

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

Kristen Campbell Wilcox, June 2011

Dr. Charles T. Lunsford School 19 Rochester City School District

I think it's very important that we look at our own students. It's not a one size fits all across the district or across the state. We need to identify what our own kids need. We are very, very focused on our own children here and we do it as a team.

- teacher and instructional coach



School Context

As you enter Dr. Charles T. Lunsford School 19 in the Rochester City School District, pass the chattering students hurrying to class in their red, white and blue uniforms and head toward the main office, an arrangement of plaques will likely catch your eye. Two display photos of Dr. Charles T. Lunsford, Rochester's first known licensed African-American physician and the school's namesake, and the third displays his motto and words to live by: "Success

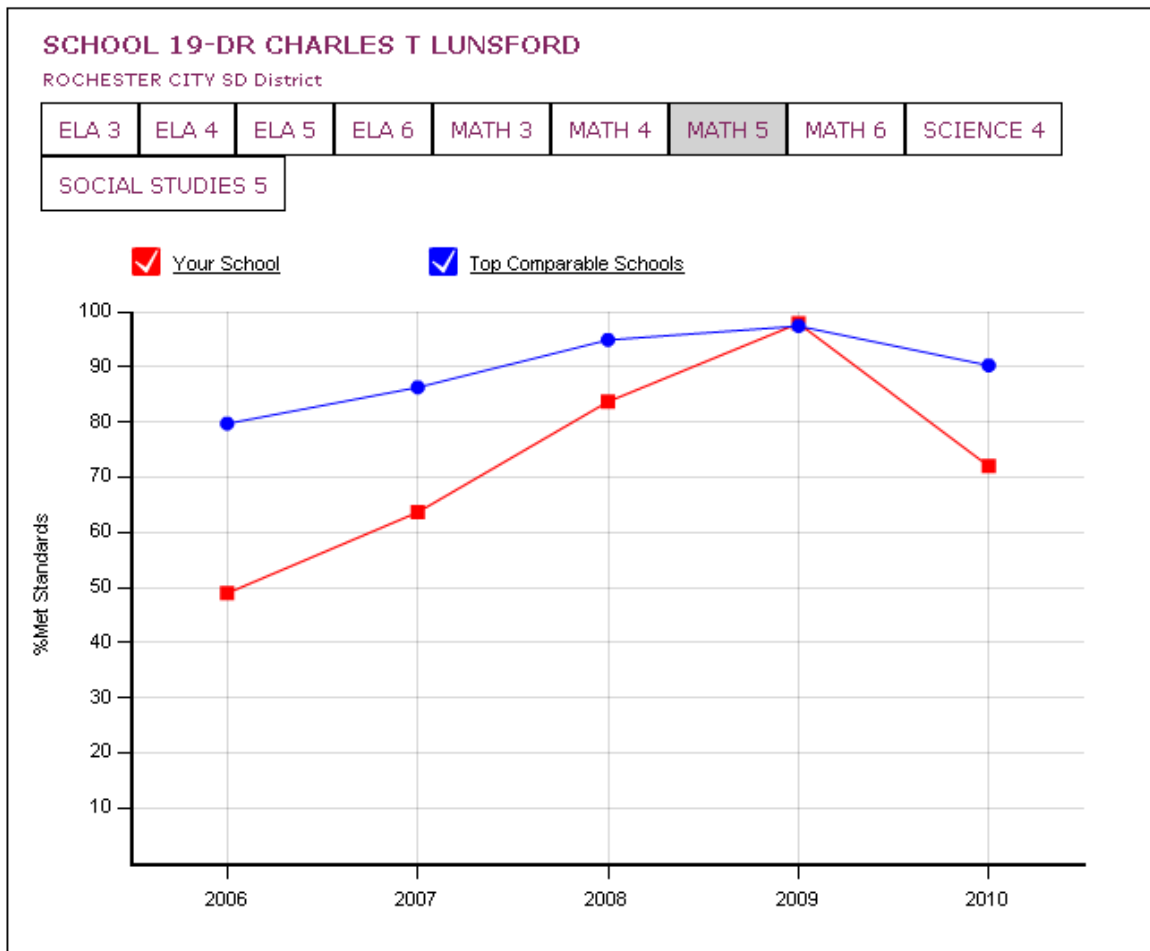
makes one humble, but mistakes make one wise!" "Love, brotherhood, tolerance, good will." This motto and these words are woven into the story of how a school with 98% of its students living in poverty manages to outperform schools with many fewer challenges.

