

# Best Practices Case Study

Kristen Wilcox, June 2005

Just for the Kids-  
New York

## Ulysses Byas Elementary School

**Roosevelt Union Free School District, Roosevelt, NY**

### School Context

The Roosevelt Union Free School District serves approximately 3000 students in grades K-12 and has historically been a high-needs district. It is the only district in New York State that has been taken over by the state, and it has been a School Under Registration Review (SURR) for more than 13 years due to consistently low performance in the middle and high schools. To some in the district, the state's takeover in 2002 was perceived as "a pure insult," and the assigning of a board from outside of the community felt like "deprivation." One administrator argues,

*People around us are capable of running a school district -- not someone who doesn't know our culture.*

According to the new superintendent appointed by the State Commissioner of Education, the district had been "mismanaged"; teachers were not treated as professionals and not validated in their work.

Although the elementary schools typically perform well on state assessments, the district is challenged with "crumbling buildings, unfocused staff development, systems unglued." An administrator describes the district's climate:

*There's been a perfect system in place even though it's dysfunctional. Think of a war zone. After the war pieces are broken. Systems have fallen apart so people put something in place and they become embedded in part of the culture. You build a wall – "don't touch it – it ain't broke. Don't touch it." To penetrate that is difficult.*

According to one administrator, to make changes in such a "broken" system feels "like we're walking through mud." The district is also challenged by the high needs of the community it serves. The principal of Ulysses Byas Elementary, a long-time resident, explains the history of the community.

*A lot of people came here for the suburbs. They came here for a suburb, but then there was a white flight. Blacks moved in: Whites moved out.*

The community has many multiple family dwellings and a high number of foster children coming from New York City. The Ulysses Byas Elementary School is like the other elementary schools in the district in that it is not "broken" despite its challenges: It consistently outperforms

similar schools on state assessments in language arts and math. An administrator attributes the relatively high scores to individual building efforts:

*(The school's performance) is not a districtwide manifestation. They (the elementary schools) have profoundly dedicated people. The teachers live in the community and they are giving their lives. They will get up early and stay late with an individual child. They are very dedicated.*

Ulysses Byas' principal argues that the school's performance is not about "... the environment. It's what you create inside the system." At Ulysses Byas, administrators and teachers have created a strong mission and an ethos of caring in their school. The school's mission is:

*... to provide interactive, motivational, and culturally enriching skills that cultivate students to reach their highest possibilities by exceeding the standards; therefore empowering them to contribute to the transformation of the universe.*

This mission translates into a school climate where students

*... seem pleased to be here – they understand their responsibilities. They know what's expected of them. This is the mission – they are first in the universe. They know this. Teachers explain what their role is as a human being and in society. The constant reiterating that they will do well – despite your limitations or limitations society will place on you – you can persevere – don't work with what you don't have, work with what you're given.*

**Student Demographics 2003-04:** *Ulysses Byas Elementary School serves a high-need student population. The school's percentage of students qualifying for free lunch is 100% -- approximately three times as high as the state average and more than 20% higher than the district. The school's population is also more diverse than the state with higher percentages of African-American and Hispanic/Latino students.*

	Ulysses Byas	Roosevelt UFSD	New York State
% Eligible for Free Lunch	100%	79.9%	37.0%
% Eligible for Reduced Lunch	0	2.8%	7.2%
% Limited English Proficient	18.6	8.7%	6.8%
<u>Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution</u>			
% African-American	72.6%	82.2%	19.9%
% Hispanic/Latino	27.1%	17.3%	19.4%
% White	0.2%	0.4%	53.7%
% Other	0	0.1%	7.0%
% Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards on Grade 4 ELA Assessment	73%	69%	63%
% Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards on Grade 4 Math Assessment	88%	76%	79%

## Best Practices Highlights

*The culture of the school is the reason for success: Students know we are a school of excellence. Teachers collaborate well together. We are always very strong on learning standards. We also use diverse methods.*

- **Dedicated Teachers on a Mission to Transform Lives**

The school's transformative mission is supported by an ethos of caring and nurturing of children who come to school with great challenges. Teachers see their role as vital for the future health of the children and the community in which they live.

