Marlboro Elementary School

Vermont

Superintendent: Cheryl Ruth
Primary contacts: Lauren Poster, school board member, and Francie Marbury, principal*
School studied: Marlboro Elementary School
77 students, K-8, rural

District Description

Marlboro is located in Windham County in rural southeastern Vermont. The district consists of just one school that serves 77 students in kindergarten through grade 8. The district is part of a supervisory union that includes eight other small, single-school districts, each with its own school board.

Key Findings

- Marlboro Elementary School, which serves as both the school and district under Vermont’s accountability system, is deeply opposed to No Child Left Behind and has resisted implementation of the statewide assessment and highly qualified teacher requirements.

- The school has maintained very high student achievement but will likely not demonstrate adequate yearly progress in 2005-06 after failing to assess at least 95% of its students in October 2005.

- NCLB has not affected Marlboro’s curriculum or instructional practices, but the school’s principal is concerned that the law will take away the flexibility and the creative programming that have allowed the school to excel.

Overall Impact of NCLB

Marlboro Elementary School, which does not receive Title I funds, is deeply opposed to NCLB and has resisted implementation since the beginning. In 2004, the school board passed a resolution stating that NCLB is “inherently flawed” and “fails students and schools.” As a result of these concerns, the board resolution proclaims that the Marlboro Elementary School District “will not participate in AYP as determined by the No Child Left Behind Act”; “will not forward information we deem sensitive to the Windham Central Supervisory Union that can be connected in any way to a specific student by name”; “will not administer any tests that the principal does not deem to have useful educational value”; and “will not incur any extra expenses to administer any part of the NCLB Act.”

In 2005, the school softened its stance somewhat, administering the statewide assessment (see section on Testing below) after the state threatened to pull the school principal’s license.

* The other contact for this case study is Gail Taylor, director for standards and assessment, Vermont Department of Education.
NCLB and Student Achievement

Student achievement in Marlboro Elementary School is high. For 2003-04, the most recent year for which there is data, 91% of 4th graders were at least proficient in mathematical concepts on the state assessment. One hundred percent of 4th graders were proficient or higher in mathematical skills and mathematical problem solving. In reading, 100% of Marlboro 4th graders were at least proficient in basic understanding and 91% were at least proficient in analysis and interpretation.

Adequate Yearly Progress and School Improvement

DISTRICT AND SCHOOL AYP STATUS

Vermont’s method for determining whether schools and districts are demonstrating adequate yearly progress is "evolving," according to Gail Taylor, Vermont’s director for standards and assessment. The issue is that many schools in the state, including Marlboro Elementary, are small and thus do not have more than the 80 students required by the state for accountability purposes, and many districts are composed of only one such school.

Beginning in 2005-06, the state changed the way it determines whether a school has demonstrated AYP to reflect the change in its assessment system from one that tests in grades 2, 4, 8, and high school to one that tests in grades 3 through 8 and high school. According to Taylor, this system is still in the development stages.*

The way in which the state holds districts accountable for demonstrating AYP under NCLB is undergoing change as well. Through the 2002-03 school year, the state considered the supervisory union accountable as the district. Beginning in 2003-04, the state shifted its focus from the supervisory union to the town, even if the town includes only one school, as in Marlboro, meaning that a school can serve as both the school and district for NCLB accountability purposes.

Marlboro has never failed to demonstrate AYP and has received a number of awards from the state for its strong student achievement and academic programs. In 2005-06, however, the school will probably not demonstrate AYP, as it failed to assess at least 95% of its students in October 2005 (see Testing section below). The school, which is also the district, would refuse to implement sanctions such as public school choice or supplemental educational services, according to school board president Lauren Poster. Under federal law, Marlboro has the right to make that choice, since the school does not receive Title I, although the state could sanction the school under state law, according to Taylor. These sanctions, she added, would be “negotiated” with the school and would not include those typically applied to Title I schools, such as school choice and supplemental educational services.

DISTRICT AND SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES

Marlboro has never been identified for improvement, corrective action, or restructuring.

Testing Issues

Beginning in October 2005, Vermont—along with New Hampshire and Rhode Island—began administering a new assessment for grades 3 through 8. This assessment, the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP), was developed by the three states to meet the requirements of NCLB. For Vermont, NECAP replaced the New Standards Reference Exam, which

* Starting in 2003-04 and ending in 2004-05, the state made AYP decisions using three methods, depending on the size of the school. Schools such as Marlboro Elementary, with 30 to 79 assessed students, were subject to “Small School Review B.” Under this review, the state made a determination that a school either demonstrated or failed to demonstrate AYP based on one year of data as long as its finding fell within a statistical confidence interval, which got smaller with fewer numbers of students. If the state’s finding did not fall within the confidence interval, the state combined test score data from previous years until the sample size was large enough.
was administered in grades 4, 8, and 10. Marlboro Elementary School will continue to use student portfolios for assessment and school-level accountability purposes.