Student Demographics 2009-10: School 19-Dr. Charles T Lunsford, Rochester City School Districtⁱ

Grades served: K - 6	School 19	Rochester City School District	New York State
Eligible for Free/Reduced-Price Lunch	98%	85%	48%
Limited English Proficient	2%	10%	8%
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution			
African-American	94%	64%	19%
Hispanic/Latino	3%	22%	22%
White	2%	10%	50%
Other	1%	3%	8%
Total Enrollment	309	31,653	2,692,649

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

While across the Rochester City School District, students meeting or exceeding proficiency in 2010-11 as measured by New York State ELA and Mathematics Assessments hovered around 26% and 28% respectively, School 19 students achieved 47% and 79%, with goals to reach 60% and 80%. As can be seen in the chart below, School 19 students follow a similar upward trend to the highest performing set of schools in the state except for 2010 when the cut scores changed. With these successes and high expectations has come growing recognition that educators in the "little gem on the hill," as some have referred to the school over the years, are doing something special.



Data are based on publicly available NYS Assessment data as displayed at <http://knowyourschoolsny.org>. For results for additional grades and assessments, click on "Find Your School" on the website.

School 19 lies within one of the largest districts in New York State, serving over 30,000 students. This urban district has low numbers of English language learners yet high numbers of students living in poverty, a struggling economy, and its share of violence and crime. An administrator described the district organizational structure as one broken into “two houses: operational, and teaching and learning.” On the teaching and learning side, the focus is on curriculum and instruction with school zone chiefs sharing the responsibility for supervising principals. Their charge is to ensure “fidelity to the district curriculum” and that “instruction is focused on student achievement,” according to a district administrator. In School 19, where students are generally meeting or exceeding the district’s achievement targets, however, an administrator explained that the district perspective is to offer up support when needed, but “get out of the way when they [school principals] don’t need us.”

The former principal, now a zone chief, explained that when she came to the school in 2002 and looked at student performance data, it made her “sick.” School 19 was on the state’s SURR (School under Registration Review) and SINI (School in Need of Improvement) lists for not meeting AYP targets among some student sub-groups. At that time the district had required the implementation of a reform model to turn things around. Since 2003, however, School 19 has lived up to its “gem” moniker by being a school that staff do not want to leave and a place where

students consistently perform better than in other schools. A current school administrator admits that the School 19 team has earned the latitude to do what works for them based on this reputation, and they'd like to keep it that way. How did School 19 achieve what it has?

First, the former principal purposefully promoted the idea of seeing the school as a family and, moreover, behaving like a family committed to both tolerance, when needed, and always actively advancing the collective good. A social worker looking back on her first year at the school remembered, "The principal wanted everyone to be a part of what was going on – even school pictures. They [administrators] would hunt you down and call you on the PA if you weren't there. She wanted everyone in the family picture." This "family" then began to have "family" meetings (so named on meeting agendas and bulletin boards) centered on how to help students do better. They also hosted annual "family" picnics with school staff and community members intended to start off the school year bridging the school-community divide. In the process, as the former assistant principal and current principal noted, they had "squabbles like brothers and sisters . . . but through honest, open discussions . . . made a stronger and better team."

Concurrently, the former principal promoted the related idea of teachers and staff being personally accountable for students – framed broadly. She explained her vision for this: "Within our school, we saw each child as everybody's child and assumed responsibility for helping that child." Helping a child, in the view of the former principal, evoked Dr. Lunsford's beliefs of love, brotherhood and good will and promoted the idea that providing for the social and emotional support of children is essential and should be expected in a school. Implementing a Positive Behavior Intervention System (PBIS) was one of the first steps taken to bring this to fruition. The former principal explained that "teachers, custodial staff and parents wrote the plan. They stuck to it and it worked. Once students were under control, you could teach." Beyond School 19's approach toward PBIS, helping a child came to mean such acts as contributing to a funeral service for a child's parent or delivering food to a child's home.

Finally, as individual teacher accountability for School 19 students within a culture of a supportive family was established, the former principal was able to galvanize teacher capacity to develop and implement strategic curricular and instructional changes that, in the words of the current principal, are about a "less is more" philosophy: "We don't change what's not broken. We don't keep adding what's not needed." Rather, changes are made that have the most impact on student learning and student well-being. The former principal summed up how the School 19 team achieves what it does: "The people in that building -- they really care about the children. They love teaching. They made my job easy. I am a task-master and they tolerated me. They believed in what I wanted." This philosophy is carried forward with the current principal and instructional coaches in the school.

