Harrison Community Schools
Michigan

Superintendent: Christopher Rundle
Primary contact: Michele Sandro, principal, Hillside Elementary*
Schools studied:
   Larson Elementary
   Hillside Elementary
2,122 students, K-12, rural

District and School Descriptions
Harrison Community Schools is a rural school district serving 2,122 students in central Michigan. Due to declining enrollment and fiscal difficulties, the district closed its most rural elementary school building at the end of school year 2002-03.

The other two elementary schools, which historically had difficulty meeting adequate yearly progress targets, were placed in the restructuring phrase of the No Child Left Behind Act based on 2002-03 state test scores. Both schools made significant changes during 2003-04 and 2004-05. Based on 2004-05 testing, both came off the state's list of schools in need of improvement. As of school year 2005-06, no Title I schools are identified for improvement. Hillside, however, will remain eligible for a state restructuring grant, because this is the first year it is not in restructuring.

Key Findings

- Student achievement is up in Harrison, and two schools have come out from under restructuring sanctions under NCLB. District staff attributes this success to changes in grade level configurations, teacher teams, and coaching. All these changes will continue at the two schools in 2005-06.

- While the superintendent found the meetings of Harrison’s new governance board useful, other factors at the school level appear to have influenced student achievement more. The governance board will not continue to meet since neither school is in restructuring in 2005-06.

- Although Harrison did not apply for a federal Reading First grant, the district already follows some of the guidelines of Reading First, such as providing instruction using the components of reading—phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension—and devoting a 90- to 120-minute block of time to reading. Teachers and principals feared that receiving a grant would force them to adopt a new reading program. Instead, staff will attend some Reading First state training and continue to use their current reading materials and pro-

*Other contacts for this case study include Julie Rosekrans, principal, Larson Elementary; Heather M. Jensen, teacher, Hillside Elementary; Barbara Elliott, teacher, Hillside Elementary; Cindy Scare, teacher, Larson Elementary; Sandra Bristol, teacher, Hillside Elementary; Maureen Conklin, teacher, Larson Elementary; Sharon McNutt, teacher, Larson Elementary; Robert Balwinski, field services consultant, Office of School Improvement, Michigan Department of Education.
grams, which include Reading Recovery, a one-on-one reading intervention delivered by specially trained teachers.

- Supplemental educational services tutoring offered off-site by private providers proved less popular than on-site tutoring offered by the district’s Regional Education Service District (RESD). After attending RESD’s on-site academic tutoring, students could join a more recreationally oriented after-school program also in the building. The lure of the recreational program may account for RESD’s popularity, said teachers who tutored in the program. While staff reported that partnering with the recreational program was very beneficial, it could also be problematic at times. Some teachers said their students wanted to skip academic tutoring and just attend the recreational program.

- Due to NCLB’s mandate that all Title I paraprofessionals meet the state definition for being “highly qualified,” Harrison has decided not to use Title I funds for paraprofessionals. District officials said that the change has allowed the district to focus Title I funding on professional staff instead.

**Overall Impact of NCLB**

Having schools identified for restructuring due to failure to meet AYP targets added fuel to the quest to improve schools, teachers and administrators in Harrison agreed. Increased funding from the state of Michigan, specifically earmarked for restructuring, was instrumental in supporting these efforts, principals said. Still, improvement efforts went above and beyond the requirements of NCLB and were supported by a number of interrelated initiatives. “This didn’t just happen overnight,” said Hillside Principal Michele Sandro, emphasizing that teachers and administrators were seeing the fruits of years of hard work.

**NCLB and Student Achievement**

Restructuring efforts appeared to pay off in Harrison elementary schools, both of which had low student achievement. District and school staff attribute increases in student achievement to changes over the last two years, some of which, like coaching, are directly related to NCLB restructuring efforts, and some of which are due to changes unrelated to NCLB. Based on 2004-05 testing, academic achievement has increased. In English/language arts, the state Web site showed that 76% of students passed the 4th-grade state test, and in math 90% passed. This is a sharp increase from 2002, when only 58% of students passed in English/language arts and 36% in math.

