

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

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Davison Avenue School *Malverne Union Free School District*



School Context

Davison Avenue School is the intermediate school in the Malverne Union Free School District in Nassau County on Long Island. Located 20 minutes from Manhattan, it serves a greater percentage of high needs students than the state average. In 2009-10, for example, 34% of the population was eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Its 325-student, multi-cultural population is 37% African-American; 25% Hispanic or Latino; and 6%, Asian; 8% of students are Limited English Proficient. Davison Avenue students in these generally high needs categories have consistently outperformed their peers in similar schools on New York State Assessments of English Language Arts and Mathematics.

Until fall of 2010, Davison Avenue was an elementary school serving students in Kindergarten through grade 4, with three classes at each grade level and an approximate student-teacher ratio of 20-1. In the 2010-11 school year Davison transitioned from being a K-4 elementary school to become the district intermediate school serving grades 3 and 4. Grade 5 will be added in September 2012. The school provides the services of a speech and language teacher, social worker, and school psychologist, as well as second language learning instruction and remedial reading and math instruction.

Student Demographics 2009-10: *Davison Avenue Elementary School, Malverne UFSD*

Grades served: K- 4	Davison Avenue Elementary School	Malverne Union Free School District	New York State
Eligible for Free/Reduced-Price Lunch	34%	32%	48%
Limited English Proficient	8%	4%	8%
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution			
African-American	37%	57%	19%
Hispanic/Latino	25%	18%	22%
White	30%	20%	50%
Other	8%	5%	8%
Total Enrollment	325	1700	2,692,649

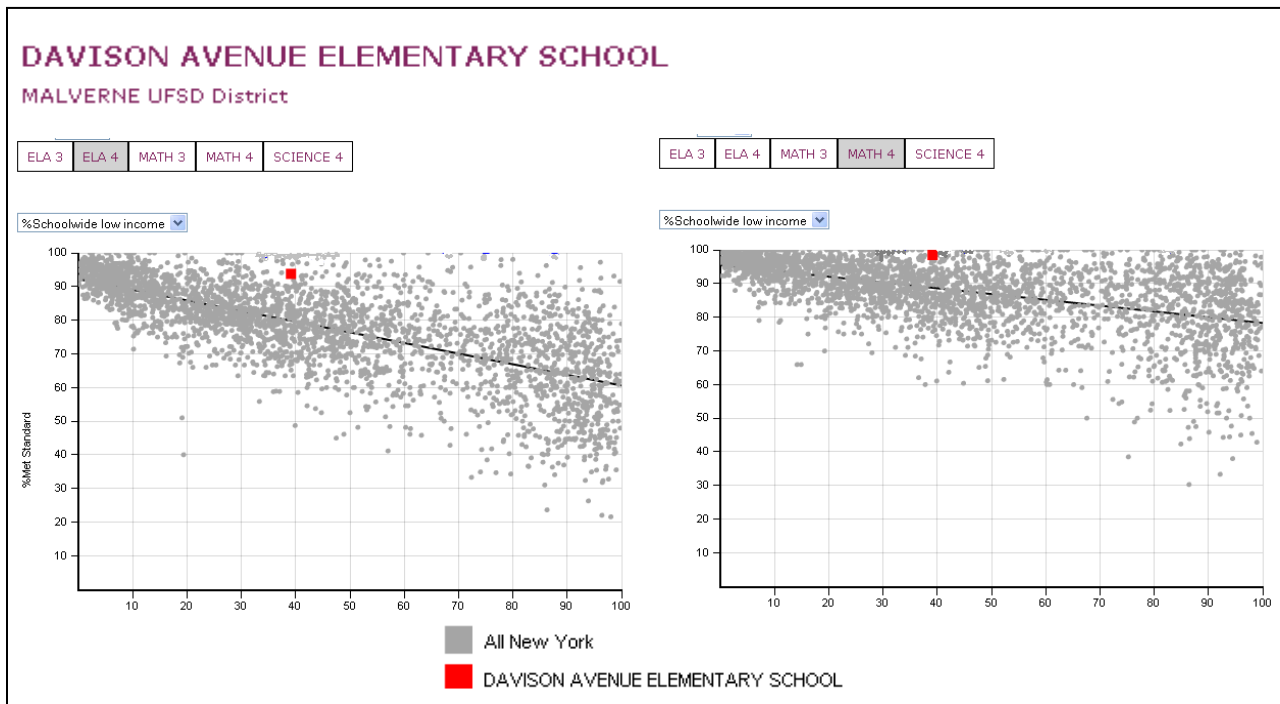
Demographic data are from the 2009-10 state report cards (<https://www.nystart.gov/publicweb/Home.do?year=2010>).