A shared commitment to the success of the School 19 "family," individual accountability to take care of the whole child, the wisdom for administrators to humbly listen to staff and identify priorities, and teachers to then act on priorities judiciously are all at the foundation of what has made School 19 what it is today.

Best Practice Highlights

In sum, best practices in School 19 include:

- Goals defined by growth of the whole child and a curriculum approached with flexibility and innovation.
- A collaborative team culture where administrators are accessible, teachers share accountability for student achievement, and professional development is focused on what will benefit students most.
- Individualized instruction informed by collaborative arrangements targeting resources to students' unique needs.
- The use of systematic assessment tools, clear procedures for using assessment data, and general acceptance of and expectation for the use of data to inform instructional and other decisions impacting student achievement.

A Closer Look

These practices are evident throughout the five broad themes that frame the study of which this case is one part. The practices will be further described in the following sections, which discuss each of the five themes.

Curriculum and Academic Goals

No Excuses, No Cookie Cutters, and No Magic Chocolate Milk

For me I don't like excuses. To tell me this child came from a single parent home or he was poor and that's why he didn't do well: it was unacceptable. It's how you teach them. They [School 19 teachers] understood that that was what I wanted.

– former school principal/district administrator

We look at not just the end result. We look at the journey of how they [students] get there.

– school principal

You look at our school --- we don't have magic chocolate milk here. The kids in the city are plenty smart. The kids have to be invested in the schools and the teachers have to be invested in the schools.

– teacher and instructional coach

Redefining the Goal: Growth of the Whole Child

According to the school principal, goal-setting at School 19 is decided by the superintendent, but as she explained, goals are also set at the school: “We’ve always strived to be better than we can be. We push ourselves. We have the philosophy of no excuses.” One of the challenges in reaching goals raised recently was the change in cut scores on the state assessments. This precipitated a “dip” in School 19 students’ scores and a revisiting of what might be considered achievable goals. Since the school has had a reputation for exceeding the norm, the superintendent set a goal of 96% proficiency in math and 75% in ELA. The principal conceded, “that may not be achievable,” and yet this does not deter School 19 educators from keeping expectations high.

Although goals are very much attached to the state assessments, at School 19 success in meeting those goals is defined at the level of each individual child. From this vantage point, as one teacher explained it, there is “no cookie cutter” approach toward attempts to reach goals. Rather, achieving academic goals is seen as reliant upon providing the unique emotional and social supports each child needs. Teachers at School 19 don’t tend to talk about academic goals explicitly or as their central focus, even though their school has received recognition for doing well at meeting and exceeding them. In this school, “growth” and “the whole child” are the ways academic success is conceptualized. To them, success

. . . means that every individual child does better than they have done in the past. For example, you may have a child who is in the lowest percentile – when you look at our data – they may be a 1 but [have] gone from a low 1 to almost a 2.
– school principal

. . . is the kids making growth. It’s ok if everyone doesn’t finish the same. Is it important that our kids get 3s and 4s in school? I’d rather have the kids want to be here and try.
– teacher and instructional coach

According to the former principal, this perspective of individualizing goals and the pathways to achieving them by the unit of a child was not always prevalent at the school. She recounted, “We were not really looking at our kids individually.” She promoted the belief in “educating that whole child,” which meant to her, “If he came without a coat, we got a coat for him. He could then focus on his learning.” It also meant exposing students to inspiring experiences children in wealthier communities might have, such as going to a circus or dinner theater or learning to play the violin.

I would shut the whole school down and go to the circus. They went to dinner just like the suburban kids. We expose them to a lot of things.
– former principal/district administrator

High expectations, attention to the needs of each child, and shared investment in developing the whole child are all approaches that impact School 19 educators’ approaches toward curriculum.

Curriculum as a Tool not a Play Book

A district assessment specialist explained that the use of the Rochester Curriculum, which is available on line, includes pacing charts, is complete for most grade levels, and is expected in schools across the district, as are benchmark assessments attached to the curriculum. However, and quite importantly for School 19 teachers, “the how” of instruction is not mandated. Also, a fortunate coincidence for School 19 teachers is the fact that the Rochester Curriculum incorporates a variety of elements taken from the America’s Choice reform model that the school had adopted when it was struggling with student achievement, and so these components are already well embedded in practice.