Academic achievement also improved in the middle school, state records showed. About 63% of 7th graders passed state English/language arts tests and about 59% of 8th graders passed in math. In 2002, only 54% passed in English/language arts and 51% in math. Achievement in the district’s traditional high school fell slightly, however. For these 11th graders, 65% passed state English/language arts tests and 53% passed state math tests, down from the 74% who passed in English/language arts in 2002 and 71% who passed in math in 2002. District officials said they hope that as the higher achieving middle and elementary school students enter the high school, achievement will rise. Despite declines in high school, high school students as a whole met all AYP targets.

Achievement gaps between low-income students and their peers and between students with disabilities and their peers have been narrowing, district officials report. These two subgroups have traditionally had difficulty meeting AYP targets. The district is still concerned with the achievement of students with disabilities. While expectations have been raised for these students, they are typically identified for special education because they have had difficulty with academics, said Michele Sandro, principal of Hillside Elementary.
In general, district staff, particularly elementary school teachers, said that the state test reflects the gains made in Harrison fairly accurately. Sandro, however, emphasized that gains in Harrison have come from focusing broadly on student learning and higher-order thinking skills, rather than focusing narrowly on the state test and test-taking skills. In the district and nationally, she said, “There is still some belief that if we just teach to the test we’ll be okay. We need to change that thinking.”

**Adequate Yearly Progress and School Improvement**

**DISTRICT AND SCHOOL AYP STATUS**

Michigan calculates district AYP based on the performance of elementary, middle, and high school students. Based on 2004-05 testing, Harrison met all AYP targets at all levels and is not in improvement.

Over the past few years, Harrison has focused on getting its two elementary schools to meet AYP targets. Based on 2002-03 testing, Larson and Hillside were identified for restructuring. At that point, both schools had a spotty history of academic achievement. Both had difficulty meeting math targets for all students, and all targets for low-income students and students with disabilities. About 58% of students in Harrison are categorized as low-income and 16% are students with disabilities.

Also in the 2002-03 school year, the district closed its third elementary school due to declining enrollment in the school, increased transportation costs and other financial considerations, and a desire to enhance collaboration among the district’s teachers and reduce competition among sites. Although this school had been doing better than the district’s two more centrally located buildings and was successfully making AYP, it was located far from most students’ homes. This closure was highly unpopular with some parents and teachers.

The grade levels at the district’s two remaining elementary schools were reconfigured so that all students in the district would eventually attend both schools. Larson served grades K-2, while Hillside served grades 3-5. Larson’s 2003-04 test scores showed improvement, and all AYP targets were met. Hillside, on the other hand, failed to make AYP based on the math scores of low-income students. While Larson technically did not have to implement restructuring in 2004-05, Sandro said both schools went ahead with their restructuring plans, especially since plans included rearranging both schools’ grade-level configurations.

Currently, only Harrison’s alternative high school is identified for improvement. This school serves about 20 students, including many who have not been successful in the traditional high school. The alternative school caters particularly to students who have left traditional high school and may now be working and raising families. The school is in year 1 of improvement due to the performance of students in math. It does not face any NCLB sanctions, however, because it receives no Title I funding.

**CORRECTIVE ACTION AND RESTRUCTURING STRATEGIES**

Harrison used a variety of strategies to improve its two Title I schools in restructuring. To meet the requirements of NCLB, the schools added a new governance board. The superintendent, Christopher Rundle, appointed this board consisting of state and local education leaders to make major decisions about the schools’ operations. Members of the new governing board include Rundle, Harrison’s field services consultant in the Office of School Improvement at the Michigan Department of Education, the director of the Michigan Department of Education’s Office of School Improvement, the superintendent of the Regional Education Service District, and the president of the district’s teachers union. The board met as needed, with the first meeting in January and about five meetings total during the year, Rundle said.
While meetings were at times difficult because of the members’ widely varying backgrounds, Rundle said he believed the group was useful. “I think it was valuable in generating ideas and talking about things to try to improve schools,” he commented. “The work we did ended up being helpful.”

