2004-2005)	22%
Average class size	23

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Built in 1992, Watson Williams School occupies the newest of Utica's nine elementary buildings. This performing arts magnet school houses a classroom-sized dance studio, two small amphitheatres built into the corners of the first floor corridors, a stage area for student activities, and two technology labs. The simple two story concrete block building is across the street from a row of small multi-unit dwellings. Teachers park their cars in a fenced and gated parking lot across a street to the side of the building. The school is near the city center, has very little land beyond the building, and no off-street area for buses and cars to park when discharging or loading children. Only children living more than 1.5 miles from the schools are bussed, so many walk or are driven to school. The school hopes to acquire a vacant lot behind the school, the building on which has recently been demolished. Frequent violence in the neighborhood has led to locking the school doors with a single point of entry.



### Creating a Safe and Caring Environment

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Inside the building, the halls are clean and well painted, with student work on the walls. From time to time a student may be seen walking purposefully down a hall from one class to another, courteously greeting strangers to the building. Escorted by teachers, classes of younger students gather at the top or bottom of a staircase to assemble into two orderly lines before moving on down the hall. At least one teacher, says principal Henry Frasca, has her students recite math facts as they climb the stairs in order to make use of all the limited time that they have in school.

What is immediately apparent on entering any of the school's classrooms and watching adults engage with students is the strong culture of caring. The principal explains that outside the school walls, Watson Williams's students are used to harsh, negative interactions and raised voices. They know how to tune them out. Inside the school, teachers and the administration provide a safe, caring, and supportive environment. With universally strong management skills, teachers spend little time on classroom management or student discipline. "Are you going to be talking much more, sir?" a third grade teacher asked a student who was talking without being recognized. Seldom was even this admonition required in the classes we observed. Instead, students were continually complimented on their work and always spoken to respectfully.



Students reciprocate, and demonstrate respect for each other and their teachers. When a new student comes into the school, others will let him or her know what the school's expectations are. The principal himself may take time to teach or test a student who is having particular difficulty focusing and will not otherwise attend to the task at hand.

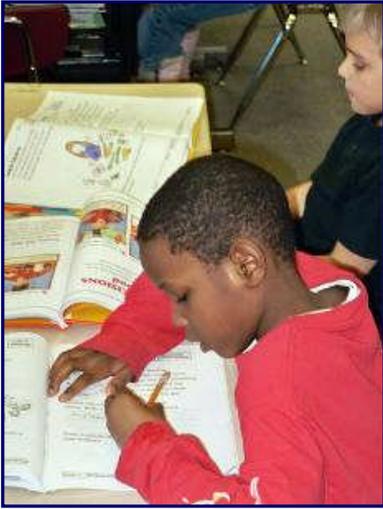
Attention to school safety extends beyond the school day and walls. Because school dismissal time has been an occasion for student fighting and parent conflict, special education and students who live over 1.5 miles away board their buses first. Other students are then dismissed in groups through different building doors, eliminating a large mass of students in front of the building.

### Conveying High Expectations

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This supportive environment is coupled with high academic and behavioral expectations. "There is a culture of achievement," said one teacher. "If the kids are quiet, that's not enough." Children attend school to learn, and must apply themselves at Watson Williams. The message is that teachers and administrators care. They know both the academic achievement and personal background of each student. Recognizing that each student has different

needs, the work of school staff is different every year because the students change. Principal Frasca reminds his teachers that Watson Williams's students come to school with very different experiences than those the teachers have had. He expects teachers to actively seek to understand their pupils and to adjust their instructional practice to



the needs of their individual students. Instruction that worked with a prior group of students may not be as effective with those currently in front of a teacher. Constant review of student learning is built into the way that the teachers work.

Learning, say the teachers in turn, is the students' "work." They are expected to excel, and they are given the support they need to do so. "We don't let them not do the work," said one teacher, adding that students are expected to do reasonable amounts of meaningful homework from the time they enter kindergarten. The students may be less advantaged than suburban peers in other schools. They may arrive in kindergarten on average 1.5 years behind their academic developmental age, but they are good learners and with adequate

attention and application they will and do achieve. A kindergarten teacher summarized what high expectations look like and result in for the students entering Watson Williams:

"We give them something to read the first week they are here. They don't know that those squiggles make sounds. Then week after week as they start making the connections, they do start realizing what they are. We start right away, give them three [sight words] that first week they're here. They don't even know what the letters are. They don't know what writing is. They don't know whether to read it left to right, right to left, top to bottom. They don't know what it is. I think that's a real classic example [of our high expectations], and I had a hard time with that in the beginning. It just didn't seem right. But over the years I can see that it does have its benefits because we are getting them used to seeing print. High expectations really do bring out the best in everyone."

