

Vision and Leadership are Key
Alfred-Almond's Paradigm for Success
St. Bonaventure University
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Alfred-Almond Central School, located in semi-rural Allegany County in New York's Western Southern Tier and a student population with a nearly forty percent free and reduced lunch count could be at or near the bottom of the academic achievement threshold. Frequently other school districts cite similar demographics as reasons why they really cannot compete against well funded city school districts with much more favorable resources. Add to that fact Alfred-Almond spends almost three thousand dollars less per pupil than the New York State average. The district's annual per pupil expenditure is \$13,300 compared to a state average of \$16,300. Some might say that Alfred-Almond's proximity to nearby State University of New York at Alfred and Alfred University is the reason that their students are overachievers. However those children of faculty and staff of the two institutions of higher learning number not more than ten to fifteen percent of the student body. Why then does a school district with these kinds of numbers get rated in the top ten school districts in Western New York by Business First?

Alfred-Almond Central School is not a well kept secret and its number six ranking is no fluke among school district's in Western New York. According to Richard Nicol, Alfred-Almond Superintendent, his school district is recognized by U.S. News and World Report, Newsweek Magazine and the United States Department of Education. I was attracted to Alfred-Almond and eventually to an interview with their superintendent due to their exceptional ranking. How does only one school in the southern tier best all of its neighbors many of whom are larger and better funded.? The secret is leadership and sticking to basics. At at time when many school districts opt for the latest fad, Alfred-Almond remains true to its core vision which is, "all students who come to us will succeed academically at the highest levels." This very simple

vision statement provides the school district with the necessary focus to raise student achievement to an exceptional level. Alfred-Almond has an enrollment of 670 students K-12. That is small especially when you compare that to the number five school, Orchard Park, which has 5,317 students and the school just behind Alfred-Almond which is Grand Island also in Erie County with 3,223 students. Only Bemus Point which was ranked at number ten by Business First, in more affluent Chautauqua County has a pupil population anywhere near Alfred-Almond. Bemus Point has 970 students. The next closest school in Allegany County is Fillmore with an enrollment of 699 but it is ranked forty-ninth overall and the closest school in Cattaraugus County is West Valley which is ranked at thirty. This disparity is what really made the school district stand out. It is clearly an outlier and while many cite its proximity to two nearby colleges that really does not hold water.

Fillmore Central is adjacent to Houghton, New York the home of Houghton College and it ranks forty-ninth. Allegany-Limestone Central School which is located within a three mile radius of St. Bonaventure University and Jamestown Community College's Olean campus is ranked thirty-second by Business First. The same comparison is appropriate for the City of Olean Schools in a city which is home to Jamestown Community College, Olean Business Institute, and which borders the St. Bonaventure Campus. Olean is ranked seventy-first on the list. What then is the secret to the school district's success?

Alfred-Almond's formula for success is a succinct vision/mission statement and focused leadership that begins at the board of education is stewarded by superintendent and the building principals. Except for Cattaraugus-Allegany BOCES "Schools Attuned" program, Alfred-Almond grows their own success. Mr. Nicol was quick to point out that all initiatives even those

that seem good at face value must pass the litmus test of how does that help the school district to connect with students and achieve their core vision of "all students who come to us will succeed academically at the highest levels." I asked Mr. Nicols what the school did for staff development and he told me that they were involved in Schools Attuned. The district uses the summer months to focus on Schools Attuned. For professional development the administration identifies what we are looking for their staff. They have found that their teachers need to know how to make connections with our students individually. They need to know the students well. Student teacher relationships are key to their success. Mr. Nicol stated that teachers, "needed to be creative in their instruction." He said that the school district never looked at "canned programs" that promised something for nothing and that the focus at Alfred-Almond remains on those relationships with students and a committed faculty devoted to creative approaches. Not surprisingly the school district mentors their teachers and has a one year program for freshman faculty that partners each new teacher with an older experienced colleague. Alfred-Almond's teachers are not highly paid either. They are ranked at number eighty-five out of ninety-eight school districts identified by Business First.

When questioned about strategic planning Mr. Nicol was quick to point out that, the school district has strategic planning but it is not a contrived program provided by a consultant. He said, "we have goals set by the board of education and expanded upon by our administration. Their planning is self-created and they remain focused on their goals. The school assesses their work and publishes the results to the teachers and community. Mr. Nicol insisted that their focus is also on transparency. One of the school district goals is that all students will be successful on statewide assessments.

The administration says for example that all students must be at level three or higher on state reading assessments and that all students must be 85 percent or higher on Regents examinations. There are no pullouts and all students even those in special education are cared for in the classroom. The school has nine special education teachers but does not use resource rooms. All students are educated in regular education classrooms and none of Alfred-Almond's special education students are educated elsewhere. When I questioned Mr. Nicol about programs like Response to Intervention he was quick to point out that the district uses a "common sense" approach. If a student is not succeeding, teachers are asked what they have done to analyze the student. Special attention is given to tailoring instruction to meet the learning styles of students and teachers are encouraged to adapt their lesson plans to fit individual students. Teachers are also encouraged to use a best practices approach. Rich Nicol believes that most districts have made it much too easy to remove a student from a regular education classroom and he sees this as a net negative. He reiterated that if a student is having difficulty the emphasis is "have you analyzed the student, have you tailored your instruction."

When I asked Mr. Nicol about Alfred-Almond's philosophy on curriculum he stated there are three basic areas: learner objectives, instructional activities, and significant assessments done both formative and summative. Teachers write the curriculum and the district makes no exceptions and it is incumbent and directed that the teachers need to update curriculum when and where necessary. The district has been working on curriculum mapping and they bring teachers in for two or three days in the summer. Their special education staff is included in curriculum development and curriculum documents are all written by the teachers.

