

Attachment A

# **Elementary Level**

**Problem-Based Learning Scenario**

**Mountaineer Elementary School**

**West Virginia Institute for  
21<sup>st</sup> Century Leadership**

**Fall, 2008**

## **Elementary Problem-Based Learning Scenario West Virginia Institute for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Leadership**

### **Mountaineer Elementary School**

#### **Community Demographic Profile<sup>1</sup>**

Big River County, West Virginia, has been served by Mountaineer Elementary School (MES) since its opening in 1967. The total population of Big River County is 193,559. There are several communities in Big River County including the largest city in the state, the state capitol. Mountaineer Elementary School is located to the south west of the capitol in the small community of Mountain Town. Mountain Town has a total population of 4,200.

MES is located in a somewhat homogeneous community with most students from working class environments. Although most of the community is employed in hourly occupations, a new expensive housing development and one very large subsidized housing project have impacted the make-up of the student body. River-related industries and factories, mining, and manufacturing of mining-related products have traditionally been the largest employers within the county. Government agencies and the school system also rank among major employers. Most citizens who live in the new housing development travel into the state capitol to work in professional occupations.

The community's demographics have had some marginal changes over the last five to eight years, although the economic base has remained relatively stable. The price of coal is stable and mining jobs in nearby counties to the south have opened up new opportunities for earning good wages. Unemployment exceeded 10 percent throughout the 1990's for many parts of West Virginia while Big River County consistently has had an unemployment rate of 4.6 percent. The current per capita household income for the Big River County school district is \$28,000, which is slightly above the state level. Crime rates remain below the state averages although there has been a slight increase in drug-related activities.

There is a strong sense of community in Mountain Town with tight personal bonds formed through church and community activities. Traditional outdoor activities like hunting and fishing, community sports teams and church-related activities are important to community members. For most MES students and their families, the school and its activities are one of the focal points of Mountain Town community life.

#### **School Demographic Profile**

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<sup>1</sup> This *Problem Based Learning Case* is built on a real school profile. However, all personnel profiles and situations are fictitious and any resemblance or similarities to real people and situations is coincidental.

The enrollment of Mountaineer Elementary School is 335 students in grades kindergarten through five. There are 29 faculty and staff members who serve the school. Over the past five years, MES has gained two percent in enrollment, with a projected population growth of six percent by the year 2010. The majority of MES graduates have attended the school for all six of their elementary school years. The gender ratio is almost even at 49 percent male and 51 percent female. The ethnic mix (with 92 percent white, 7 percent African-American, and one percent Asian, Hispanic and Native American population combined), has been fairly consistent over recent years. The Asian and Hispanic sub-groups are new within the last five years. These groups are projected to bring about a moderate population increase in coming years. For the most part, MES has had limited experience with mobile, transient, or non-English speaking students but the new trend indicates some change in this area. Although national trends toward increased numbers of non-traditional families are reflected locally, a survey of MES students indicates that 65% of students still live with both parents. Approximately 44% of students in the school are eligible for free and reduced lunch, however, only about 33% of the eligible students actually participate in the program. A community pride in self-sufficiency seems to impact participation in entitlement programs. The number of students identified for special education services has significantly increased from 15.5 percent in 2000 to 22 percent in 2006, the highest percent in the entire district. Even though the minority population is small, it is expected to increase significantly in the next several years due to a low cost housing project.

### **Educational Results**

Mountaineer Elementary School appears to have some conflicting data on educational results. While only about 20 percent of the current students' parents have completed college, a recent district study indicates that 47 percent of the students who matriculated through the Big River County school system *from MES* ultimately attended college seven years later. MES had the highest percentage in the entire county.

On the state WESTEST and the WV Writing Assessment, however, the school has had mixed achievement results causing concern in the community and at the district office: (a) on the WESTEST at each tested grade level, there has been a significant increase in the percentage of students scoring at mastery in the All Subgroup (in both reading and mathematics) but a significant decrease in the percentage of students scoring in the above mastery and distinguished levels, (b) there has been a slight increase in the percentage of special education students who have scored at mastery but no special education students scoring above mastery or distinguished in either reading/language arts or mathematics, (c) the WV Writing Assessment scores for grade four have been relatively stable but significantly below the county-wide scores. Five years ago, MES had the highest writing scores in the state, (e) (d) even with mixed results, the school has met AYP two of the last three years. Daily attendance remains high at nearly 98.5% ADA. Most attendance issues that do exist come from the subsidized housing project. Teacher attendance is among the highest in the district.

