

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

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### Columbus Elementary School New Rochelle City School District



#### School Context

Columbus Elementary School is part of the New Rochelle City School District, in a suburb of New York City bordering Long Island Sound. The school serves a far greater percentage of high needs students than the state average, with 78% of the population receiving free or reduced-price lunch in 2009-10; 31% of its 816 students are English Language Learners (ELLs), and 82% are Hispanic. Columbus serves the largest enrollment of Hispanic and English Language Learners of the district's six elementary schools. Many students were formerly classified as ELL, many living in households where Spanish is the only language spoken and within neighborhoods where they can also speak Spanish at church, in the stores, and playing with friends. School may be the only place where they speak English regularly. Because Spanish is the first language of most of the Columbus student population, instruction is driven by the goal of developing proficient English language speakers and users.

#### Student Demographics 2009-10: *Columbus Elementary School, New Rochelle City SD<sup>i</sup>*

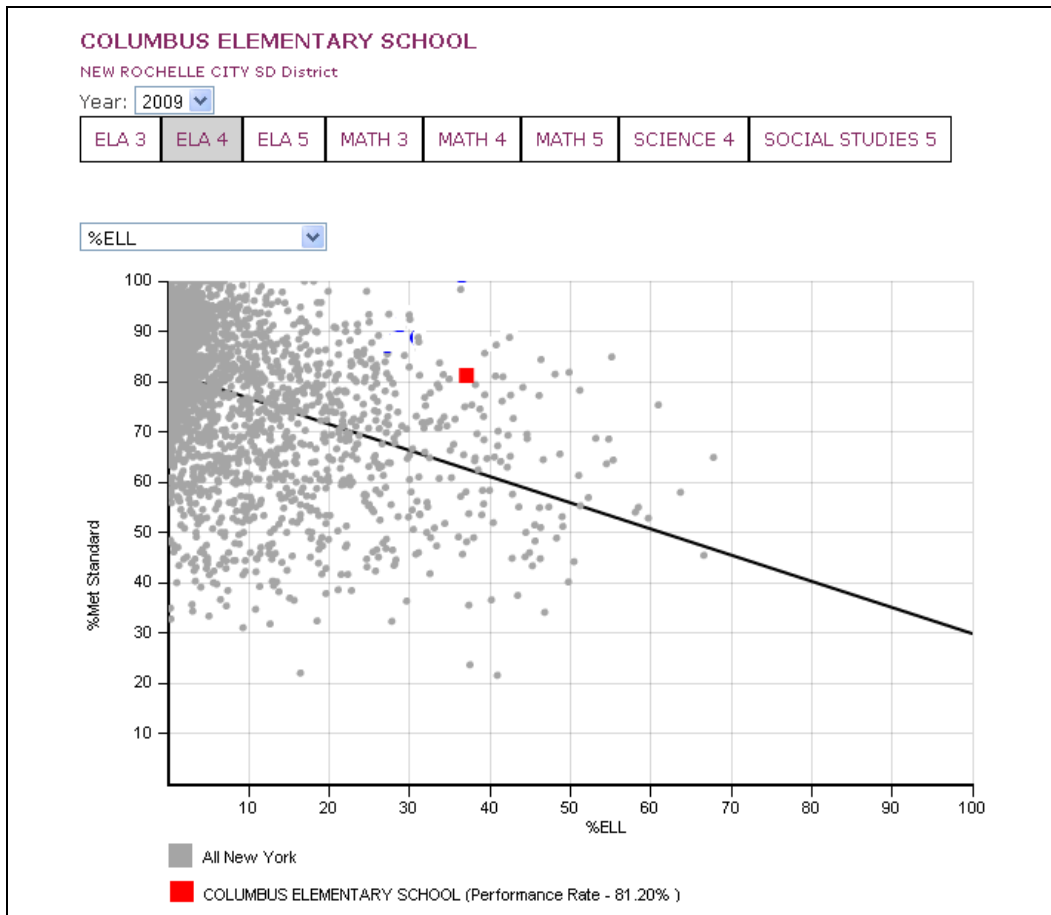
Grades served: K- 5	Columbus Elementary School	New Rochelle City School District	New York State
Eligible for Free/Reduced-Price Lunch	78%	42%	48%
Limited English Proficient (ELL)	31%	10%	8%
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution			
African-American	8%	25%	19%
Hispanic/Latino	82%	40%	22%
White	8%	31%	50%
Other	2%	4%	8%
Total Enrollment	816	10,551	2,692,649

