



McGregor Elementary School

Canton, OH

Principal: **Victor Johnson**

Superintendent: **Michele Evans**

School type: **District**

Grades served: **K-6, pre-k**

372 Student enrollment

90.2 Percent economically disadvantaged

26.2 Percent non-white

14.9 Percent of students with disabilities

16 Teachers' average years of experience

\$60,917 Average teacher salary

\$10,204 Total expenditure per pupil

“There’s no school like McGregor.”

McGregor Elementary occupies one block in southwest Canton, in a mostly working-class neighborhood with small houses and neat yards overshadowed by the nearby Timken plant. Each day during the morning drop-off, the new, dusty-brown brick school opens its doors to students and parents alike. Indeed, the morning ritual is best described as a bit of ordered chaos. Students are escorted by their parents through the double-door entrance and immediately met with streams of people—staff members welcoming families, other parents catching up with each other, and kids heading toward the gymnasium before being dismissed to their classrooms.

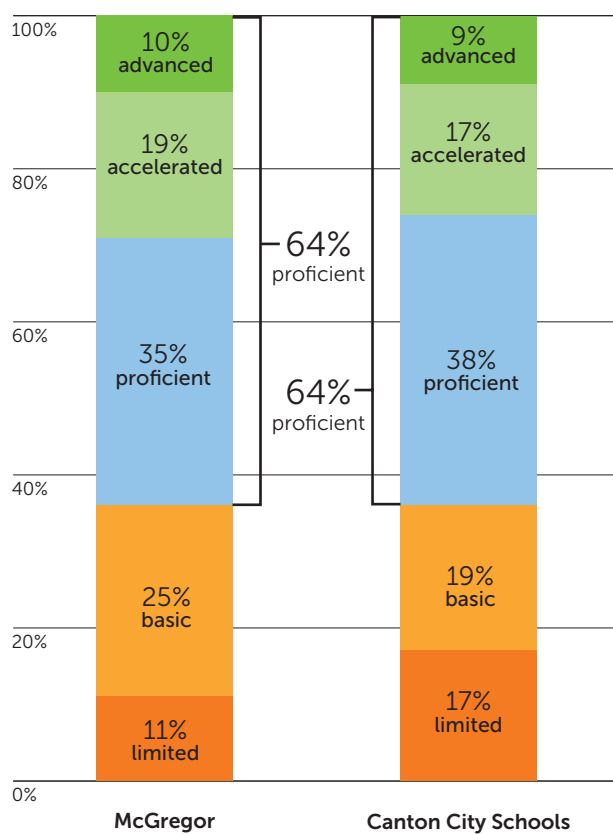
SOURCE FOR CHARTS: Ohio Department of Education interactive Local Report Card, 2008-09; reading and math calculations performed by Fordham Institute, see endnote 11.

While not exactly orderly, there was no threat of *disorder* in the scene. In fact, amidst the throng of people it was clear this sight was unusual for an urban school educating over 90 percent low-income students. Most parents drop students off inside the building. Adults aren't dour or quiet—they talk and laugh with the staff members and each other. And teachers use this casual atmosphere to chat with parents about their children.

Darting in and out of the front doors and working the crowd is Victor Johnson, the 16-year veteran principal who has spent 13 of those years at McGregor. Principal Johnson moves quickly through



Reading



Percent of students by reading proficiency level, 2008-09 (McGregor vs. district)

the mass of parents and students—directing some, greeting most, and smiling at everyone. He knows these parents. And they know him.

Of the schools visited for this report, McGregor is closest to being a “neighborhood” school. That’s part of what accounts for the family atmosphere and comfort parents feel within its walls. Some parents are even proud alumni of McGregor. The history and level of stability at McGregor clearly help parents and faculty alike feel they are part of something special. Principal Johnson and his staff go to great lengths to make parents and students feel welcome. (Parents explained how other schools would only allow them to drop off or pick up their children outside the building or curbside.) Besides, a growing number of McGregor students come from outside the neighborhood. Like



most of Ohio’s urban school districts, Canton City allows parents to choose their preferred school.

—● *“If I didn’t have McGregor, I’d be home-schooling my son.” – Francis Thomas, parent*

According to Principal Johnson, the open atmosphere at McGregor is all part of relationship-building (a common theme in Needles schools). “We want folks to know that we believe in their kids.”

Parents seem to notice this, too. Francis Thomas, father of a third grader, noted his confidence in the staff: “They let me know if there’s a problem... and the staff always treats you with respect. If I didn’t have McGregor, I’d be home-schooling my son.” Such sentiment was echoed by Tony Lackey, a parent of three McGregor students. “Academics are no-nonsense,” he

said. “And Mr. Johnson and staff do a lot to make you feel welcome. There’s no school like McGregor.”

