

## **Best Practices Case Study: *Meeting Critical Needs at the Elementary Level***

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Kathleen Nickson, April 2011



### **Centennial Avenue Elementary School** **Roosevelt Union Free School District**

#### **School Context**

The Roosevelt Union Free School District serves approximately 2,600 students in grades K-12, including a high number of economically disadvantaged and critical needs students. The community is composed of African Americans and a burgeoning Hispanic immigrant population, many of whom are refugees from Central America. In addition to the growing number of students identified for English as a second language (ESL) services, Centennial Avenue Elementary School has the largest population of special education students among the three elementary schools in the district. Despite these challenges, when compared to schools with similar demographics, the school has demonstrated consistently better performance on state assessments in English language arts and mathematics for linguistically and ethnically diverse students and students with special needs.

In 2002 the district was taken over by the New York State Education Department and has been closely monitored by the state ever since, although the primary focus is on programs in the middle and high schools, where performance has been consistently low. The district has a five-year Strategic Plan, and each elementary school writes a yearly School Improvement Plan. Since the state take over, the district has had a series of superintendents. One current administrator explains that “one of the most challenging things has been adjusting to changes in leadership. We’ve had five superintendents in eight years.” The present superintendent has been with the district for four years, providing more stable leadership.

Over the last three years a major initiative has been the unification of the elementary schools in terms of materials, textbooks, resources, and programs. An administrator explains that “in a district like Roosevelt that has high student mobility, this has been especially important. Curriculum across our district is now articulated in a similar manner, with pacing maps, and instruction occurring relatively simultaneously within a given academic month.”

Another change since 2002 concerns school buildings that were previously described by an administrator as “crumbling.” Now all the elementary schools and middle school are housed in new buildings, with the high school slated for a building project in the coming year. The Centennial Avenue school building is clean, bright, modern, and very inviting. Student work is

prominently displayed in the hallways and there are school decorations honoring the cultures of the students. It is obvious that the school community embraces the diversity of its students. As one teacher states:

*Centennial School is very inclusive. We recognize the diversity of our students. We honor the many cultures of our students and train our students to respect differences. One of our key priorities here is to make the students feel part of a larger family.*

**Student Demographics 2009-10: Centennial Avenue Elementary School, Roosevelt UFSD<sup>i</sup>**

Grades served: K- 5	Centennial Avenue Elementary School	Roosevelt UF School District	New York State
Eligible for Free/Reduced-Price Lunch	66%	77%	48%
Limited English Proficient	30%	20%	8%
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution			
African-American	54%	60%	19%
Hispanic/Latino	45%	39%	22%
White	0%	0%	50%
Other	0%	0%	8%
Total Enrollment	440	2651	2,692,649

Demographic data are from the 2009-10 state report cards (<https://www.nystart.gov/publicweb/Home.do?year=2010>).

The principal explains that the large banner “We Are Family” sends a most important message:

*Our school is warm and caring. Children are the center of all we do. I always emphasize the importance of what is best for the kids. We all stress the notion that “we are family” with our Centennial School community.*

The changing demographics of the community have been a challenge for the school. Many of the students from El Salvador, Honduras, and the Dominican Republic are students with interrupted formal education (SIFE). They come to school with little or no formal education from an environment where a child working to help the family survive is the norm. Many of their parents are illiterate, and the children have little or no exposure in the home to books or educational experiences. A teacher explains the problem the school faces:

*[SIFE] poses a great difficulty in placing students within our school program. Obviously these children have many gaps in their education and are often virtually illiterate even in their own native language.*