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

Columbus is open and welcoming to parents, many of whom arrive with baby carriages and strollers in tow. Making parents feel comfortable at Columbus is a long-standing, schoolwide goal. A bust of Christopher Columbus overlooks the school's circular foyer, where parents and other visitors are greeted by student work posted on walls and projected from a video monitor by the security desk. Included in the student work are proposed floor plans drafted by fourth graders for the design of the Expo Exhibition Hall, a hands-on, integrated learning project.

Columbus Elementary School houses six classes each of kindergarten through grade five. Class size averages 22 students. A full-day kindergarten began in the 2009-2010 school year. The building’s cleanliness reflects a quiet energy. Student movement in the halls is orderly and comfortable. A greenhouse, nature study pond, fully-equipped science lab, digital multi-media production center, and computer lab support the learning in this magnet school for science, math and technology, a problem-based learning school. The students learn English by using it to solve real life problems.

Although Columbus Elementary has served Hispanic students, mostly from Mexico, for many years, the percentage of the Hispanic population has risen over the years, increasing the need for all teachers to teach English as a second language (ESL). Mainstream as well as ESL teachers feel responsible for developing their students’ English language ability. In 1998, 66% of students were Hispanic compared to the current 82%. Yet students consistently perform better than the state average and well above most schools with lower percentages of English Language Learners.



Performance of Columbus fourth graders on the NYS ELA Assessment in 2009, compared with all elementary schools in the state in terms of student poverty levels. Data are based on publically available data as displayed at <http://knowyourschoolsny.org>. For results for additional grades, years, and assessments, click on “Find Your School” on the website.

## Best Practice Highlights

### Building a Bridge between the School and Parents

*Parents feel welcomed into Columbus Elementary School and see it as a safe place.*

- social worker

Columbus Elementary School's climate is described repeatedly by staff as "welcoming, warm, nurturing, caring." Staff voice a love of and appreciation for working with the children and the parents of Columbus Elementary School that demonstrates cultural awareness and sensitivity. They express commitment not only to the children's success, but to supporting and empowering parents. They understand the home situations of their students and recognize that because many of the parents do not speak English, they feel they cannot assist their children with homework. They know that the parents care and want to be involved; parents show their support, in part, by attending and supporting school-wide events. Teachers understand how difficult it is for parents to attend meetings during school hours and accommodate this by meeting before or after a parent's work day. Babysitting is always provided, so parents can attend without their children, when necessary. Everything from the school is sent home in both English and Spanish; robo-calls are made in both languages. Approximately half of the staff speak Spanish, and interpreters attend parent-teacher meetings for those who do not.

Over the years parents' comfort level at the school has grown. Seven years ago the school formed a "Latina Moms" group, which meets every Friday for an hour. At these meetings the school social worker and other invited guests address many of the concerns parents have and help them navigate the school community and the community at large. This year for the first time, two Latina moms lead the Columbus PTA as co-presidents, and the school has started a Dad's group.

### Expecting Success

The challenges of teaching a large number of students who have a limited command of speaking, reading, and understanding English are embraced by Columbus educators. A building-wide belief that all students can and will learn is held by the administrators, as well as the teachers. The status quo is not accepted; good enough is not enough.