Choosing the right members for governance boards may be difficult. While Rundle said non-district members brought fresh perspectives, at least one member felt removed from the process. “I felt more like an outsider than part of the process,” said Robert Balwinski, field services consultant with the Michigan Department of Education. He recommended that others creating governance boards choose members who are more familiar with the districts they will be governing and that they structure meetings in ways that will allow all board members’ voices to be heard.

Even with these changes, however, Balwinski said he is not sure governance boards hold the key to school improvement. “There is no research that shows that appointing a governance board is a good idea,” he pointed out. “That was part of our problem. We were pioneers.”

In the case of Harrison, Balwinski and others said the governance board was not the primary reason the schools improved. District officials said the last two years brought a major cultural shift in the district. As Balwinski put it, “The people were ready for change. The data hit them in the face.” Changes in grade configurations, teacher teams, and coaching all had a large impact on the schools and will all be continued, officials reported. Now that the schools are no longer in restructuring, however, Rundle said the governance board will no longer meet.

Changing the schools’ grade-level configuration was a first step toward teacher collaboration and school improvement, principals said. Instead of two schools both serving kindergarten through 5th grades, in 2004-05 the district created three schools within two buildings. Larson served kindergarten and 1st grade. Hillside was divided into two separate schools with two separate principals. The lower school served 2nd and 3rd grades, and the upper school served 4th and 5th. For 2005-06, Hillside will become one school with one principal serving grades 2-5.

Prior to these changes, the elementary schools had competed against each other for students and community support. Initially staff and parents resisted the restructuring. “The first year was gruesome,” said Sandra Bristol, 4th grade teacher at Hillside. “There was historical conflict that went way back. I think we worked on that. I think the community is blending more.” Grade-level teams and training were essential to the schools’ new cooperative approach, teachers said.

As well as rearranging the grades in the elementary school, the district expanded to all-day, every-day kindergarten. Prior to 2004-05, the district offered kindergarten only every other day with alternating Fridays. Unspent Title I funds set aside in 2003-04 for choice and supplemental educational services helped finance the expansion, Sandro said. All-day, every-day kindergarten will continue in 2005-06. Kindergarten teachers said they noticed a difference in how much students learned when they attended every day. “Kids coming into 1st grade will be at a much higher level,” confirmed Sharon McNutt, 1st grade teacher at Larson, who has observed the kindergarteners.

Impact of NCLB on Curriculum and Instruction

GENERAL CHANGES IN CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

Decisions of teachers in grade-level teams and in cross-grade writing and math teams had a strong effect on curriculum and instruction, teachers said. Curricular teams had funding from the district’s restructuring budget to buy supplemental materials, such as computer software for improving math achievement and math textbooks that matched the texts used in the middle school. These teams bought the materials, passed on information to the grade-level teams, and recommended professional development to support curricular goals.

Another change facilitated by these teams was a move toward flexible grouping for language arts and math. In grade-level teams, teachers frequently analyzed student achievement data,
grouped their students according to the skills they needed to work on, and then designed lessons to meet the needs of each group. “We’re using assessment to guide instruction,” explained Barbara Elliott, Title I teacher at Hillside.

This flexible grouping is a departure from previous practice. “Before, lots of teachers just taught a cookbook lesson,” said Maureen Conklin, Reading Recovery teacher at Larson. Small-group instruction is supported by having Title I and Reading Recovery teachers like Elliot and Conklin work in the classroom alongside the regular classroom teacher. This team teaching made it possible to have several group lessons running simultaneously. It also increased communication and teamwork, teachers said.

**CHANGES IN CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION FOR SUBGROUPS**

After summer training in 2004, Harrison implemented a more inclusive model of special education. As much as possible, special education teachers team teach with regular education teachers, Sandro said. Inclusion appeared to pay off in rising test scores last year for students with disabilities, Sandro added. Seeing special education students and teachers more frequently increased opportunities for communication and helped regular education teachers see what’s possible. “I think we’re all raising our expectations for special education,” said Title I teacher Elliot.