These high expectations, with caring support, continue throughout the grades. "All these students," said a fourth grade teacher of the class in front of him, "will score a '4' on the state science test this year," and he meant it. He introduced a social studies lesson on Document Based Questions (DBQ) by saying, "I love DBQs, you know why? ... Because they're so easy." He modeled, with student interaction, writing an essay response to a state DBQ as he would answer it, reasoning that this would give the students a higher quality example of what they needed to strive for than if they collectively wrote a model response. He also wanted to show that educated adults draft and redraft their words before arriving at a final text that conveys what they want to express.

Parsimony is a guiding principle: no unnecessary programs are brought into the school. Instead there is continuous, limited, focused innovation based on how and what the current students are learning. "We are careful not to mistake activity for achievement. Just because they are moving does not mean that they are learning," says Mr. Frasca. Another Watson Williams principle is that change and learning take time and occur in small increments. In brief daily meetings before students arrive, teachers review assessments, discuss what their students achieved, and plan what they need to do to change their instruction to enhance student learning. There is a strong sense of teacher efficacy and empowerment, a certainty among teachers that if they teach the topic adequately and the students apply themselves, those students will learn. "The focus," says principal Frasca, "is not on what we can't control, but rather on what we can control."

### **Studying Data, Continuously Adapting**

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"There is no magic wand," says Principal Frasca. There is no single reason for the school's success. It results from clear, imaginative thinking, hard work, and continuous adaptation. The school staff studies student data and assessments, and constantly hones what and how they are teaching to help their students achieve uniformly high standards.

Watson Williams' teachers unapologetically explain that they do teach to the state assessments because they are based on the New York State standards; criterion-referenced, they communicate what is expected to be taught. The Watson Williams staff systematically reviews each state assessment to determine what is essential for their students to know. They also use textbook tests (the district selected the ELA and math texts for their alignment with New York State standards) and mock state exams to learn what

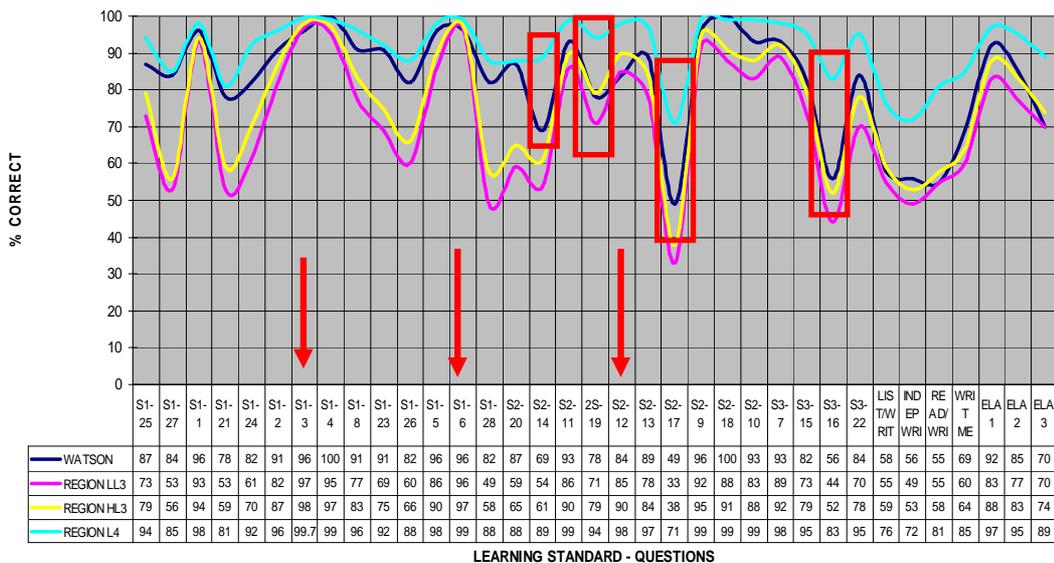


their students know. After students' responses to each state assessment have been scored, the school makes a copy of them so that staff has information with which to work long before the school formally receives student scores back from the state. Finally they use data from computer-assisted instruction in math and ELA, on which every student spends half an hour daily.