- **Campus-Wide Objectives (CWO) Keep Teachers on the "Same Train"**

In addition to a strong school mission, teachers are guided by CWOs. These keep all teachers working toward aligned objectives at the same time. Meeting these objectives is monitored through area coordinators in Language Arts and Social Studies, and Math and Science.

## A Closer Look

### Curriculum and Academic Goals

A "Five Year Education Plan" was implemented in 2002 to improve the overall process of reaching academic goals in the district. It focuses on "data gathering, analysis and assessment, focused staff development, and focused instruction." The plan outlines "quality standards" and "quality indicators" across 11 "quality elements." Quality Element number one is "the school curriculum is aligned with State Standards." In the Roosevelt UFSD the state standards shape the district curriculum "and always have" even before the "Five Year" plan came into effect, according to teachers. At Ulysses Byas, Campus-Wide Objectives provide a consistent sequence for delivery of this standards-based curriculum.

### **Campus-Wide Objectives Provide Consistency across the School**

At Ulysses Byas, the curriculum is based on the state standards and organized around "Campus Wide Objectives"(CWOs). According to the principal, the language arts curriculum needed "more sequencing" and students needed to provide "more details, main ideas" in their writing. She says that these are the reasons they turned to CWOs, which came from a program called "Spotlight on Reading." CWOs provide "everybody with the same focus: Character traits, main idea..." across the campus. In language arts teachers have a 90-minute block and at least an hour for writing to explore these CWOs.

*The whole school will go from 9-10:30 and 10:30-11:30: A block of ELA and writing.*

The campus wide objectives in Language Arts for 2004-05 were the following:

**Language Arts Campus-Wide Objectives**

Objective	Pacing
Author's Purpose	November 8-19
Main Idea and Theme	November 23-December 23
Inference and Conclusion	December 8 – December 23
Understanding Character	January 3- January 14
Sequence of Events	January 18 – January 31
Cause and Effect	February 1- February 14
Vocabulary in Context	February 15 – March 7
Recalling Information/Details	March 8 – March 23

In math also, CWOs provide a sequence across the school: The principal says, “The entire school will work on geometry -- everyone’s on the same page at the same time.” The math curriculum includes an outline of the CWOs and duration of time to spend on each standard and strand. Teachers also receive a library of materials such as math manipulatives, instructional guides, and resources to aid in implementing the math curriculum.

**Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building**  
**Raising and Keeping Morale High in a High-Needs District**

*I'm amazed about the morale.* – Interim Superintendent

A teacher says one of the reasons she was attracted to the district is that she has an “interest in the community – I went to these schools.” Other teachers say that “if you can make it in Roosevelt you can make it anywhere.” This sense of rising to a challenge in a high-needs environment motivates many to stay. Some teachers also take advantage of the benefits of educational opportunities: “They provide things like a Masters degree.” Still others say they really stay because of the kids they see at risk of falling through the cracks in the impoverished community in which they live. The idea that school is less about “living by a clock” than “following a compass” and that school administration, teachers, and students are “all headed in the same direction – perhaps at different times but we’re going to get there” pervades the climate. This sense of the school being a “welcoming place” where “if you can give help, you give it” spurs teachers and students to collaborate and perform beyond expectations despite constant changes in leadership at the district level.

**Collaboration from Inside and Outside the School and District**

Most of the collaboration around refining what works and what doesn’t in the curriculum and the classroom occurs in grade-level meetings and in-house workshops. Teachers say,

*Lunch breaks are aligned, as are planning breaks. We have regularly scheduled grade-level meetings. “Where are you? Can we combine?”*

*We work together as a group – we do activities together. We have Monday morning grade-level meetings. I’ll say I did this or that and they can ask me for a copy or ask questions, passing things between us. We decided we would group our children in fourth grade on performance. If we need to move a child up or down we do that. If we feel something’s not working, we change it right away.*

The principal makes objectives clear and asks teachers to think about what they expect to see in a child at the end of the year. She also calls school-level meetings to discuss changes in the standards or state assessments.