**NCLB School Choice**

The Harrison school district wasn’t able to offer choice within the district in 2004-05 because both its elementary school buildings were identified for improvement. Parents did have the choice of sending students to neighboring districts due to Michigan’s inter-district choice program. No Harrison parents, however, specifically requested a transfer under NCLB in 2004-05. Sandro and Rosekrans said that because of lengthy commuting times, they believed most parents would not want to send their children outside this rural district.

**Supplemental Educational Services**

Three providers offered supplemental educational services to students at Larson and Hillside in 2004-05: the district’s Regional Education Service District, which is a state agency; Sylvan Learning; and Kumon Math. Of the 610 students eligible for SES, 48 participated in tutoring offered by RESD in the first and second semesters, 1 participated in Sylvan Learning during the year, and 1 in Kumon Math. Both Sylvan Learning and Kumon were off-site providers with no transportation offered. These characteristics may help explain the low participation rates, Sandro said.

The more popular RESD tutoring consisted of small-group instruction in math, the subject in which the schools’ students needed the most help. RESD employed Harrison teachers to work at the school sites with no more than four students at a time for one hour after school. Students also received a snack and could join Sparks, a recreational after-school program, for an hour after they completed math tutoring. Funded through a 21st Century Community Learning Centers grant, Sparks also provided transportation home for all students attending after-school programs at Larson or Hillside.

While Sparks helped RESD by providing an additional hour of activities and transportation, Sparks also competed with the RESD program. “Some kids wanted Sparks more than math tutoring,” said Bristol, 4th grade teacher at Hillside, who tutored in the RESD program. Although Sparks did provide academic activities in the first hour after school, the activities were perceived as less intense. In the RESD program, the instruction focused on testing and was less flexible. For example, Bristol said, “You couldn’t just relax with students and play a math card game that might encourage a student to enjoy math. Lessons were scripted by RESD and didn’t allow for differences in learning styles or behavior.”
Another challenge to the RESD program was that only low-income students in the school could be invited to participate. “It would have been more effective if we had gotten all the kids who really needed it,” said Cindy Scare, a 1st grade teacher at Larson who tutored in the RESD program.

Because neither Larson nor Hillside is still identified as in need of improvement, SES will no longer be offered, but the 21st Century grant and Sparks will continue. Principals Sandro and Rosekrans anticipate that Sparks will be able to serve all the students who were previously served by RESD, and that the loss of SES should not impact achievement.

**Teacher Qualifications, Support, and Professional Development**

**HIGHLY QUALIFIED TEACHERS**
Currently, 95% of the districts’ 115 teachers are highly qualified, according to NCLB criteria. Due to NCLB, Michigan changed the requirements for middle school teachers; therefore, several middle school teachers in Harrison had to take additional courses to be counted as highly qualified, even though they had state certification to teach. Sandro anticipated that all or nearly all will have completed these requirements by the 2006 deadline. Even though Harrison is a rural district, both Rosekrans and Sandro noted that they have had little difficulty attracting and retaining highly qualified teachers.

**PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**
During the 2004-05 school year, teachers at Larson and Hillside all worked in grade-level teams. These teams met for about an hour and a half twice a month. In addition, cross-grade level teams met for half a day once a month to work on math and writing curricula. Restructuring funds provided substitutes for teachers while they were meeting. These teams will continue in 2005-06, although the cross-grade level teams will meet after school to cut down on substitute time.

Using restructuring funds and other grant funds, the district also hired a coach to provide professional development for the teams. “People automatically think a group is going to know how to work together,” said Barbara Elliot, a teacher at Hillside. “That’s not true.” The consultant’s work on team building and conflict resolution was essential to the success of the teams, teachers said.