### **School Climate and Culture**

The school climate of MES is characterized by tradition, routines and order. A majority of the teachers come to school each day and teach in a very traditional mode. They are proud of their school and are comfortable with the traditions and procedures. Generally, when the district office initiates new practices, the staff is adept at marginal implementation. Prominent in the teacher's workroom is a sign that says, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." All the staff but a few actually signed the poster. In general, however, the staff is rarely confrontational. The last major conflict was over the location of the copier and the limit placed on the number of handouts that could be run by staff members. The principal has complimented the staff on many occasions saying, "the school could run itself." Clearly, the teachers think it is their job to take care of the classroom, and it is the principal's job to take care of everything else. Most discipline issues are handled by teachers who "run a tight ship." However, teachers are beginning to see a slight increase in the number of students who act out and challenge authority.

### **Educational Programming**

**General Information:** The school has a number of support programs including Title I and a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Grant Award for after school programs. It is also in its second year as a Reading First school. Although standards-based math was highly recommended by the county office, the school staff was key in influencing the adoption of a traditional mathematic program. There is a fully equipped computer lab in the school with 25 new computers and a wide variety of available software. The county recently provided one white board per three teachers in all the elementary schools. Each teacher has computer access in their classroom although many admit to being "non-techies" and say the "kids know more than me." The special education program is largely self-contained although the county has recommended other staffing models. Title I still functions as a pull-out program.

**a. Curriculum:** The curriculum is guided mainly by the adopted textbooks and teacher priorities although all teachers have copies of the CSO's. The principal has encouraged the teachers to base the curriculum on the CSO's and has given the teachers articles on standards-based instruction. An attempt to get teachers to design a uniform lesson planning template was a miserable failure. Under the new superintendent, the district has developed curriculum maps for reading/language arts and mathematics, however, only about half the staff uses them as a guide. Due to a recommendation from Mr. A, the staff decided to develop common unit benchmark tests for mathematics. Unfortunately, the project lost steam when Mr. A took leave after his wife died. The special educators continue to follow their own curriculum and do not use the county's adopted text or CSO's feeling that these are much too difficult for the students. WESTEST and Writing Assessment results are analyzed by the principal and discussed with teachers prior to school. Results are also sent to parents with the note, "Call in you have any questions about these results."

**b. Instruction:** With the exception of 4-5 teachers, the instructional program is teacher-centered with traditional methods of direct instruction, discussion, work sheets and culminating tests. Though the student population is starting to become more diverse, there is

very little differentiation in instruction. However, classrooms are generally bright, colorful and very well-managed. The principal has worked with staff to implement several school-wide projects and competitions that the kids and parents have loved. The annual reading rewards program resulted in local businesses donating savings bonds totaling \$6,000.

**c. School Effectiveness:** Due to county and state requirements, the school has a School Improvement Council. The principal develops the school's required Five-Year Strategic Plan and gives it to the Council for input. Primarily, the plan focuses on getting students to Mastery on the state WESTEST. The Council meets three times a year, usually for an hour after school. The Council has 8 members that include Mr. B, Miss C and Mrs. E. Mrs. F, the head cook, is also on the Council as are two parents and a local restaurant owner, Mr. Q. Mr. Q is among the most well-known and loved members of the community. He is known for his generosity to the under-privileged and support for education.

**d. Student Support:** For two years, MES has used funding from a special grant to hold an after-school program to help remediate students with academic difficulty. It has been well-received by the parents who have even helped organize a car-pooling system for kids who were going to be left out because of transportation problems. To support the program, Mr. Q donated five notebook computers that are loaned to parents as part of this program. He also worked with the Rotary to get special community discount cards for the staff who work with the students. For years, the teachers have also run their own informal program to find clothing for kids who need it. As a credit to their generosity, an article appeared in the local newspaper in 2005, when the teachers in the school raised \$10,000 for food baskets for school families that had been flooded just before Thanksgiving of that year.