In addition, administrators say they work closely with the State Education Department, BOCES (Board of Cooperative Educational Services), and local universities to make improvements in classroom instruction. Collaborative efforts included a Teacher Quality Leadership Partnership (TQLP) program and implementation of a STEM (Science Technology Engineering Mathematics) program. The Roosevelt UFSD also benefits from hiring new graduates from area universities' education programs.

### **Mentoring**

New teachers at Ulysses Byas receive new teacher workshops and are “paired up with teachers who implement the way I like to see them teach,” says the principal. Both the reading and math specialists in the building also support new teachers by modeling lessons, demonstrating manipulatives, showing how to use a cooperative approach, partnering the children. They make clear what the objectives are and what performance indicators teachers want students to accomplish. According to one teacher, not just mentors help new teachers out,

*Everyone wanted to help me out. The teachers on my level shared. They had no problem sharing. “Well come in and if you need anything come to me.”*

### **Instructional Programs, Practices and Arrangements**

Although Ulysses Byas has participated in the use of district-mandated instructional programs as they have come and gone, according to the principal, “We don't focus on one program.” Teachers attribute students' successes to,

*The ability to not use the text as the main thing you teach from, knowing you can use it as a resource, having the freedom to do other things – freedom to teach. I don't see a lot of rote learning. Most teachers feel they can bring their real life into school. From my perspective, teachers are allowed to connect to their real life experiences.*

*We don't lock ourselves into a text – we use it to complement.*

### **Catering to Children's Needs in Creative Ways**

*Whatever the child needs, we cater to the needs of the child.– a teacher*

To meet the diverse needs of their students, teachers devise creative ways of delivering the curriculum. A teacher explains how she uses drama in her class and why:

*We do plays throughout the year. We did a Kwanza performance: It motivates the students with their acting abilities, reading, public speaking. When they know they're going to have to audition, their behavior may change. The making of the play changes the whole classroom environment – having their parents see them performing motivates them to do well.*

Other teachers tap into the arts for inspiration also. One teacher describes her class's “I am green” campaign:

*Students came up with a slogan or a jingle. We had a voting process for the top three and picked one of them. They then choreographed steps to their music.*

Another teacher says she uses “a little of everything:”

*I personally love the arts, not just visual, but music. I try to get them into other areas, beyond what they see every day. When I played classical music, they were like “what is she listening to?” I try to explain to them about tones and beats and complications of music and this applies to writing too.*

Teachers tap into students’ real-life experiences and enrich the curriculum with the arts and music. The district also offers a gifted and talented program in another building, and at Ulysses Byas, a teacher says that if a student is not recommended for the GATE (Gifted and Talented Education) 5-day-a-week program but can work at a higher level, “they will be given some more challenging work.”

### **Focus on Writing to a Prompt**

In order to improve students’ performance for on-demand writing tasks, a fourth-grade teacher created a rubric that all fourth-grade teachers now use. She explains her process for devising these “Writing Tips,”

*I kept saying to myself, “How can I put something simple on one sheet that can help my students prepare for the fourth-grade English Language Arts Assessment?”*

She condensed “important things that they needed to do” on one sheet. It has eight tips including: indent; restate question; answer the question; do not start a sentence with “but, because, so, and, yes, or no”; end each sentence with the proper punctuation mark; use details and character traits, etc. She says that it is important for students to use brainstorming, prewriting, editing skills but “that’s not focusing on what they need to do on the test – on the test they don’t have time for that.” These writing tips are displayed in fourth-grade classrooms and have become a focus for student writing.

### **Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data**

As a SURR district, Roosevelt assessment score data have been monitored closely. At the district level state assessment score data are disaggregated and these data shared with each individual school. Ulysses Byas’ principal says that the students at her school have traditionally performed well on state assessments regardless of state monitoring:

*Before the state came we had 93% of our children passing on the fourth-grade assessment – We were OK.*

Nonetheless the district and school monitor teacher and student performance in several ways.