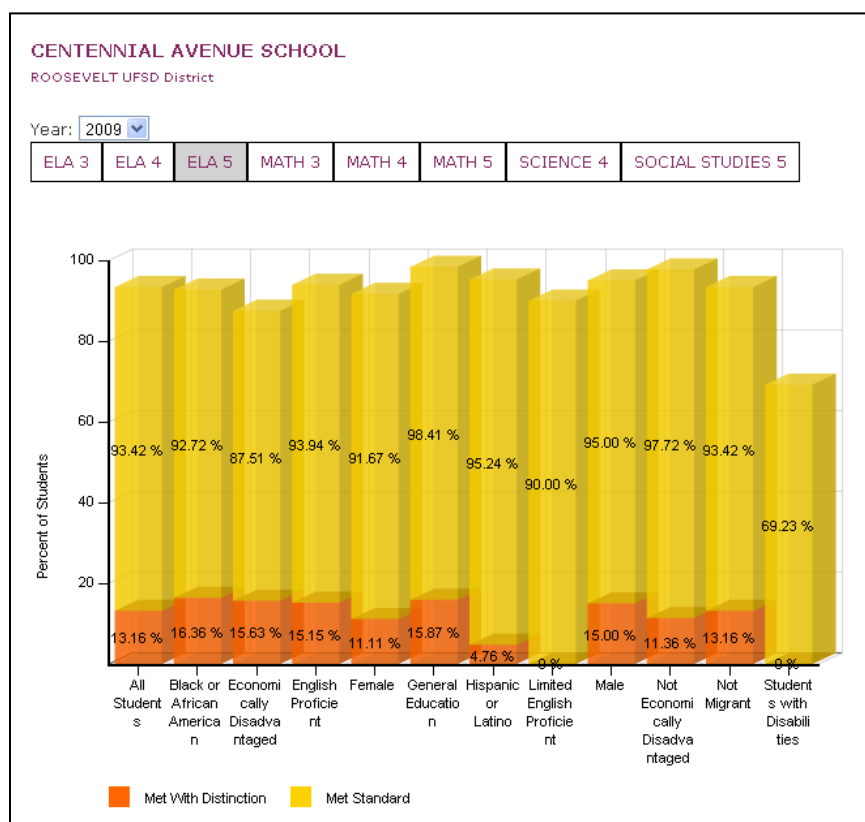
It is reported by many members of the staff that the program for English language learners (ELLs) has been strengthened with the addition of an ESL coordinator. The staff is also quick to praise the work and passion of the ESL teachers in the school.

The majority of the special education student population is classified as learning disabled; in addition, students who are speech impaired, visually impaired, hearing impaired, other health impaired, emotionally disturbed, or autistic receive services at Centennial School. There is a growing need for services for ELL students who are also classified with special needs. The special education services include self-contained classes, a resource room, inclusion classes with coteachers, and classes that include bilingual/special education.

Several commercial programs are used for students with special needs, with all the special education teachers trained or certified in their use. A special education teacher explains:

*Math and reading are our primary focus. I am Wilson certified and approach reading differently [from mainstream teachers]. I use the Strategic Intervention materials from [the regular ed reading series] which I find helpful with my students. I use my teaching materials my way to meet the individual needs of my students. Our curriculum is dictated by the state mandates.*

Another teacher reports that “our district and school have worked hard to use the same curriculum with all our students. How the curriculum is taught is determined by the unique way that each student learns.”



Performance of fifth graders on the NYS ELA Assessment in 2009, by subgroup. Statewide, the average percent meeting the standard was 82%. Data are based on publically available NYS Assessment data as displayed at <http://knowyourschoolsny.org>. For results for additional grades, years, and assessments, click on “Find Your School” on the website.