Parents aren’t the only ones that notice the different environment at McGregor. Dr. Michele Evans, Canton City’s superintendent, remarked that McGregor doesn’t have any of the typical traits of an urban school. “It feels like a more affluent suburban school. The staff members enjoy the kids and each other—and the kids enjoy being at school.”

“You don’t want to let your teammates down.”

Good feelings aside, McGregor’s success stems from a relentless drive to improve. A case in point is the school’s approach to early reading. Led by intervention coach Annie Arvidson, who is in many ways a de facto co-leader at McGregor, the reading initiative targets all students in kindergarten through third

grade, and select students in grades four through six. Using handheld computers and the DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills) assessment, Ms. Arvidson and her staff periodically descend upon classrooms to assess students, collect data, and monitor progress. Data gleaned from the sweeps are then crunched and individual students' progress charted and categorized for different levels of intervention.

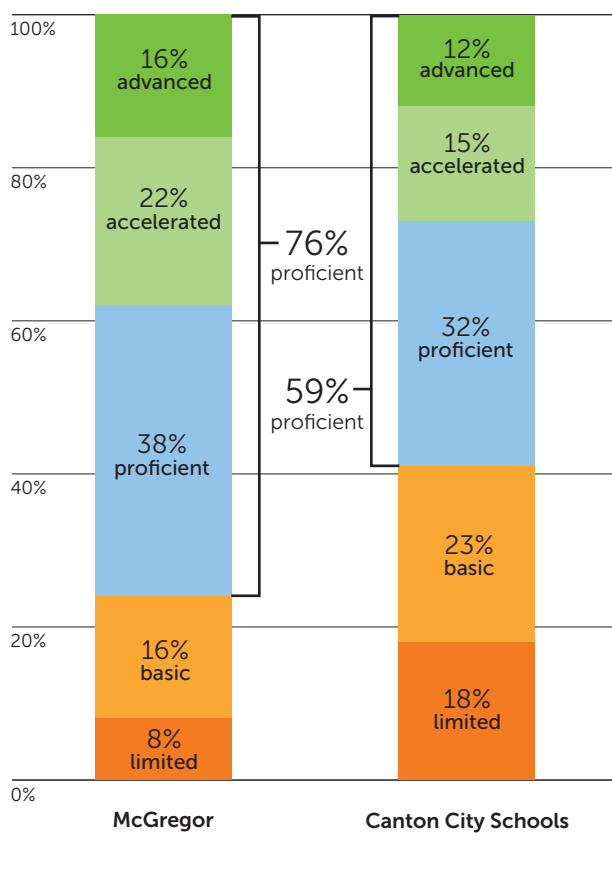
—● *McGregor's success stems from a relentless drive to improve.*

From there, it's a team effort to improve students' reading. Grade-level teachers meet with the Title I team during a weekly 80-minute collaboration session. Using these data, together they discuss individual student needs, brainstorm strategies and interventions, and revisit the data to create reading groups based on student progress. (Title I teachers go back into classrooms to assist in guiding these groups.) "We focus on all students this way, not just struggling readers," Ms. Arvidson said.

It is this comprehensive approach at the lower levels that helps students prepare for the more difficult work at the intermediate level (grades four through six). There, teachers work in pairs (one math/science and one reading/social studies) to provide students with consistent expectations across classes and individualized instruction that meets their needs. Meanwhile, Annie and her Title I team also provide interventions for any struggling intermediate level readers.

The curriculum is not necessarily unique, nor is weekly collaborative time. In fact, they are the same across the district. But more than a few staff members agreed that these just really work better at McGregor. Principal Johnson credits Annie and the teachers. "[They] go above and beyond their assigned duties," Principal

Math



Percent of students by math proficiency level, 2008-09 (McGregor vs. district)

Johnson said. "I ask a lot of them and they rarely ever say 'no.'" When asked about the time and hard work they put in, teachers agreed. But no one seemed to think it was too much. In fact, most cited the needs of their students and the dedication of their colleagues. "You don't want to let your teammates down," explained Barb Jialanella, a first-grade teacher.

That sentiment was shared by most of the teachers at McGregor. And Principal Johnson noted that it helps to maintain a positive school culture. To be sure, he hires selectively to create a core of strong faculty, but he also relies on the school culture to help folks along. The expectations are clearly high for



everyone. “You need the right people,” he explained. “Once you get a majority, those people who aren’t [right] become outcast.” The school’s faculty and staff take ownership of the expectations placed on both students and those who work at McGregor.

It is attitudes such as these that contribute to McGregor’s academic success. While educating a high percentage of disadvantaged students, McGregor is able to keep pace with or exceed the district’s test scores. For example, on the 2009 Ohio Achievement Test, 76 percent of McGregor students were proficient in mathematics, while the Canton City Schools average was 59 percent.

“We’re problem solvers here.”