### **Formal and Informal Monitoring of Teachers’ Performance**

The principal says that at Ulysses Byas they have both “formal and informal” processes for monitoring teacher performance. “Formal for teachers not tenured” include observations and evaluations by the principal. One of the ways teacher performance is monitored informally is through observations and consultations with building coordinators.

*We have coordinators – reading and social studies and math and science – they are liaisons for the building. They communicate with teachers and the principal. They randomly come and give us benchmarks on our Campus-Wide Objectives and then we’ll discuss the results as a team.*

### **Formal and Informal Monitoring of Students’ Progress**

For students, monitoring is done formally at the school level using assessments such as “Spotlight on Reading, Spotlight on Math, SFA, and SRI.” These assessments are then used to place students into reading groups. Teachers also use benchmarks from their textbook series and some use “their own benchmark at the beginning and the middle of the school year.” Many teachers say that the best way to monitor their students’ progress is by paying attention to students’ responses,

*If we have a conversation and I ask them a question about foreshadowing and they are able to tell me – or if they took what they learned in reading and use it in Social Studies and Science – this lets me know they got it. If they can’t carry this over then it’s my fault. I make sure they know. I ask them to tell me when they don’t. Make me work. This is the most useful way to measure students’ progress.*

According to one coordinator, student assessment for the most part is “left up to the teacher.” She says,

*Assessments – I leave it up to the teacher to determine how she is going to assess her students. I believe one grade created their own clocks – first they had to construct their own clock to demonstrate elapsed time for example. In fourth grade the teacher had the children create math games: They had to explain directions and how to play the game. I gave the teachers a rubric – something that is student friendly, so students can rate themselves. I give an example of the rubric. If they want to modify it, they can go ahead. I don’t tell teachers what to do. I make suggestions. I’m in dialogue with them.*

### **Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustments**

Students in the Roosevelt district live in the third most segregated county in the state. According to administrators, they “face utter racism.” Providing students with opportunities to overcome the challenges of such a context means valuing character along with academics and intervening early when students show a need for extra help.

### **Valuing and Validating Character**

The principal holds a firm belief in self-control and discipline. She says, “We are a fight free, drug free, disrespect free school – the whole focus is I am here to learn.” Students wear uniforms and recite their school’s mission statement with passion. “Self-management” is reinforced through a court system. Students are assigned as attorneys and judges and hold mock trials for their peers who “get out of hand.” The principal says the students assign “great punishments:”

*They have to write about what took place – they would have to (if it were a fight) protect that child they fought with, hug and talk to them.*

Ulysses Byas’ students also receive recognition for good behavior through the Positive Assertive Discipline (PAD) Point system. Every day, each child comes to school with 36 points, “if a teacher has to speak” to a student about behavior, they lose a point. If a child ends a day with 30 points, he or she gets a star. Stars are added up and students with enough stars are invited to go

on special PAD field trips. In the words of one teacher, the PAD system reinforces the idea that “every day is an opportunity.”

### **Tutoring and After-School Programs**

Teachers “reinforce what they taught during the day” in morning tutoring, which occurs between 8:05 and 8:40. A teacher says that “a lot of students are motivated to come.” Some students also participate in the after-school program tutoring from 3 to 4:30. These programs, along with the use of Reading Recovery, are ways students’ needs are met early at Ulysses Byas.

### **In a Nutshell**

In the face of racism and poverty, administrators, teachers, and students at Ulysses Byas strive to rise to the calling of their school’s mission statement to “transform the universe.” From the cohesiveness of their Campus-Wide Objectives to the emphasis on character and giving, they assert their pride and purpose. They “pull together as a school,” and teachers reiterate to students that “they will do well” despite their own limitations or the limitations society places on them.

---

<sup>o</sup> Demographic Data are from the 2003-04 New York State Report Card (<http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/repcrd2004/home.shtml>). This case study was conducted in spring 2005.

**Ulysses Byas Elementary School  
Lillian Coggins-Watson, Principal  
Roosevelt Union Free School District  
Underhill Avenue, Roosevelt, New York 11575**