Using an approach modified from professional football, in which coaches look for patterns in broken plays that result in big gains and then try to replicate that pattern as a designed play, teachers analyze student performance for patterns in the responses of individual and groups of students. The diagram below illustrates how state tests are

analyzed, item by item, to determine where groups of students have performed less well than their state counterparts. Those items on which Watson Williams's students score significantly below other students in the region are intensely examined. (Red rectangles in the diagram show questions to be examined.) What common patterns in the students' responses give a clue to some concept that wasn't adequately taught? What pattern in the way the questions were asked might have led students to misunderstand what was being asked of them? Did any sub-groups of students get the question wrong? How does teaching need to change for students to understand some concept that they are missing? Teachers discuss and revise their teaching, and then check to assess their impact. This, says Principal Frasca, is part of "a culture of diagnosis, prescription, and then evaluation that is used for further diagnosis." This description inadequately captures its "messiness." There may be "hiccups" when teachers try something and the learning they are seeking does not occur, but such attempts are part of the necessary learning and are not regarded as mistakes.

**2005 NYS GRADE 4 ELA (95.5%)**



**Graphic Analysis of State Assessment to Identify Items for Exploration**

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This frequent, detailed analysis of state assessments also informs the teaching staff of other knowledge and skills students need. Teachers have identified key vocabulary for all subjects, and integrated them into the everyday curriculum. Kindergarten students are, for instance, asked to sit around the *perimeter* of a circle in preparation for understanding a math concept yet to be taught. Teachers have identified essential science vocabulary and assigned

mastery expectations by grade level, so that kindergarten students, for example, are expected to master the words *flower*, *germinate*, *gravity*, *leaves*, *precipitation*, *roots*, and *stem*. Through frequent assessment aligned to the state standards, teachers also identify which students are “fence sitters,” who need additional attention because with a little effort they can ensure they don’t slip a level on the state assessment. Frequent assessment also informs teachers what students know so that they can move to new content, providing only reinforcement for what has already been learned. “We don’t have time to teach them what they already know or what is not essential,” says Frasca.

This attention to detail is achieved under the leadership of the principal, who also provides workshops on data analysis for other principals in the district and region. He has structured the school day so that teachers meet for fifteen minutes every morning before students arrive to talk about the data and its meaning for their instruction. Grade-level meetings take place Monday through Thursday; on Fridays teachers meet for cross-grade subject-area discussions. This permits the curriculum integration that is a hallmark of Watson Williams. Frasca seldom attends these meetings, preferring that teachers make the necessary instructional and programming decisions independently. Through this process, teachers base decisions about instructional change on data, not on teacher beliefs about instructional practice. These fifteen minute meetings originated from a decision to provide professional development in the use of math manipulatives, and have become a primary form for embedded professional development.

### Integrated Schoolwide Initiatives

Three principal schoolwide initiatives support classroom instruction. As a **performing arts magnet**, all students are involved in what is referred to as an “arts-infused” curriculum. Each year the performing arts teachers work with classroom teachers to plan the arts program for the following year. Through careful planning, relevant concepts and vocabulary from each subject area are integrated into the performing arts program so that it is part of a seamless whole of instruction. Students in science, for example, were having difficulty understanding friction, so experiments and discussions of friction were integrated into dance classes. For the 2006-2007 school year, the program is entitled Finding Avenues to Boost Learning in Elementary School (FABLES). Each grade is performing a play based a different fable; other grades watch the performance. The plays also integrate character education.



A second schoolwide initiative is **computer-assisted instruction (CAI)**. Every student in the school receives a half-hour of CAI daily. CAI addresses both math and ELA, comprises a single curriculum covering the span of grades in Watson Williams, and is fully integrated into the instructional program. This gives classroom teachers daily access to information on their students' progress as well as custom CAI courses for students who are struggling. Instructional leaders receive daily summary information that is used in monitoring and planning.

**Academic Intervention Services (AIS)** are also seamlessly integrated into the instructional program. When AIS staff works with a class, all students in that class are grouped so that they all receive small group instruction, whatever their level of subject mastery. Every student receives, minimally, a half-hour of this small group instruction; students who need more support receive it either during lunch hour or after school.