Davison Avenue has long emphasized achievement and high expectations for student success. The school is proud of its success and teaches the value of achieving to its students. A sign at the entrance of the school reads “DAVISON AVENUE: RECOGNIZED SCHOOL OF EXCELLENCE” in honor of the school’s 1991-2 Blue Ribbon Award from the U.S. Department of Education. Inside the school lobby visitors can see the actual Blue Ribbon Plaque. Nearby is a framed poster, entitled “Malverne Pride: The Faces of Success,” that displays the photos and names of Davison’s high-achieving students, those who made the honor roll.

One of the current year’s school goals is to “Increase the number of students on the Honor Roll.” Teachers work to build confidence in students, teach them to honor learning, and to believe that they can all be honor students. Student work is posted around the building, giving it a place of importance; students can see what others have learned and learn from each other.

It is ingrained in our philosophy. We have a long-standing belief that we can meet the needs of every single child. We are going to keep the bar high for our students. - teacher

Davison Avenue staff focus on the academic achievement of students while educating the whole child. The student body and staff gather monthly with invited families and guests to recognize a student from each classroom who exemplifies the rules of respect, impulse control, compassion, and equity. This program, called Peacemakers, supports and applauds the character and conduct development of Davison Avenue students. Nearly 100% of the invited parents attend the monthly Peacemakers assembly.



Performance of Davison Avenue fourth graders on NYS ELA and Math Assessments in 2009, compared with all elementary schools in the state in terms of student poverty levels. 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 school reflects the district's motto: "Learn Well, Stay Safe, Participate, Graduate," as well as the district goals as expressed on its website: "The spirit and aim of our schools are to benefit, to the utmost degree, every student who enters. Each one is given the opportunity for the cultivation of character, scholarship and health. Good citizenship is stressed, activities are encouraged, and a school life is fostered."

Best Practice Highlights

Some of the characteristics of the school that stand out are its school-wide commitment to success, individualization of instruction and services, collaboration, and balancing test preparation with teaching skills, strategies and content.

School-wide Commitment to Student Success

Teachers and administrators view the school community as a family and expect each member of their family to be successful. They share the responsibility of educating the child.

Every teacher is invested in the success of every student. We feel the children are our own children, crying when they don't succeed, cheering when they do. We care about and worry about the kids. - teacher

A student who transferred from another school to Davison said to his teacher one day, "I never had a family before. It's only me and my mom."

Individualization

The staff is committed to knowing each student as a person and a learner. They strive to differentiate instruction by matching their teaching to the student's learning style, adjusting pacing, and building vocabulary and background knowledge.

Our teachers never give up on a child. We never stop trying to find an alternative way to reach the student. We don't see it as a challenge; they're just our kids. - teacher

Collaboration

From hiring staff, to writing curriculum, to discussing students and planning for their success, Davison Avenue teachers and staff work together and support each other. Teachers talk about their work as being a team effort with everybody banding together.

When we see children in need, we sit down and decide what we can do and how we can help the child; what strategies to use and how to implement them in the classroom. - district chair

Balancing Test Preparation with Teaching Skills, Strategies and Content

Educators continually assess students and analyze the data to understand and address student needs. Their analysis helps them determine the skills, strategies and content that need to be taught, as well as what test-taking strategies and test formats need to be taught and practiced.

Our students become familiar with test taking and have built the stamina to complete a test, so they are comfortable taking the New York State exams. - teacher

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 practices at Davison Avenue within each theme of the framework.

Curriculum and Academic Goals

The superintendent has always made a push for increasing the achievement of our students in every way, not just in testing, but in everything possible.

- district administrator

The curriculum and academic goals are determined from a review of the previous school year's scores and climate. Following this review, the superintendent and the Board of Education set district goals. Each employee of the district is expected to ask him- or herself, "What can I do to support accomplishing the district goal? What is my role?" Deputy superintendent, district chairs, principals, and teachers each set role-specific goals to address the district goals. During this process the district goal becomes more defined. For example, the district goal is "to continue to improve academic expectations, standards and learning outcomes consistent with the principles of mastery learning." The Davison Avenue building goal is "to increase student achievement in mastery in both ELA and Math." The third-grade teachers' goal is "to achieve a higher number of 3s and 4s [meeting standards and meeting standards with distinction] on the [state] ELA and Math Assessment." The teachers' individual goals include strategies that they will employ to achieve the goal.

Everyone -- bus driver, secretary, teacher, principal, chair -- has a different role to fill in improving student learning and safety. If everyone fulfills his role, the students realize and understand that it is their role to learn well and stay safe. – district administrator

The teachers at Davison Avenue express that they feel their students' success is supported by sharing common goals and working together as a team to achieve those goals.

Curriculum materials and programs that are selected to meet those goals are aligned with the New York State Learning Standards. When new programs are being reviewed for selection, they are discussed by the principal, deputy superintendent, chairs, and teachers. Programs selected need to be researched-based programs that have been tested and assessed to have met the desired needs.

Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building

Staff Selection

Davison Avenue teachers meet with chairs and the principal to review teaching candidates and make recommendations to the deputy superintendent and superintendent. Several teachers have been hired after having hands-on experience in the school as student teachers, substitutes, or serving in temporary positions. Candidates are observed during a demonstration lesson as part of the selection process.

District representatives attend diversity recruitment fairs as part of their search to find candidates who will be a “fit for the family.” Teachers and chairs, as well as the deputy superintendent, expressed that in addition to caring about instruction, being a master of their subject area, and being passionate about teaching, successful candidates need to know the proper way to work with the school population and the staff and how to be part of a team.

Leadership

Mutual respect and admiration are shared by the principal, chairs, specialists, and teachers for the work each does and for how they support each other. The principal empowers the staff, appreciates and applauds their success.

Davison Avenue has a very talented and dedicated staff who work very hard and go the extra mile. I can delegate and trust people to do their jobs. Our success is a team effort.
- principal

Instruction and curriculum are supported within the building and from the district level, which provides a district chair for each academic area. Davison has reading and math specialists who work directly with the chairs and with classroom teachers. In addition, grade-level leaders serve as liaisons for the science and social studies information that comes from those district chairs.

The district chair is an excellent leader who is good about saying, “Here’s where I want to go” and then lets us fine tune how to get there.
- teacher

Capacity Building

Although teachers are supported to attend professional conferences and workshops and participate in webinars, much of the capacity building takes place in house through the supervision process, presentations and modeling by chairs and specialists, and through collaborative teamwork.

Teachers are observed by the principal, deputy superintendent, and district chairs, all of whom use the same observation protocol. Part of the observation is to assure that teachers are keeping the bar high enough for students. Teachers are encouraged to participate in reflective practice.

The most important part of every lesson is when a teacher analyzes what she did and how it worked.
- district chair

At monthly grade-level meetings, the chairs provide specific curriculum and instructional professional development for teachers. The chairs, as well as the math and reading specialists, are available to push into classrooms to model lessons and teaching strategies.

Teachers credit their success and energy to the collaborative teamwork that happens throughout the day at the school. In addition to the grade-level and subject-area meetings, teachers talk about children and instruction constantly:

We meet in the faculty lounge at lunch and talk about how to meet a child’s needs, like how to reach out to those who just lost a family member. We are here after school preparing work and talking about a better way to teach a lesson. - teacher

Teachers have received training in differentiated instruction, balanced literacy, guided reading, and a nationally recognized writing program.

The principal builds his capacity through his work with teachers and chairs, as well as participating in collegial circles with district administrators, discussions within the Nassau County Elementary Principals Group, and professional conferences.

Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements

Davison educators see each student as an individual who can and will succeed. Educators there believe differentiation of instruction is the basis of a student's success.

Differentiation

Differentiation occurs in pacing and materials and in addressing learning styles. Teachers use cooperative learning as a structure for differentiating instruction and building on students' strengths. Teachers also differentiate homework. Students are expected to have meaningful homework Monday through Friday. When teachers know that a child does not have support at home, they differentiate by doing the homework with the child after school or first thing in the morning; giving less homework; and/or giving work that they know the child can do without adult support.

Integration

Integration takes place throughout the curriculum. Language arts skills and strategies are taught and practiced in all curriculum areas. Thematic units integrate a variety of content, skills and strategies. The building of background knowledge and the use of manipulatives, learning centers, hands-on activities, higher-level questions, graphic organizers, and vocabulary development activities are lesson components in all subject areas. The goal of every lesson is to have students actively engaged and learning for themselves. Teachers tier vocabulary, teaching simpler vocabulary (synonyms) first and incrementally increasing vocabulary to more complex levels.

A Spiral Approach-Repetition

In the mathematics and language arts curriculums, a spiral approach is integral. In math, for example, every lesson starts with a bridge to the previous lesson. In both math and language arts a skill or concept is taught, practiced, and revisited throughout the year. In the spiral approach, the teacher asks, "What is worth repeating to the students?" Teachers at each grade level use the same language to teach a strategy, so the students recognize what they have been taught and do not think that they are learning something different.

Concepts taught are threaded through the curriculum throughout the school year. New information is integrated with the old. The students hear the concept over and over and it becomes part of their repertoire. They own it.
– district administrator

Chairs, together with teachers, build the curriculum for math and language arts. The structure for the math program is provided by the math series that the district adopted, which reflects the spiral approach and integrates technology, hands-on activities, and literature to support its approach to teaching math concepts and strategies.

Differentiation and individualized instruction are manifested in the instructional reading program, which uses a balanced literacy approach; this includes interactive read alouds, shared reading, guided reading, independent reading, and writer’s workshop. A literature-rich environment is created in each classroom.