### **Faculty and Staff Profile**

There are 29 faculty and staff members who serve at MES. There are 17 classroom teachers, one librarian, three aides, four cooks, one secretary, and two custodians. Of the 17 classroom teachers, 15 have more than 25 years of experience and three of those have 30 years of experience. Only two faculty members of MES are new teachers.

The following dossiers are profiles of key personnel who serve at MES:

- **Mr. A.** has been teaching fifth grade at MES for 35 years and has in the past been awarded outstanding teacher of the year awards. Included in his awards were the Disney Teaching Award, the Massey Coal Award and the Milken Family Distinguished Teacher Award. Mr. A. has recently lost his wife of 30 years. They were married in 1976 shortly after Mr. A. returned from Viet Nam. Mr. A. seems to be going through the motions when it comes to his teaching, but he does enjoy working with Mr. B. and is appreciative of the fact that he is at MES.
- **Mr. B.** just completed his third year of teaching fourth grade. He served in the first Gulf War and returned in 1991. Mr. B. entered a highly acclaimed five year teacher

preparation program in 1997 and finished with a masters degree in elementary education. He is currently working on National Board Certification and is enrolled in a principal preparation program. Mr. B. is loved by all of his students and their families. He always goes an extra mile to be positive with all of his students and pays special caring attention to those who seem to be at high risk. He rarely talks with colleagues about the innovative things that he tries in the classroom.

- **Miss C.** just completed her first year of teaching first grade. She finished her pre-service training with a Masters degree in elementary education at the same institution as Mr. B. Miss C. loves technology and reads everything she can find on early childhood education. Her unit and lesson plans are creative and innovative. She has been hired by several local businesses to design web pages. She is also currently enrolled in an educational doctorate program for instructional design and technology.
- **Mrs. D.** has been teaching second grade for 26 years and has never missed a day of work. She loves to teach reading and has cabinets of materials that she has used to teach phonics through the years. She believes in structure and discipline. Mrs. D. is quiet and unassuming. Mrs. D. is married to state Senator D. who is the chair of education committee.
- **Mrs. E.** has been teaching second grade for 18 years and is one of the few teachers who is verbal in meetings. She generally feels that there are too many rules and regulations from the county and the state. She often says, "Just leave us alone and let us teach." Mrs. E. has served as Faculty Senate Chairperson for three years. Mrs. E. is married to the president of the local teacher's association. Mr. E. teaches at the nearby high school.
- **Mrs. F.** is the head cook at the school. She is very influential and well-respected. Her son was the valedictorian at the high school, and she credits the education he got at MES as the reason he is successful. She doesn't feel that there is as much enthusiasm in the school as there was when her son was a student.
- **Mrs. G** is a special education instructional aide who loves kids. Being a parent of a child with special needs, she has great skill and compassion for students with learning disabilities. She enjoys having lunch with students, bringing them special treats, making bulletin boards, grading papers and supervising them during the day. She is taking two courses at the local college on learning disabilities and feels that she has much more to offer than supervision and paper work.

### **School Organization/Professional Development**

Each teacher at MES has a daily thirty minute planning period. Also, due to a new itinerant music teacher assigned to the school, each teacher will have a full hour planning three days a week. Currently, few teachers of the same grade level have the same planning period.

Recently, the Board of Education approved a monthly “early out.” All elementary schools will have a ninety minute time allocation for planning/professional development on the first Monday of each month.

Traditionally, the county sponsors the three professional development days for teachers. There has been no county focus for these days, and they have largely been based on a variety of topics suggested from an annual survey of staff. At a recent principal’s meeting, the superintendent announced that he is modifying this process. For 2007-2008, each school will be responsible for planning at least two days of professional development based on the school’s strategic plan; one in October and one in February. These days can also be worked off in smaller increments if the school chooses.

### ***School Board and Central Administration Relations***

The Central Administration at the county office seems highly skilled and innovative. The Superintendent is in the second year of his first five-year contract and is known as an innovator. He is particularly savvy in technology and wants the system to move forward with technology integration. He is supportive of principals and pushes them to improve their schools.