Students enjoy individual adult attention: to eat and spend lunch with a teacher while learning is no punishment. Classroom teachers and AIS reading specialists work together "as if these kids are with both of us all day," said one of the teachers. Scheduled time for AIS teachers to talk with classroom teachers and the wealth of academic information on each student allows AIS staff to make good decisions about what to work on. All students are grouped for AIS by the end of the first day of the school year, with services beginning no later than the first full week of the year. Students are subsequently regrouped as necessary. AIS are not referred to as remediation, nor do any students receive instruction covering new curriculum during this time.



### Authentic Instruction

The staff of predominantly young teachers uses a variety of methods—cooperative learning, small group, whole group, direct instruction—but all focus on real-life, hands-on learning; for example, students use math manipulatives and letter tiles. This year the school is experimenting with a system, Watson Wages, to integrate practice with use of money into learning. Kindergarten students, for instance, are rewarded with pennies and can exchange every five pennies earned for a nickel, and so on. Kindergarten students, teachers learned, understood their math facts but did not translate them to the actual value of different coins.

Most Watson Williams students come from homes with few books, yet research confirms that children who consistently read authentic texts become good readers and writers. Concluding that textbooks did not provide their students with enough high quality reading, Watson Williams faculty analyzed the types of reading included on state

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assessments, and combed children's magazines such as *Highlights* and *Cricket* for stories that would meet the criteria, compiling an instructional packet. The school could have purchased a set of readings and related exercises, but the selection process and the experience of creating the discussion questions to go with the packet offered yet another opportunity for embedded professional development. The teachers, for example, now frame and ask better questions of their students. The discussion also led to full integration of the stories into the curriculum. For K-2 students the school has arranged for the local Board of Cooperative Education Services (BOCES) librarian to supply them with K-2 books so that the children can read a book of their own each day. All students now read four different types of literature a day. This adds up to approximately a thousand interactions with good reading and writing every school year and, in turn, results in a long-term increase in knowledge and skills. And reading is not just viewed as a consumer activity. Real reading, say teachers to their students, "changes you."

## Planning and Leadership

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Watson Williams School has a thick school plan. It contains everything that each grade covers in its curriculum,



making it a powerful tool for teachers' lesson planning. The entire plan is reviewed annually, and if something isn't being taught, it is removed. If teachers decide to change what they will cover, they add new items. New text and commitments in the plan are entered in **bold**. Because the plan has been refined over a number of years, the amount of new material is very manageable. The plan, says principal Frasca, is a living, breathing document. There is flexibility in the structure of the plan, and the staff can always revise benchmarks if they discover that they are inappropriate. Planning itself is done well in advance of implementation so that teachers have time to integrate new approaches into their instruction. It is also accepted that nothing planned is likely to be fully and effectively implemented in a single year.

The concept of a flexible structure that seeks to maximize instructional time permeates the school. Creative scheduling, attention to classroom dynamics in assigning children to teachers, and continuous re-grouping are all part of managing a flexible structure with a focus on student learning. Closely allied to this is a fierce attention to the best possible use of the time available. In the classroom little time is spent on matters such as attendance. Academic Intervention Services begin in the first full week of school, teachers and students may spend lunch eating and working together, and teacher meetings are tightly structured, to name a few examples.

Behind this is a principal who assists with the structure, supports his staff when they take risks and make decisions, and constantly asks questions of his staff such as, "What makes sense in this instance . . . And what does the data say?" He emphasizes the importance of commitment from all the staff in a team effort for the successes at Watson Williams. He seeks to cultivate leadership in the entire community and emphasize the importance of teacher leadership, hiring only those who will invest the effort required to build the institution that Watson Williams is becoming into their work. New teachers are usually hired from among those who have been regular or long-term substitutes, and so have been able to demonstrate their commitment to the school's values and the way in which it works.

**Conclusion**

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The success that Watson Williams students have achieved and the culture that staff have co-created in the school speak to single-minded attention to the personal and learning needs of all its students. The school depends not on imported programs, but on a number of basic principles of good instructional and organizational practice that are well executed and continually examined and refined. It also depends upon the commitment of young, hardworking staff members who concentrate on what they can control to create an island of civility, mutual support, and learning within the larger context of a financially strapped and struggling community.

Watson Williams Student Performance State Criterion-Referenced Tests					
% proficient and above: 4th grade Reading					
	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
All	59	62	49	95	76
Low income	60	61	47	94	
Special Education	67	40	33	88	
% proficient and above: 4th grade Math					
	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
All	86	85	84	100	97
Low income	90	81	84	100	
Special Education	82	100	84	100	