Initially, Marlboro indicated that it would refuse to administer the new state assessment, insisting that it was instructionally irrelevant and time consuming to administer. According to Poster, in September 2004, Vermont’s Commissioner of Education, Richard Cate, notified the school and the supervisory union that he would “pull the license” of the school principal and superintendent of the supervisory union if the school refused to participate. Taylor said that the commissioner had “good conversations” with the school and has assured them that the test, which was developed with the help of teachers from across three states, is “instructionally relevant.”

Nonetheless, according to Poster, Marlboro insisted on assurances that the test data would be kept secure and anonymous and not linked with other pieces of data, such as students’ health or disability status. The Vermont Department of Education agreed to this condition, according to Poster, who added that the commissioner also assured her that no school would be labeled as “failing.” Rather, according to Poster, the commissioner will have “individual conversations with principals of schools not showing improvement to find out what was going on.”

Ultimately, Marlboro did administer the NECAP, but allowed parents to excuse their children from taking the test. Four families (5 students out of about 50 in grades 3-8) took advantage of this option. According to Taylor, it is up to individual schools to determine how to handle students who do not participate in the assessment, but all schools will be held accountable for ensuring that at least 95% of their students do so. As mandated by NCLB, schools that do not administer the state assessment to at least 95% of their students cannot be found to demonstrate AYP. Taylor added that if Marlboro Elementary does not demonstrate AYP for two straight years, it will be found to be in need of improvement even though it does not receive Title I funds.

After administering the test in October 2005, Francie Marbury, the school’s principal, remains convinced that the state assessment has “no value for our students and is very disruptive to daily instruction and learning.” As the children took the tests, she added, concerns arose over its format, wording, and vocabulary, which prevented students who knew the content from answering correctly.

Impact of NCLB on Curriculum and Instruction

Marlboro school board member Lauren Poster said that no changes have been made to the school’s curriculum in response to NCLB. The school has made some recent curriculum changes for other reasons. Spanish was added to the curriculum beginning in 2003-04. Also, the school has started using Medicaid reimbursements to provide after-school programs and summer programs, including a homework club, a climbing club, and girls’ track, according to Marbury.

Despite the relatively small impact NCLB is having on Marlboro, Marbury remains concerned that the law will have an adverse effect on the school. In particular, she remains concerned that NCLB is leading to increased top-down management of schools. As a small, rural school in a community that values education and is proud of its school, she noted, Marlboro has benefited from a high degree of local control, offering innovative and creative programs in the arts and in experiential education. “Our 5th and 6th grade leaves for a week of field study on Cape Cod next week, and they have spent the better part of the last month preparing for this trip,” said Marbury. “All of our 1st and 3rd grade students study the violin. We believe that these activities enhance learning in all areas, but they can’t be packaged into a scientifically based curriculum and sold by McGraw Hill.”

NCLB School Choice and Supplemental Educational Services

Marlboro has never failed to demonstrate AYP and has therefore not had to offer public school choice or supplemental educational services. Gail Taylor, the state’s director of standards and assessments, indicated that the school would likely receive technical assistance but would not be subject to school choice or supplemental educational services.
Teacher Qualifications, Support, and Professional Development

Neither Poster nor Marbury knew the percentage of the school’s 9 teachers who are highly qualified according to the NCLB definition. According to Marbury, teachers have received this information from the state, but it has not been sent to administrators. Consequently, the school has not notified parents of students taught by teachers who are not highly qualified.

The school has made no changes to the way it develops or supports its teachers as a result of NCLB. For the most part, the school provides its own support for teachers, although it also purchases materials, professional development for teachers, and music and physical education classes for students from the supervisory union. The school believes that it already provides an outstanding education.

Paraprofessional Qualifications and Support

Since Marlboro Elementary is not a Title I school, its seven paraprofessionals need not be highly qualified as defined by NCLB, and the school does not track their qualifications.

Data File—Marlboro Elementary School

Location: Vermont
Type: Rural

Number of Schools
Total: 1 (K-8)
Number of Title I schools: 0

Student Enrollment and Demographics
Total enrollment: 77
White: 91%
African American: 5%
Latino: 3%
Asian: 1%

Low-income students: 29%
Students with disabilities: 12%
English language learners: 5%

Teachers
Total number of teachers: 9
Percentage meeting NCLB “highly qualified” requirements: Unknown

Paraprofessionals
Total number of Title I instructional paraprofessionals: 0 (out of 7 total paraprofessionals)
Percentage meeting NCLB “highly qualified” requirements: Unknown

Total Number of Schools That Did Not Make AYP Based on 2004-05 Testing: 0
Number of Title I Schools in Improvement, Restructuring, or Corrective Action: 0
Number of Schools Offering Choice and/or SES: 0