*Our focus is on rigor, not remediation.* - principal

### Building Capacity

A commitment to building the capacity of students, teachers, and parents permeates the school culture. The principal is respected as an instructional leader who provides the experiences and tools for Columbus teachers to build their capacity, so they in turn can increase the capacity of their students. With the help of the principal, building specialists, and their teaching colleagues, teachers explore practices and tools to meet the needs of their students. Teachers often pilot new instructional programs and participate in professional development activities.

Educating and supporting parents is seen by school personnel as indirect service to students. Thus they provide experiences for parents to help them learn how to give their children experiences that can support their learning. For example, a school consultant takes parents by

subway to a museum in New York City, so they can see the possibility of taking their children to museums. ESL and reading teachers also provide workshops for parents to help them support literacy development in their children, even if they are not literate themselves. The principal would like to see wi-fi set up in the neighborhood so parents could access the internet at no cost, enabling them to be more involved in learning opportunities. This focus on building the capacity of others and building working relationships infuses the work at Columbus Elementary School and supports the learning of the students.

### **Monitoring Progress; Expecting and Respecting Change**

A focus on monitoring performance permeates the instructional practices at Columbus. Teachers continually monitor student progress to determine what practices and tools are meeting the needs of the students. Data are used to inform teaching practice by determining what needs to change. Change is accepted, expected, and sought out at Columbus in an effort to have each child succeed.

## **A Closer Look**

These practices are evident across five broad themes that frame the best practices study of which this case is one part. The sections that follow discuss specific practices at Columbus Elementary School within each theme of the framework.

### **Curriculum and Academic Goals**

The curriculum and academic goals of Columbus Elementary School are determined and guided by its high population of English Language Learners and its large number of ethnically diverse students, as well as its mission of being a problem-solving, hands-on science, math, and technology magnet school.

The New Rochelle City School District's locally developed Learning Outcomes in language arts, social studies, science, and mathematics have aligned grade-level instruction with the New York State Learning Standards. In turn, each grade level at Columbus is working together with the building's subject area specialists to develop curriculum maps for each subject that align with the district learning outcomes. Their focus is on performance goals that demonstrate what the students can do.

The over-arching goals for all instruction are to increase vocabulary level, background knowledge, and critical thinking to enable all students to become proficient speakers and users of English.

*Whatever we need to do to help a student become literate, we will do.* - principal

## Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building

### **Staff Selection**

Columbus administrators and teachers indicate that it is important for teachers to be a good “fit” with Columbus Elementary. A good fit is a teacher with strong pedagogy who loves working with the school’s student population, who is dedicated and works long and hard, who embraces collaboration, and who sees change as a tool for student success.

*The staff is open to new learning and challenges. There is low resistance to change.*  
- reading specialist

*Even if something works, we try to find something better. If it works for 80% [of students], we try to find something that works for 100%.*  
- teacher

### **Leadership**

There is stability in the leadership and teaching staff at Columbus Elementary School. The principal has been in that role for 11 years and the assistant principal for 5 years. Only 3% of teachers have been at Columbus for less than 3 years.

The principal is highly respected and credited by many for creating an environment that enables the success of Columbus Elementary School students. He encourages and models reflective practice.

*The principal understands that it takes time to train, implement, and monitor for fidelity. He looks long range, but monitors very closely on the short range.*  
- district administrator

The principal is an advocate for his students, teachers, and parents. He states that his main goal has been getting the teachers to believe in the kids and themselves -- and getting the kids to believe in themselves and the parents to believe in the kids and themselves. His commitment to building capacity in students, teachers, and parents is grounded in his philosophy that ability can be developed; individuals are born with a range of ability rather than a given amount. He believes in a fluid intelligence model, not a fixed model<sup>ii</sup>.

### **Professional Development**

*You always have the opportunity to try something, if you can explain why you need it [to the principal].*  
- teacher

Guided by the philosophy that effort matters, the principal advocates and provides ongoing professional development and hires consultants to work with teachers, sometimes supplementing district-provided opportunities for more extended or in-depth work at the school. In addition to supporting professional workshops and activities and hiring in-house consultants, he advocates for and supports teachers at each grade-level working together and supporting each other. He designs the master schedule to support this. Each grade level also has a bilingual or ESL liaison who participates in monthly grade-level meetings. Collaboration is valued and encouraged.