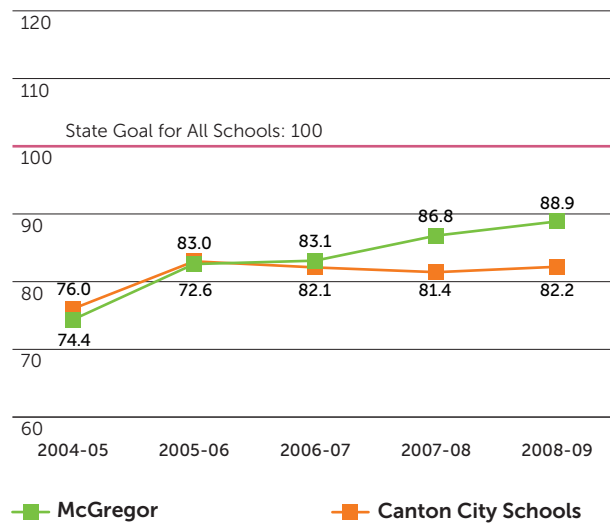
Principal Johnson often compares relationships at McGregor to a marriage. Deninne Cap-Brown, a fifth-grade reading/social studies teacher, echoed that metaphor. Teaching with her math/science partner lets “students see a mutually supportive team in

action.” It models how students will need to collaborate and cooperate in order to be successful in school and beyond.

These relationships are a critical element in the chemistry at McGregor. Certainly, they foster collective ownership of the students and the school’s broader mission. Yet strong relationships among the staff members also facilitate risk-taking and innovation. “We have the ability to try new things—to experiment,” fourth-grade teacher Michele Milano said. Call it the freedom to innovate, or as many teachers said, “the freedom to teach.” In either case, it really amounts to articulating expectations clearly, and then being flexible in how people meet them.

The expectations, though established in part by the state, also take the form of individual student data profiles. Teachers and students chart goals and progress together. “The bar is set,” explained one teacher. “How you get students to meet it doesn’t matter.” Talking to staff members, the approach to every new

Performance Index



Performance index scores over time (McGregor vs. district)

venture is open and positive. At McGregor, it seems that the risks come not in trying and failing, but in failing to innovate. As Ms. Arvidson said more than once, “We’re problem solvers here.”

Breaking It Down

Discipline at McGregor—as in most of the Needles schools—consists of both positive incentives coupled with clear consequences for infractions. Students earn privileges for good behavior and work habits. For instance, the sixth graders took a ski trip to Mansfield, Ohio as a reward for good behavior. For most, it was their first experience skiing. Yet there were also students who did not go on the trip. They had to stay behind and complete school work instead. Samia, a sixth grader at McGregor, put it this way: “They [the teachers] lay down the law.”

—● *“We don’t look at the kids as disadvantaged. They’re just our kids.” - Barb Jialanella, first-grade teacher*

Yet students were also quick to highlight the support they’ve received from McGregor staff. Allison, a fifth grader, described teachers at the school as easy to talk to and always willing to help. Madyson, a fourth grader who has attended McGregor since kindergarten, said she liked the school because the teachers “help you understand things when you need help.” And almost in the same breath that Samia talked about the law, she was quick to observe that teachers at the school “help you with your work...breaking it down so you can understand.”

Teachers caring for students is not the exception, but rather the rule. What seems to make a difference at McGregor (as opposed to many other schools educating similar students) is that teachers not only care for their students, but also refuse to make excuses for them.

“We don’t look at the kids as disadvantaged,” first-grade teacher Barb Jialanella said. “They’re just our kids.”

Lack of “Churn”

It is common in many large district schools for principals to move frequently—particularly those who have been successful. The logic behind such moves is that the most able principals should be matched with the most challenging schools. In other instances, successful principals are quickly snatched up by the district’s central office for broader administrative duties. McGregor’s success calls these practices into question. After all, based on the findings in this report, leadership is but one component of terrific schools.

An equally important component is stability; particularly for folks in the business of relationship-building. Principal Johnson has been at McGregor for 13 years, which is a long time for an urban principal to stay in one building. He contrasted his tenure with another, more troubled school in Canton City that has had four principals in five years. With that level of administrative “churn,” he said, it’s hard to develop a good team and a common culture.

Canton City’s superintendent, Dr. Michele Evans, agreed. “Administrative churn is hurting schools. We know that,” she said. Dr. Evans cited McGregor’s stable staff and leadership as one reason the district is making a commitment to building and maintaining successful teams in schools. “We want to give building leaders the charge and support to grow.”

At McGregor, this charge is carried every day. “Annie and Vic [Principal Johnson] are united in a core set of beliefs,” said Dr. Evans. And the teachers and students embody those beliefs—namely that kids at McGregor will achieve and that the school will continue to improve. As fourth-grade teacher Sharon O’Donnell said, “Everyone believes that these kids can do it.”