The teachers interviewed report a team approach throughout the school with a commitment to collaborative teaching. As one coordinator states:

*Collaboration is supported and sustained by the modeling of our principal and by the belief of all faculty and staff that collaboration is critical for the success of our students. For example, our resource room teacher might report the progress of a student in [the program used in the resource room] to the mainstream teacher. This would prompt a discussion about how the progress manifests itself within the regular classroom, and*

*whether that improvement is being observed and carried over into the regular classroom performance of the student.*

Another coordinator says:

*Our ability to collaborate is a definite strength. The faculty and staff work together for the good of the students.*

Despite its many challenges, Centennial Avenue Elementary School is succeeding with its linguistically and ethnically diverse student population and those with special needs as well as its regular education students. The chart on page 3 shows performance by subgroup on the State English Language Arts Assessment in 2009 for all students in grade 5. All groups at Centennial exceeded the state average performance. Overall, 82% of students statewide met the standard. Among critical subgroups, the state averages for meeting the standards were: African American students, 70%; Hispanic/Latino, 72%; limited English proficient, 43%; and students with disabilities, 48%.

The dedication and commitment of the faculty and administration to the goal of educating these students is apparent in all they do.

## **Best Practice Highlights**

According to educators in the school and district, three practices stand out as explaining the success of students at Centennial Avenue Elementary School:

- **Uniformity of curriculum with an emphasis on literacy for all students**

*I truly believe the Roosevelt School District is headed in the right direction. The articulated and unified curriculum of the district has been beneficial to our students. Given the mobility of our school population, it is important that we have a cohesive instructional program.*

- district coordinator

- **Student centered instruction in a nurturing environment**

*Student centered instruction works best. Teachers should facilitate learning, not just deliver instruction. In ESL classes we use learning centers with listening, speaking, reading, writing in that order. As teachers we need to learn the students' modality and reach them that way. We use lots of pictures and role play. High quality instruction uses small groups and differentiated instruction.*

- teacher

- **Collaboration among administrators, teachers and students to maximize student achievement**

*Our ability to collaborate is a definite strength. We focus on the needs of our students and work tirelessly to support them in their studies.*

- district coordinator

*Collaboration and respect are hallmarks of our school.*

- principal

## A Closer Look

These characteristics are evident throughout the five dimensions that frame the best practices study for critical needs students of which this case is one part. The sections that follow expand on the characteristics in the context of the study's framework.

### Curriculum and Academic Goals

#### **Unifying the Elementary Curriculum**

Standardizing the elementary curriculum throughout the Roosevelt School District is cited by both teachers and administrators as a positive step toward academic achievement for all students. All the schools have the same text books for reading, science, and math. Curriculum specialists are in place in all the schools, and all the special education teachers have been trained in the use of several commercial programs to meet the literacy needs of their students. A district administrator expresses her support of the school leadership teams in unifying the curriculum:

*Strong leadership is most important. We must be accountable to parents, students, and staff. We must be sure the curriculum is being implemented with fidelity in each building and that funding is in place to sustain it.*

A district coordinator explains why the unifying of the curriculum is an important step forward:

*The elementary schools used to be islands by themselves. With the mobility of our student population, we need the cohesion of all doing the same texts with discussions as a whole district. We now have a unified curriculum with a district-wide literacy team. We use backward planning and have forward motion for the district.*

A monthly curriculum newsletter, "Curriculum News," details what is expected in a given month for English language arts, math, and science instruction for each grade level; upcoming testing dates and topics of general interest are also included. Both ESL teachers and special education teachers report that "Curriculum News" helps them stay abreast of where they should be and the goals for the month. As one special education teacher states:

*We use the same texts across the district for uniformity. The special education teachers adapt these materials. Content is taught. We know our own students and differentiate based on what we know our students need. We have worked hard to use the same curriculum with all of our students.*

One of the coordinators explains, "I am in communication with other coordinators on how to accommodate special ed students without watering the content down."

The recent addition of curriculum specialists in English language arts, math, and science provides teachers with mentoring, model lessons, data collection and interpretation, and professional development. One of the coordinators believes the weekly grade-level meetings in each building and monthly meetings with the coordinators strengthen the implementation of the curriculum and the instructional program.