A teacher describes the principal as an instructional leader who is always pushing teachers to take the next step: “It’s always we get to a point and he asks, ‘What are we going to do next?’ [There’s a] constant push to always learn more and do better.”

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

Instruction and curriculum at Columbus are guided by the philosophy that everyone can learn, that instruction needs to be individualized and differentiated, and that scaffolding in teaching is essential. Through ongoing assessment teachers focus on determining what students know (or don’t) and scaffold learning by breaking procedures down and building learning up step by step.

*I learn from the students what they need by asking them what they understand and what they don’t.*  
- teacher

Among the specific approaches in use – and in which all teachers (classroom, ESL, special education, and specialists) have received professional development – are:

- balanced literacy
- SIOP (Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol) – an approach for adapting content instruction to the needs of English language learners
- differentiated instruction – a major initiative over the last five years
- problem-based learning
- thinking maps, a district initiative further developed at Columbus
- a problem-solving, inquiry-based mathematics program that uses constructivist mathematics investigation

#### **Sheltered Instruction**

The Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) promotes scaffolding and developing background knowledge as language learning tools that are effective for English language learners. Every Columbus teacher has been trained in SIOP and uses it throughout their instruction. All lessons have a content objective and a language objective, content-obligatory language and compatible language, and an assessment. The lessons are linked to background knowledge and past learning. Reading, writing, speaking and listening are integrated, and the lesson is scaffolded, providing modeling, guided practice, and group practice. Students are involved in hands-on, meaningful activities that promote engagement. Assessment is by individual written response.

English language learning instruction happens throughout the day, with particular emphasis during literacy blocks. Each grade has a 90-minute literacy instructional block and a 60-minute reading enrichment block. Workshop models are used in both the literacy block and the enrichment block. Across the grades, an enrichment program is used as a resource for phonics/decoding skills, guided reading, word study/vocabulary, and building fluency. During the daily 90-minute literacy block in grades 3, 4, and 5, ESL teachers are in classrooms coteaching reading with the mainstream teachers. Academic Intervention Services (AIS) for reading are provided during the 60-minute reading enrichment block.

In the past four-five years, the ESL program has evolved from having had dual bilingual classes in all grades to transitional language classes and collaborative push-in classes. Early learning classes for English Language Learners are structured so that kindergarteners learn in a 90% Spanish/10% English classroom; first-grade students, in 80/20; and second-grade, in 70/30. The goal is to have third graders be able to score as proficient in ELA on the NYS Assessment. In grades 3-5 English Language Learners develop their use of English in an ESL collaborative (push in) classroom.

*Columbus has discovered the treasure of coteaching.* – district administrator

### **Other Instructional Innovations**

Another tool used by Columbus teachers to help students develop language, as well as critical thinking, is thinking maps, which help organize thinking and make it visible. Thinking maps also provide a common visual language for learners that can be applied in all content areas, at all grade levels. Each of eight maps, or graphic organizers, is based on a particular thinking process.

Teachers at Columbus reinforce math learning by structuring the day to include math two or three different times during the day. The primary instruction takes place in a 45-60 minute block using their inquiry-based, investigative math program. At another time in the day students also have an additional 15 minutes to practice key concepts using a calendar-based math program. Some teachers have added individualized practice with skills that need constant reinforcement during the first half hour of the day.

All the students at Columbus Elementary participate in an annual hands-on, problem-solving school-wide project that enables them to exhibit their learning to the school community and the community at large. Each year Columbus third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade classes present an integrated math, science, and technology exhibition of classroom investigations for the school and community called Expo. Third grade focuses on science investigations. Fourth grade designs and builds the Expo floor plan in collaboration with the NY Foundation of Architecture. Fifth grade develops and displays problem-based investigations through technology. Students in each grade are docents for the visitors to the Expo.

