Comments by James M. Wigo  
Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum & Instruction  
Upper Darby School District  
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**District Overview**

Upper Darby School District serves a little larger than an 8 square mile area of almost 90,000 residents in Upper Darby Township, Clifton Heights Borough and Millbourne Borough. One of the most densely populated and urbanized townships in Pennsylvania (10,738 persons per square mile); Upper Darby is an “inner ring suburb” of Philadelphia. Over the past 20 years, the district has grown from 7,500 to 12,150 students (November, 2010), making it the largest school system in Delaware County and among the top 10 in the Commonwealth of PA. The district operates 1 high school (3,750 students), 2 middle schools (2,702 students), 10 elementary schools (4,889 students) and a Kindergarten Center (601 students).

At the same time that enrollment has increased, the educational and socioeconomic needs of Upper Darby students have been growing in complexity and severity. U.S. Census estimates for 2008 reveal a poverty rate of 20% for children less than 18 years of age in Upper Darby Township. Almost 50% of district students meet the low-income standard set by the Free and Reduced Lunch Program and seven schools receive Title I school-wide services. Twenty years ago the township and students populations were very different from today. Twenty years ago the demographics were easy to describe…white, middle-class homeowners. A key descriptor for the community was “stable” and it was used to preface almost every comment made about the community and its citizens. Today Upper Darby, through its students, presents a very different picture. A picture of an ever-changing and increasingly diverse population: 42% African American, 39% White, 14% Asian/Pacific Islander, 4% Hispanic. Some of our schools experience annual mobility rates that approach 40% and the new descriptors “unstable and transient.” The district educates over 700 English Language Learners from 73 countries of origin who speak 79 languages, with the top five languages today being Spanish, Bengali, Vietnamese, Punjabi, and Chinese.

In the midst of all the documented instability, Upper Darby School District made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), without qualification, in 2008, 2009 and 2010 after six years in District Improvement or Corrective Action status. Making AYP is particularly noteworthy because Upper
Darby schools present a total of 269 subgroups. In the world of NCLB, that translates into 269 ways to fail. Ninety-six percent (259) of which met AYP requirements in 2010. Emerging out of corrective action reflects the district’s commitment to, and investment in, a system of educational programs mentioned below:

- Use of data to drive instruction and program development.
- Standards-based/aligned common core curriculum, with full inclusion of Special Education and ELL students.
- Daily, building-based professional development, most notably by instructional coaches.
- Learning walks to promote fidelity to best practices and research-based programs.
- Response to Instruction & Intervention (RTII) framework, EAP tutoring and research-based interventions.
- Technology-based learning solutions.
- Strategic expansion and use of key learning support personnel, e.g., reading specialists, ELL teachers, special education teachers, school psychologists, social workers, academic coaches, nurses and other health personnel.

The Upper Darby School District seems to have found the formula for success, i.e., put the largest number of trained professionals in front of the fewest number of children for the longest periods of time. Virtually every penny of federal and state funding has been directed to and found its way in front of children in the form of trained professional learning support personnel and the results are undeniable. We believe that all children can learn and we also believe that we are the teachers to teach them! The challenge for the very near future will be our ability to sustain a system of programs that has proved so successful.

Programs, however, do not translate into achievement without professional and caring people. Upper Darby’s Board of School Directors has been steadfast in its support of the district’s 2008-2013 Strategic Plan (www.upperdarbysd.org) to improve student achievement while remaining fiscally responsible. The Superintendent’s Cabinet meets weekly to set, coordinate and monitor progress on strategic goals, programs and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). Most importantly, 1,017 certificated staff and 841 support staff (including aides, secretaries, bus drivers, crossing guards, cafeteria workers, maintenance and business office personnel) provide instruction and support to students each and every day.
Data Driven Organization

Over the past five years, Upper Darby School District has emerged as a data-driven organization at the individual student, class, grade, school and district-wide levels. Data provides the means to become a self-correcting organization at every level. The district credits this transformation to its decisions to: 1) participate in the Johns Hopkins CDDRE initiative, 2) become an early adopter of 4Sight Benchmark Assessments, EAP tutoring, and Response to Instruction and Intervention, 3) develop comprehensive school and district improvement plans, 4) invest in an Educational Research Coordinator, 5) purchase the CDA data tool, 6) infuse Literacy Coaches into each and every school and most importantly, 7) expand the role of the school psychologist to include the systematic collection and interpretation of the data that has been so critical to our making effective decisions. The PA Department of Education, PATTAN and the Delaware County Intermediate Unit have been critical catalysts, supporters and funders of many of these activities and have partnered with our district to provide the level student learning support necessary for the current outcomes.

The district’s intentional use of data to determine root causes is reflected in a comprehensive and extensive Local Assessment Plan and Testing Calendar that are based on a wide variety of reliable, valid and usable assessments. These assessments provide practitioners the ability to diagnose problems and prescribe interventions necessary for student success.

The district’s 14 schools follow a standardized system of Data Teams and Data Team meetings to review student data and progress. Data teams have been in operation at the elementary level for three years and at the middle school level for two years.

In each elementary and middle school, grade level benchmark Data Meetings are composed of the principal, classroom teachers, reading specialists, literacy coach, school psychologist, ELL/special education teacher. Meetings are held in September, January and May and use a very specific and consistent protocol and a set of predetermined “critical questions” to guide their discussions at each tier. Our staff has the ability to really know each and every student. In addition to analyzing academic data, the district monitors student and school data including suspension and expulsion rates and reportable incidents for PDE’s Safe Schools Reports. An RTII model of diagnosis and prescription of school climate and culture issues is in place and having a dramatic impact on student
attitudes toward their place in the learning cycle. Our students are physically as well as emotionally safe while they are with us...two conditions necessary for learning to take place.

The identification of low-performing schools is a natural consequence of operating within a data driven organization. Every school is expected to exist as a self-correcting organization. Each fall, school improvement teams analyze standardized test and other data results as the first step in developing their school improvement plan. The district also prepares a district improvement plan. These plans are prepared regardless of whether AYP is made. The Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction and his staff reviews all plans and forwards them to the Superintendent for approval by Board of School Directors and submitted to the PA Department of Education, when required.

The Upper Darby success story should not be an anomaly within the education industry but it certainly seems to be. We have designed a system of programs that, through intentional planning and implementation, has made the district a learning place of choice for people from all corners of the planet.

To be clear, this success takes unwavering commitment to the belief that every child can learn and we are the people to teach them; a lot of hard work; the willingness to acknowledge when something is not working and correct it; an adequate number of the right kind of professionals on the school teams (including teachers and learning support professionals); and funding. Upper Darby has benefitted from and made excellent use of federal and state funds, including ARRA money and other grants. This funding has enabled us to put the largest number of trained adults in front the fewest number of students for the longest periods of time. When this funding disappears, we will have great difficulty sustaining our success. Funding for innovation is fine but without funding to sustain the programs and approaches that work, no school district can maintain comprehensive lasting improvements in school achievement for all students.