The big thing is to be responsive to the needs of our schools – by providing a solid curriculum, as well as opportunities for choice, and in giving principals as much autonomy [as possible] over what they can do with their resources.
–district administrator

Teacher autonomy and accountability with regard to the curriculum work hand-in-hand at School 19. There is flexibility in the ways that teachers approach the teaching of the curriculum, whether it is through departmentalization by subject, by gender, or by skill level, but with accountability to ensure the curriculum is taught and taught effectively. This will be discussed in more detail in the section on instructional practice. Overall, teachers say they are encouraged to see the curriculum as a “springboard” and adapt it to what they experience in their classrooms. For example, when the America’s Choice program was chosen the school had a whole language literacy program in place. To resolve these differing approaches toward literacy instruction, teachers developed a School 19-specific model incorporating skills blocks and workshops.

We [teachers in the same grade level] noticed that we were lacking a skills block. From there we broached [the problem] with our administrator . . . our input was listened to and they let us collaborate. We took the best of a couple of different programs. We created binders with a scope and sequence and a format that followed the workshop model from the America’s Choice reform. - teacher

In School 19, the curriculum is seen as a tool that can help teachers do their work, yet not a prescriptive play book. In some schools such an approach might contribute to incoherence in delivery of the curriculum across grades and from teacher to teacher. However, if there is “magic” in School 19, it would emerge, in part, from the very engaged and collaborative work that happens between teacher and teacher and teachers and administrators.

Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building

A Vision and How It Carries On

I think the key to our success has been the collaboration among the teachers as a team . . . and supportive administrators. - teacher

I have to say the culture of the building – that is our strength – that is what we do well. We want to be a team building. - principal

I believe that leadership sets the tone for everything we do. We had no other choice but to work as a team. We wanted to please those in administration because they were attentive to our needs. - teacher

Reversing the Administrative Turn-over Cycle

One long-time teacher recounted a time when School 19 leadership was in flux: “We had a very rough period in 2002-3. We went through three administrators.” When the former principal and now district administrator was hired, School 19 educators had already received many different administrators’ “visions.” Throughout this tumultuous period, however, a teacher recounted that School 19 had the benefit of a foundation of teachers “very committed to seeing things improve.” Garnering educators’ commitment to the principal’s vision in 2003 came not without a strategy to continue to promote that vision more broadly and from within. The current principal said she was selected as assistant principal during that time because she could be the “yin” to the former principal’s “yang.” She explained how this happened,

I came in 2005. I was selected due to my instructional background. I was a math specialist and I did a lot of work with analyzing data in a SURR school. . . .

She [the former principal] had a history in administration. She was primarily operational. She called us the yin and yang: what I didn't know, she knew; what she knew, I didn't know. I just was able to learn everything I needed a background in. We got to a point where we could finish each other's sentences.

– principal

This principal has carried forward the former principal's vision of “no excuses” and “no cookie cutter” approaches toward School 19 children's education. She has continued to nurture the family culture that keeps the school a desirable place to be for educators and students alike. The next generation of potential leaders for this building are also within sight. They are those who work on the leadership team and as instructional coaches.

Professional Development the Turn-Key Way

One of the ways staff development is approached at School 19, which is indicative of the fluid and collaborative culture of the school, is the approach toward using instructional coaches. Instructional coaches, who also have teaching assignments, are expected to attend workshops and conferences to then turn-key what they have learned with their fellow School 19 teachers. This arrangement might not work well everywhere, but in School 19, another motto guiding teachers' work is: “We are one.” Whether a person is custodial staff, classroom teacher, instructional coach, or building administrator —everyone is expected to share what they can and come up with innovative ideas to do things better.

In addition to professional development offered by School 19 staff, teachers also have the advantage of a variety of district-wide professional development offerings. One special education teacher explained that the district's response to intervention (RTI) offerings provide for “collegial” and ongoing support from specialists in his area of expertise. District specialists have also been brought in to help with the integration of a 7th grade in School 19 with “teen brain” presentations and ongoing classroom support.

Building a Community of Accountable Collaborators

Building a community of accountable collaborators is in part reliant on finding and hiring the right fit of teacher to join the School 19 family. What is clearly common among teachers at School 19 is a shared desire to work in an urban district with high needs children and be part of a team. An example of this is one 26-year veteran of the school who said she was at a more advantaged school previously and “they were children anyone could teach. . . . I need to push kids to get them to succeed here.” Feeling inspired by the challenges the School 19 student population poses and as if one “can make an impact” drives many of these educators to put forth extra efforts to compromise with their colleagues when their opinions differ. A formal mentoring program is also available for teachers in their first year, and the Rochester Leadership Academy, touted as “one of the only ones like it in the state outside of New York City,” provides monthly meetings for newer principals. Beyond formal mentoring, teachers also lend support to each other informally.