Earlier grades develop a similar school-wide Literacy Fair. As described by one of the primary grade teachers, “The Literacy Fair is presented each year by kindergarten, first, and second grades. The students use the literacy skills they have been learning all year in a real life situation. To put on the Fair, the students build a booth, teach their class topic by using their reading, writing, and thinking maps and exhibit their work.”

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

From district office to classroom, data drive instruction and curriculum at Columbus Elementary School. The district director of research, assessment, and accountability meets with each principal to review and analyze data together and develop ways to make data meaningful to teachers and the building leadership team. For example, an item analysis for Columbus students might show weaknesses in inferential thinking, a result of not having a fully-developed

understanding of the nuances of English. This can then be addressed by focusing even more attention on developing vocabulary and background knowledge. According to a district administrator, “The principal is data-centered and relationship-centered. He is able to take the teachers from data analysis to scaffolding learning. He knows what is good teaching and what the students are learning.”

Both principal and assistant principal continually analyze the data to identify gaps in performance, and grade-level teachers meet regularly to analyze data together and use that information to inform their practice. “We re-evaluate all the time” says one ESL teacher.

In addition to the New York State Assessments, other forms of assessment are used to monitor progress at Columbus Elementary School. Literacy assessments and web-based progress monitoring help teachers answer the questions, “Is my intervention working? If not, what change is necessary?” Teachers also use frequent formative assessments to create student-centered goals, identify students at risk, and track interventions. A computer data management and monitoring program that can accept data from any assessment is used to organize test data and track performance.

All second-grade teachers administer and analyze the results of locally developed ELA and mathematics assessments that parallel the format and content of the State assessments that students will meet as third graders. These exams not only acquaint students with the format of the assessment but are also used to evaluate the instructional program in second grade and the performance of second graders in order to better prepare students for the Grade 3 State Assessments.

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

The hands-on, language-rich curriculum and instruction that Columbus Elementary provides is supported by a schedule that gives extended time to literacy instruction and by the embedded use of technology. A six-day cycle of 30-minute blocks each for music, library, computer lab, art, and physical education (twice) provides common time for grade-level planning and concentrated time for literacy instruction.

Technology supports learning in many ways. SMART Boards in every classroom make learning visible and visual for students. Teachers use them as a valuable tool for helping students learn language and develop vocabulary, particularly for pre-lesson activities to provide essential background knowledge (e.g., a video of a dairy farm). Students are actively engaged in hands-on learning in the computer lab and mobile laptop lab (80 wireless laptops are available for classroom use). Students who need it are provided instruction using computer-based programs that individualize instruction to reinforce necessary skills.

Selected students are given learning opportunities beyond the school day. For example, Columbus is in the third year of a five-year grant that provides students in grades two through five after-school support in reading and math. Students are selected based on their performance on New York State and local assessments, and the program runs four days a week from 3:15-5:30 from October to May. The school also provides homework support, tutorials to prepare for



State ELA and Mathematics Assessments, academic enrichment, and regular family literacy activities. A three-week, five-hour/day (9:00-2:00) program during July helps selected students maintain the school year gains. And Columbus enjoys an effective working relationship with the Parks and Recreation Department of New Rochelle, which operates numerous after-school and summer recreation programs.

## **In a Nutshell**

All the tools, practices, and programs that Columbus staff use focus on developing language and literacy in ways that are most effective for learning English as a second language. All students are taught with techniques that support growth for all language learners. And teachers and administrators constantly monitor progress and seek new and better ways to ensure success for each child. The staff share a vision of success for their students and work together to achieve that vision.

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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 may be seen on the project web sites: [www.albany.edu/aire/kids](http://www.albany.edu/aire/kids) and <http://knowyourschoolsnyc.org>.

<sup>ii</sup> Based on the work of psychologist Carol Dweck at Stanford University.