### **Academic Goals and High Expectations**

The district sets academic goals within its Five-Year Plan. Each elementary school has a yearly School Improvement Plan and will be developing a Comprehensive Educational Plan in the near future. A district administrator believes the development and setting of goals is beneficial to all stake holders: “They [the plans] help bring people together about goals and what needs to be addressed in the school district.”

All faculty and administrators interviewed echo the belief in high expectations for both students and teachers. Two teachers express these thoughts on expectations:

*Like a family, we set expectations for the students to be accountable for themselves and to be good citizens.*

*Students and teachers are both held accountable for their success in the classroom. This is encouraged in a very positive way. As a result, teachers across the school building work as a team and students themselves develop great pride in their efforts.*

The principal says when setting goals she starts with a general vision of excellence then “drills down” to be sure everyone, even the students, understands the performance indicators. She wants the performance indicators to be displayed alongside student work, so the students see the connection. The principal expects teachers to have measurable academic goals and objectives:

*I emphasize with the faculty to make sure all goals are measurable. I stress the need for our assessments to mirror New York State expectations. There has been great growth in the ELL students and the special ed students because the teachers have high expectations.*

Special education teams are included in the process of curriculum development. A special education administrator explains:

*Every year I set specific goals. We have focused heavily on compliance issues. I offer professional development and training so the IEP becomes a “living” document. We have a better chance at success when we can tailor our programs to meet student needs. We focus on math and English language arts in our resource rooms and self-contained classes. Our inclusion classes have a full-time special education teacher coteaching the curriculum.*

Another administrator describes the importance of appropriate mainstreaming to student success:

*I believe we have had success by incorporating students with special needs and ELL students into the regular education program. All of our students, regardless of their special circumstances of learning or learning a language, get the same program of excellence that all our students receive.*

A district coordinator adds, “We are sticking to high standards for our special ed students. Cooperative team teaching, coteaching all day long, and very skilled self-contained teachers all contribute to the success of Centennial special ed students. Proper modifications for students equal success.”

A district coordinator also emphasizes the need for teachers to be knowledgeable about the New York State Standards and the statewide reference points:

*To that end, it is more important than ever that our curriculum be aligned with the New York State Standards and that we follow our pacing guides to ensure that all expected curriculum be taught. In short, the more informed our teachers are, the better prepared we will be to meet the state's expectations.*

### **Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building**

#### **Hiring New Staff**

The administrators interviewed agree on many of the qualities they look for in the selection of new staff. First and foremost they want candidates who understand the community, the school district, and its needs and have a “vision and a mission.” They also look for someone who embraces a diverse student population. As one explains, “Successful candidates should be knowledgeable about our district, school and instructional program. They must be highly aware of the diverse population that our district serves. They must be passionate about their work. In addition, they must have some special quality to offer or add to our school.” Another administrator says, “I expect candidates to have researched the community and have done their homework on the student population. They should have the goal of working with families and the children. I have little interest in arrogant people who have all the answers. I want people who are team players; I’m open to what they can bring to the table that will help us go forward.”

After the Human Resources Department screens candidates’ credentials and references, they provide an interview committee composed of several stake holders with a set of interview questions to ensure consistency. Candidates are rated on a rubric, and teacher candidates are asked to teach a model lesson to students. Recommendations are then made to the superintendent.

#### **Capacity Building through Strong Leadership and Professional Development**

It is clear that professional development is a continuous source of learning for the faculty and staff. Teachers and teacher assistants were all trained in the proper use of commercial programs and the new reading series. There has been professional development on designing mini lessons, the value of reader’s workshop and guided reading, strengthening student writing, and implementing the Centennial School Book of the Month.