“Our teams have fostered trust,” said Heather Jensen, 5th grade teacher at Hillside, explaining that teachers are no longer hesitant to visit one another’s classrooms and to ask for and receive advice on how to improve. “There’s a lot more teamwork and camaraderie. It’s pretty exciting.”

The cross-grade-level curricular teams also influenced professional development, teachers said. The teams joined professional organizations such as the International Reading Association and passed information on to grade-level teams. They also sent groups to conferences and passed information on through the grade-level teams.

**Paraprofessional Qualifications and Support**
Harrison no longer uses Title I funds to employ paraprofessionals. Before NCLB, Sandro described the district as “para-pro heavy.” “NCLB was an opportunity to put our money into professional staff,” she said, a change that resulted in better use of funds. The paraprofessionals currently employed in the district take care of special needs students or have non-instructional duties. This frees teachers to spend more time on instruction and cooperative planning, Sandro explained.
**Funding and Costs**

Like most districts in Michigan, Harrison has experienced cuts in state funding, Superintendent Rundle said. Harrison has had to adjust, but Rundle noted, “We’re not cutting programs for kids.” Due to Harrison’s recent increases in student achievement, Rundle said he hopes to stop the district’s declining enrollment of about 50 students per year and even attract additional students from neighboring districts. “Our reputation is going to get us students,” he anticipated, “but not overnight.”

Title I funding to the district has remained relatively flat. Coming off the state list of schools in need of improvement will mean less funding in the form of state funds earmarked for restructuring. In 2004-05, the district received an additional $90,000 for restructuring. These funds were used for the coach, materials, additional meetings, and the hiring of substitutes for teacher training and team planning times. This year only Hillside will be eligible, and the funding will amount to only $45,000. “I do believe we will notice a difference,” Sandro said. “There’s a huge financial support that will be gone.”

Other district grants, such as the Comprehensive School Reform grant and the 21st Century grant, will help take up the slack, Sandro noted. Teachers also said they believed the schools would continue to improve despite this reduction in funding. “The structures are in place,” Bristol said, “I think we can maintain growth.”

As teachers, “We’re all making a personal commitment,” added Sharon McNutt, Bristol’s colleague at Larson Elementary. She speculated that teachers would be even more willing to give their time to school improvement efforts now that student achievement is clearly on the rise.

**Reading First**

Although Harrison was eligible to apply for a Reading First grant, teachers chose not to. “We had too many other reading initiatives in place,” said Hillside Principal Sandro, noting that a Reading First grant in Michigan would have necessitated a change in reading curriculum and materials. “We wanted to see the fruits of our current work,” 1st grade teacher McNutt explained.

Despite the difficult decision to forgo a direct Reading First grant, Sandro said the district does have some of the components of Reading First in place and will benefit from some of the state grant activities. According to Sandro, the reading programs at Larson and Hillside include the five components of reading specified in Reading First: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. The schools also both have 90 to 120 minutes of reading daily. In school year 2005-06, teachers plan to attend state-sponsored professional development funded through the state’s Reading First grant.

**Data File—Harrison Community Schools**

**Location:** Michigan

**Type:** Rural

**Number of Schools**

Total: 6
Elementary: 2
Middle/junior high: 1
High schools: 1
Other: 2 (1 alternative high school, 1 pre-school program)

**Number of Title I schools:** 3
**Student Enrollment and Demographics**

Total enrollment: 2,122

- White: 95%
- African American: 1%
- American Indian: 1%
- Latino: 1%
- Asian: 0%

- Low-income students: 58%
- Students with disabilities: 16%
- English language learners: 0%

**Teachers**

Total number of teachers: 115

- Percentage meeting NCLB “highly qualified” requirements: 95%

**Paraprofessionals**

Total number of Title I instructional paraprofessionals: 0

- Percentage meeting NCLB “highly qualified” requirements: NA

**Total Number That Did Not Make AYP Based on 2004-05 Testing**

- Title I and non-Title I schools that did not make AYP, including those in improvement, restructuring, or corrective action: 1

**Number of Title I Schools in Improvement, Restructuring, or Corrective Action**

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