Preparation for the New York State Assessments

Test preparation is a part of the curriculum. Throughout the school year, students are taught the test format as well as strategies to assist them in answering the test questions; they are also given practice in taking the exams. Teachers try to embed this instruction into the regular curriculum and make it fun. Teachers, together with curriculum chairs, have developed materials that match the state assessments for students to use as tools to learn how to take and practice the exams. Students are also given “old” exams three times a year as a practice tool.

Practice exams also serve as an assessment tool: Teachers analyze results to see where the students are, where they need help. They examine test questions and responses to see if students understand the vocabulary in the questions and the intent of the questions. Students are also taught to be more exact in their answers and support their answers from the text, because this is what the assessments demand. Teachers feel that students need to be taught the exactness of language in order to correctly select the exact answers that are necessary to be successful on state assessments.

As an instructional technique, teachers do the test-taking work along with the students, showing them their thinking, questions, and process. Their purpose is to “train the students to ask their own questions.” Teachers say that their students are not afraid of taking the official New York State assessments when they are administered because they are familiar with them.

We owe it to the child to make him competitive, so he can be successful on the New York State exams.
- district administrator

Parent Involvement

From day one teachers begin to build a relationship with the parents of their students. The school year begins with a school-wide parent meeting at which parents are invited to share Davison Avenue’s high learning expectations for their children. Teachers provide parents with ways that they can support their children’s learning at home. School personnel welcome the growing English language learning (ELL) population and strive to make them part of the school community by delivering messages in their native language and providing translators at parent/teacher conferences. Outreach to parents continues throughout the school year.

Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data

To address the district’s over-arching goal of increasing student achievement, student progress is monitored closely throughout the year by both building and district staff. Students are administered quarterly assessments. At the district level, the superintendent reviews the test results at the school year’s conclusion to set goals for the succeeding year. At least monthly, the deputy superintendent meets with district chairs to see how students are progressing and to determine where to go next.

At the building level, the principal and the ELA and math specialists meet regularly to determine student growth and needs. Teachers meet in grade-level teams with the specialists and principal to analyze tests and their results. They work to determine curriculum and instructional changes that will improve student achievement. All teachers, the librarian, and speech and language specialists work as a team, integrating the needed teaching strategies and vocabulary into their lessons. Over the years, more non-fiction articles have been added to the curriculum, as the New York State assessments have included more non-fiction reading passages.

For mathematics, the math leaders have created chapter tests for each of the 20 chapters in the text by selecting questions from previous state assessments that address the topic of the chapter. This gives students practice with state exam questions while teachers and specialists can assess students' math learning on an on-going basis.

Teachers also monitor their students' progress regularly by using work portfolios, running records, projects, and oral presentations of those projects. Data from informal assessments as well as the quarterly exams are collected, charted and shared to determine what will help students progress. Parents are invited to conversations about improving their child's achievement. Parent-teacher conferences are held in both afternoon and evening (3-5:00 and 6-9:00) to encourage participation by accommodating parents' work schedules.

[When there is a problem,] we try to figure out what went wrong and address it another way. – district administrator

Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustments

Davison Avenue's commitment to enabling all students to achieve academic success is supported by daily 80-minute instructional blocks for mathematics and language arts. Students' math and reading growth is supported by instruction from math and reading specialists. Teachers are paid by the district to teach an additional hour-long class that extends the school day twice a week for third- and fourth-grade students to provide more individualized instruction in ELA and math test taking. The District also provides a six-week half-day summer program of reading and math instruction for targeted students.

Davison offers an extensive forty-five minute "club program" before the start of the school day, with enough clubs to include all students. All students are invited to attend and can choose from intramural sports, band, cultural language clubs, science clubs, gardening, and many others. This program energizes the students and has a positive effect on the students' school day. Students begin the day having fun and doing something they like.

Our students work very hard during the school day. The clubs are a way to balance their hard work with fun.
- principal

Technology supports the learning at Davison Avenue. Teachers use classroom interactive white boards to teach concepts, as well as to increase students' background knowledge and vocabulary levels. Students who have never been to a beach can be taken to a "virtual beach" via the board. Teachers also take their students to Davison's computer lab to engage in hands-on computer use.

In a Nutshell

The principal's personal goal is to make Davison Avenue a place where teachers and students enjoy coming each day. Teachers' comments indicate that the principal's goal is the norm. They state that the students like coming to school and that the teachers are committed to the children and love working at Davison Avenue. Davison is a happy place where the children know all the people.

Everyone is attuned to the kids who need the extra touch of special love. - teacher

Davison Avenue School's success meeting critical needs at the elementary level stems from its belief that all their students can and will succeed. The staff is committed to working together as a team to monitor student progress and to adjust and differentiate instruction to meet the needs that are revealed.

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<http://www.malverne.k12.ny.us/dav/site/default.asp>

¹This 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 and <http://knowyourschoolsny.org>.