There appears to be a consistent presence of district personnel within the elementary schools providing professional development. For example, the curriculum specialists provide job embedded support such as modeling best practices. The principal points to the leadership of the district’s central office for offering meaningful professional development:

*There has been a true level of generosity of our central office administrators to train our staff in a variety of ways on a variety of subjects. Our leadership in central office is energetic about offering meaningful, timely, and effective professional development throughout the course of every school year.*

The district also sends teachers for training provided by the local Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) on assessments, understanding data, and district-wide online scoring. A district administrator reports a summer institute for special education teachers, teacher assistants, security officers, and mainstream teachers on how best to meet the needs of special education students. Those who attend are compensated or earn professional hours. The district encourages teachers and administrators to attend conferences as well as offering an administrative retreat.

The ESL coordinator trains teachers in her department on the computer system she believes is most effective as a teaching tool for ELLs. She also provides training to the elementary faculties: “I take advantage of principal meetings and invite myself to give small presentations. I call it ESL 101. For example, I explain the differences between bilingual and ESL teachers. I also take as many teachers and aides and administrators as I can to the Intensive Teachers Institute.”

A district coordinator expresses the need for even more professional development on English language learners and efforts to address teacher concerns: “More professional development is needed about teaching ELL students. There are a lot of questions and concerns, and professional development helps.”

The teachers interviewed speak highly of the many professional development opportunities. For example,

*As an educator, I am always learning. I have not “arrived.” The district has provided me with meaningful ESL training. In addition, the professional development offered within the district and through BOCES has helped me as a teacher.*

*Professional development has taught me the value of teaching and working in a collaborative way.*

*Our professional development training keeps teachers aware and informed on current state of the art practices for helping students.*

Another capacity-building activity has been introduced at Centennial School faculty meetings. The principal asks grade-level teams to explain best practices they use in their classrooms, complete with slide presentations and samples of student work. Some teachers were initially reluctant, but now several teachers report it is a successful addition to the faculty meetings. They are impressed with the knowledge and innovative ideas their colleagues present.

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

### **A Commitment to Literacy**

Educators at Centennial are committed to increasing the achievement of all their students in both math and reading. In addition to the core programs for English language arts, math, and science, a 90-minute literacy block is mandated for all students. There are no pull out programs scheduled during this time, and the principal is a proponent of sustained silent reading. One teacher says:



*The dedicated 90 minute literacy block with a structured mini lesson, reader's workshop, learning centers, guided reading, and writing opportunities has been a key reform. I think it has benefited our students the most and strengthened our ELA instructional program.*

Another literacy initiative is the school-wide Book of the Month. Each month every class in Centennial reads the same book and completes writing projects based on the book. The books' themes often include cultural heritage awareness. Much of the work displayed in the hallways during our visit reflected February's book, *Martin's Big Words* by Doreen Rappaport, a book about Martin Luther King's life and famous speech. The Book of the Month provides opportunities for cross-grade discussions, presentations, and learning.

### **Student-Centered Instruction**

All administrators and teachers interviewed agree that student-centered small group instruction is optimal. Students in small groups using manipulatives, kinesthetic activities, and applying lessons to the real world are cited as beneficial instructional practices because "students learn by doing." One district administrator explains what she wants to see when she visits a classroom:

*I want to see the teacher using technology and the students engaged—not straight lecture. Students should work in groups, hands-on active learning. I want to see a "do now" activity, classroom procedures and performance indicators posted, and an inviting room.*

Special education teachers advocate the use of multi-sensory instruction as well as instruction that connects lessons to the real world. They report using PowerPoint presentations and many pictures and examples. They want to build on prior knowledge and immerse students in the topic.

*We educate the whole child. We want them to be competent on tests, but lessons are geared to the real world. We want them to be able to use knowledge in the real world with real world skills. We teach them [special education students] self-help skills. We work with what they do know first and then what they don't know—we avoid learned helplessness. We concentrate on skills for life; one of the district goals is to have the students stand on their own two feet as whole persons.*

An ESL teacher concurs with connecting to the world: "I want my students to be immersed in today's society. I have 54 ESL students and my biggest challenge is trying to bridge the gap that these children experience in English language arts. I rely on pictures, role playing, and drama to engage my students. Then my instruction progresses and is based on their learning styles."