When asked about the major successes of his school district he responded that it was their

special education program. Alfred-Almond has nine percent of its students identified as needing special education. He said, "we believe all students should be included, we don't believe in resource room time, we don't send students to BOCES for special education." Mr. Nicol does not believe in separating out ESL students and said that is just another law to create a special category of student. Consistent with the district vision ESL students are placed in regular education classrooms and given the extra support in the classroom by resource room teachers and reading specialists. He also believes that their advanced placement program is very successful. The district has 90 students involved in the program and this is out of a total of 240 students in grades nine through twelve. He said the district did not do tracking and that they worked with all the students at high levels. Having over thirty percent of your high school in advanced placement is an impressive accomplishment.

He was quick to point out though that despite the school's proximity to two area colleges that only ten to fifteen percent of the student body has a direct connection to either of those institutions and that the school has thirty to forty percent of its students who receive free and reduced lunches. Therefore he believed that Alfred-Almond falls well within the average demographic of surrounding communities. My research indicates that Alfred-Almond does receive about 64 percent BOCES aid when compared to a school district like Franklinville which receives 76 percent aid so there is somewhat less poverty. However, Alfred-Almond receives much less federal aid than a school district like Franklinville. My research indicates that Alfred-Almond receives about \$360,000 in federal aid while Franklinville receives over \$1 million dollars. Since their enrollments are comparable I think this is a valuable comparison. Alfred-Almond's per pupil expenditures are \$13,300 and is at Number 68 in Business First's ranking for

per pupil expenditure and when compared to other area schools of similar size that's remarkably smaller. Franklinville on the other hand is ranked fourteenth on per pupil expenditure at \$17,393. So what then is key to their success. In my opinion it can be tied to leadership, very good leadership and a school district that has a clear cut vision of where they are going. At a time when many school districts became Reading First Schools and huge sums of money poured into districts to support those programs, Alfred-Almond steered clear according to Mr. Nicol. He said it did not fit their vision.

When I asked him about the budgeting process and how that progressed he told me that he prepared the budget and submitted it to the board of education. We target our funds to the specific issues that help us to be most successful. We will not fund initiatives that will not advance us toward our goal of all students achieving at the highest levels. When asked about how the district promotes itself he said that they publish all of their test results on their website and that they maintain rigorous transparency with the public. When asked what separates Alfred-Almond's students from other around the region he said, "we don't track, we don't have honors courses, we keep everyone together, and we expect our teachers to teach at a high level." Rich Nicol said, "We remain focused! Strategic planning sets the goals and we don't deviate." You may be able to argue with the schools approach but you cannot argue with their success.

When I asked Mr. Nicol about how he maintained good board of education relations he insisted the transparency was paramount. He said, "we give them all the information they need to make their decisions." He said the board was open minded and there is agreement on goals. The board knows that it is not their role to micromanage the school. The board's focus is on developing policy. They know that just because a community member complains this is not an

open invitation to take up the issue. I asked him if there was an staff development policy for the board of education he said that older members mentor newer members and that they are honest and open with each other.

Alfred-Almond fits the model of an effective school. It contains all of the key elements that are defined by the Effective Schools model (Effective Schools, 2008) and that is key to its success. The focus is on instructional leadership, a clear and focused mission, a climate of high expectations, frequent monitoring of student progress, positive home school relationships, and an opportunity to learn and of course a safe environment. This refreshing common sense approach in a day of silver bullet promises and fresh from discouraging results of the federal program, No Child Left Behind (NCLB).

A clear vision developed locally and coupled with very good leadership is what drives real school improvement and achievement. Federal or state mandates which only provide incentives to schools cannot guarantee success (Ravitch, 2010). At a time when other area school districts climbed aboard the Reading First bandwagon, Alfred-Almond chose to remain on the sidelines. The program did not meet their criterion for what constituted a program that took them closer to their mission of, "all students who come to us will succeed academically at the highest levels." Some might argue that they turned down a great deal of money, but at what cost did other districts risk their students and their future expenditures by climbing on the NCLB bandwagon. Vision and leadership are key.

The single most important element of the ELCC conceptual framework is vision and its number one rank in the framework is nearly intuitive, but a school district like Alfred-Almond drives that point home. Vision of course must be accompanied by effective leadership that

stewards the vision. Effective visions are succinct and Alfred-Almond's vision meets that criterion. Alfred-Almond is well served by its vision which has been developed by its board of education and stewarded by its superintendent and effective building administrators. In doing so the administrative staff is promoting a positive educational environment for its students and teachers. They manage resources effectively and that disciplined model serves the school and the community well. Their transparent communication with all stakeholders is equally effective. In addition to this setting high expectations for student achievement and using both formative and summative measures to verify their expected outcomes is necessary to insure that they are on track with their goals. The entire process encourages self-reflection, self-correction and that model insures stability for both students and staff which must in turn provide a positive climate for everyone.

Alfred-Almond's recipe for success put learners first and keeps the needs of learners, teachers and leaders at the forefront. The emphasis on focus and discipline serves the institution well and is an effective steward of resources assigned to its care. The efficient use of resource and a model that encourages reflective practice also seems to be at the heart of Alfred-Almond's approach to teaching and learning. Some might say that since the school's per pupil expenditures are so low that students might be getting short-changed, but the opposite is occurring in fact. Focused disciplined leadership following a well articulated vision is the key to educational success. The conservative use of available resources is driven by the school's self reflective model and in turn the self-reflective model serves both the vision and and the acquisition of available resources. It seems then that where there is no vision the people do indeed perish. In the near term it would seem then that Alfred-Almond ought to be a model for other similar

schools in Cattaraugus and Allegany Counties and throughout the United States. At a time when trimming budgets is imperative while preparing our children for twenty-first century citizenship this model of an effective school must be replicated.

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