Another teacher articulates the benefits of cooperative learning: "I think the one best practice used is cooperative learning with peers learning from each other. They learn important social skills too. It is good to make learning real to the kids; they need to see it is important in everyday life."

All the ESL teachers and coordinators interviewed agree that ELLs need small group work that emphasizes discussion, visual learning, and hands-on activities for the greater acquisition of new vocabulary and the understanding of new concepts. Teachers have success with student projects such as students creating their own books. The ESL coordinator thinks "the teachers have a

unique way of transferring their passion to their students.” Many create their own materials in addition to using the many available resources.

A mainstream teacher believes classroom learning centers that incorporate cooperative team work have positively impacted both ELL students and those with special needs. Another classroom teacher says she makes connections culturally with her students. She believes it’s important to understand the challenges ELL students face every day when making the transition to a new country and new school.

Starting in third grade, the biggest challenge cited is the pressure to pass the New York State ELA Assessment within one year of arrival in this country. The belief that it is too soon for these students to perform with success in meeting the statewide proficient point is stated repeatedly. The school has a growing number of ELL students who are also classified as special needs students, which presents another set of unique challenges. The perceived need for more bilingual teachers is also a source of frustration.

Centennial School is committed to integrating the performing arts into the curriculum. An annual Kwanzaa celebration involves most, if not all, students. There are Artists in Residence programs and celebrations of students’ Spanish heritage as well. These types of programs are all inclusive and also encourage a very high level of participation of parents. An administrator comments, “Once [students are] on stage, you wouldn’t know who has special needs and who the ELLs are.”

### **Collaboration**

Collaboration is another practice that is encouraged by administrators and embraced by teachers. Administrators interviewed spoke of the importance of teacher collaboration with statements like, “We are always looking for a team person open to collaboration and future professional growth,” and “I think collaboration of teachers and cooperative settings are important promising practices at Centennial.”

Collaboration is especially important to the special education and ESL programs and manifests itself in a variety of ways. Teachers say informal collaboration happens daily. More formal collaboration occurs through the weekly grade-level meetings where discussion of student needs, successes, and performance takes place; in coteaching arrangements the special education teacher coteaches all day in a regular education class; teachers consult through electronic forms used to share information and concerns; and many collaborate through the monthly staff meetings and “best practices” sessions.

The principal explains the benefits of collaboration for special education students: “Collaboration among teachers and special ed teachers helps to mainstream and identify students’ strength so they [special needs students] are not totally separated from the student population. Teachers partner and differentiate instruction. Cooperative learning for students in teams works well, too.”

An ESL teacher comments that time for collaboration is a challenge, but she makes it a point to initiate contact with her ELL students’ classroom teachers: “I inquire about lesson plans and review with the teacher the areas in which I may support my ELL students. I feel a deep commitment to advocate for my students so they may have my attention and support in their classroom efforts.”

Another ESL teacher has developed an electronic form to maximize consultations, reporting, “Success comes from communication with the classroom teachers at least twice a week. I developed a form to give teachers (via email) and they are good about getting it back to me.”

The school psychologist believes a major reason for Centennial School’s success is that teachers and administrators work as a team. Many committees, including the Child Study Team, Response to Intervention Team, School Based Management Team, and School Safety Team, all composed of faculty members and administrators, work under the theory that “many minds are better than one.” The principal is credited by several people for promoting this type of team approach.

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

To inform teachers in the simplest way of what a student can and cannot do, informal observational monitoring is done daily. As one teacher says, “I believe in the power of teacher observation.” Student progress is also monitored in more formal ways with weekly tests, teacher constructed tests, projects, bench mark exams, report cards, and New York State assessments. An Academic Intervention Services (AIS) teacher’s motto is “diagnose first and foremost and do my best to meet the individual needs of each student.” Classroom activities and instruction are monitored often by principal “walk throughs.”

The ESL program uses an assessment program to determine the entry language acquisition level of students entering the program. The data play a role in the scheduling of students by identifying a particular performance level. All available data are used by teachers for instructional purposes. As a district curriculum administrator reports,

*Our district supports the belief that data drive instruction. We use professional development workshops to review assessments, to look at the new cut scores on the New York State assessments, as well as to review benchmark assessments and intervention plans in addition to monthly data meetings in each school. Data stored by our district data office and our Pupil Personnel Service Office all get merged to give a comprehensive summary of a student’s performance.*

The district uses its BOCES as its data warehouse and collaborates with BOCES so there is a common understanding of assessments. It has also created a special office for data collection. The “Gap Report” from New York State provides information on how any given class is performing in relation to the district, region, and the state. To close the achievement gap, Centennial School reviews data and analyzes what instructional steps are necessary to move forward. Data are shared with the board of education following each marking period.

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

It is clear the entire faculty of Centennial Avenue Elementary School strives to improve the academic achievement of its most struggling students in the English as a second language and special education programs. After-school and summer intervention programs are offered to reinforce academic skills for these students.

The district supports, reviews, and evaluates all intervention plans. All elementary teachers are in the early stages of using Response to Intervention (RTI) to monitor student progress and individual needs. In addition to RTI, the Child Study Team administers pre and post academic screening. Based on these data, recommendations are made for services or interventions that would likely benefit the child. The district has the ability to “map” the performance of individual students and create meaningful Individual Educational Plans (IEPs). The Instructional Support Team reviews the success of interventions suggested for a particular student.

Some of the ELL students arrive with conditions that require classification by the district Committee on Special Education. Every effort is made to create an appropriate program for these students. The school sees the value of placing students in cooperative teaching classrooms with bilingual services available or in inclusion classes. The teaching team works as coteachers with the assistance of paraprofessionals. Most teachers voice the need for more bilingual teachers to support these children.

A Saturday Academy for ELL students is funded by a Title 3 Grant. Three teachers teach English language acquisition to small groups of 8-10 students through crafts, games, and sports. A Family Literacy Academy is offered simultaneously for the students’ parents. Currently school personnel have undertaken an intervention of their own design called Closing the Achievement Gap (CTAG). It aims to identify and remediate students’ weakest skills in preparation for the next state assessment.

## **In a Nutshell**

Facing the challenges of a large special education population and an ever-increasing number of English language learners, Centennial Avenue Elementary School focuses on meeting the needs of every student through student-centered instruction, a unified literacy program, and collaboration. The passion and dedication of the faculty and administration to serve all the children in the community is evident in the school’s nurturing environment.

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<http://rooseveltufsd.schoolwires.net/Domain/10>

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<sup>i</sup> This case study is one of a series of studies conducted by Know Your Schools~for NY Kids since 2005. For the study of critical needs elementary schools, conducted during the 2010-11 school year, research teams investigated ten consistently higher-performing and five consistently average-performing elementary schools. Schools were selected based on the performance of critical needs subgroups – African American, Hispanic, English language learners, and special education students, and students living in poverty as measured by eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch – on New York State Assessments of English Language Arts and Mathematics for grades 3 through 4, 5, or 6 (depending on the schools’ grade range) in 2007, 2008, and 2009.

Researchers used site-based interviews of teachers and administrators, as well as analyses of supportive documentation, to determine differences in practices between higher- and average-performing schools in the sample. Percentages of ethnic minority students, English language learners, and/or students living in poverty exceed the state averages in seventy percent of the higher-performing schools. Average-performing schools were matched as closely as possible to the higher performers in terms of student poverty levels, geographic location, size, and student ethnicity. Details regarding the project, its studies, and methods can be found on the project’s web sites: [www.albany.edu/aire/kids](http://www.albany.edu/aire/kids) and <http://knowyourschoolsny.org>.