When people come in it is challenging for sure, but it's a small school and everyone is supportive. There are always other teachers to go to who will help you. We are a team helping each other. We don't have people coming in and out. If someone leaves it's usually a retirement.

- teacher

Ultimately, maximizing student learning and achievement is seen as a communal activity at School 19. Teachers know that they can get help from their colleagues and that administrators will listen to what they have to say, but with the expectation that everyone is pulling her or his own weight. They also know that “courageous discussions,” as the principal described them, about individual children’s performance will happen on a consistent basis. These discussions occur in weekly grade-level meetings, weekly leadership meetings, “on the fly,” and in the quarterly formal meetings between each teacher and the principal.

For every grade level meeting, you send your minutes to your administrator. Every teacher in a grade level meets in the team – it’s also an opportunity for the special education teachers to contribute. At the end of the day, everybody knows what’s going on in the classrooms. There is room for communication. - teacher

Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements: Melding Instructional Approaches with an Innovative Twist

Integrating Workshops and Skills Blocks

Instructional programs and practices at School 19 are strongly influenced by the Rochester Curriculum, which, as explained earlier, incorporates workshop model components from America’s Choice. The district curriculum framework outlines an instructional sequence including an opening with essential questions, direct instruction, a workshop period, and then closing. Teachers at School 19, however, indicate that direct instruction is de-emphasized and student interaction and individual student expression of understanding is emphasized in the school.

My feeling is you have to look at each child and see what each child needs and create a program for that need. It varies from child to child - hands on or interactive. . . . It helps by having the workshop model. - teacher

This focus on student interaction and expression of understanding became routine after the former principal and the leadership team at that time looked closely at what the America’s Choice program offered and what it didn’t for School 19 students. At that time a few very important things happened to align the model to the instruction the school’s student population needed. Teachers and coaches developed modifications to the America’s Choice reform model that included integrating skills blocks based on student performance data. These skills blocks were meant to provide extra support in areas such as phonics and followed the reading program’s scope and sequence.

Departmentalizing

During this time another important element of instructional practice came into place: Departmentalization. A teacher recounted that in 2004-5 a group of teachers strategized around the idea of departmentalizing by subject area at the 3rd grade. The former principal required the 3rd-grade teachers to offer a proposal including how they would approach behavior, planning time, grading, the referral process, variation of departmentalization (e.g., by subject, skill, gender), transitions, rituals, and routines and how problems would be handled. The principal listened to their pitch and approved the idea with the caveat that the teachers would be responsible for showing that their idea worked -- and it did. Since then other teams have

followed suit; for example, the 6th grade has departmentalized by gender: boys and girls are taught separately.

I think that the departmentalization has been a success. Each teacher has been able to teach in their area of expertise, and science and social studies are taught every day. The way we tend to do it – the kids rotate by homeroom class from teacher to teacher in a cluster.

- teacher

Our 6th grades are actually very strong. 100% met state standards. I've noticed the girls are much more comfortable doing the work and being successful. They have no need to fake being dumb.

- administrator

Workshops, skills blocks and departmentalizing are all ways School 19 educators have adapted instruction to the benefit of teachers and students alike.

Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis and Use of Data - Data Driving Instruction

Using Data in “Real Time”

An individualized approach toward instruction and the collaborative culture at School 19 reinforce the use of benchmark and other testing to frequently assess student learning. The idea that student performance data should be used in “real time” to inform instruction is well embedded in processes and practices at the district and in the school. Part of the emphasis on getting timely data in the hands of teachers came with the former principal who said that the way benchmark testing had been done at School 19 previously wasn't sufficient. At that time the district required three benchmark tests that, in the view of the former principal, left too much time at the beginning of the year lost in trying to discover what students needed. Therefore, she facilitated the work of ELA and math specialists in designing an additional test to be given in the 2nd week of school. This assessment was based on the previous year's state tests.

We were way ahead of the rest of the district when looking at data. We used to give the baseline of the old state math tests in 5th grade in September. Most schools weren't doing that. They weren't using any data to drive their instruction.

- teacher and instructional coach

In addition to using real-time benchmark data, School 19 teachers also have at their disposal a variety of on-line student performance data systems in literacy and math. Between district benchmarks, on-line assessments, and other commercially available assessment tools, School 19 teachers are not reliant upon the New York State assessments to adjust their instruction.

They [teachers in the Rochester CSD] have multiple assessments available. If they see a child is having a difficulty, we can be specific about what is needed.

– district administrator

These data all inform “data meetings,” as the School 19 principal calls them. In these meetings the principal and teacher will “go over each individual student and discuss anyone who might have fallen through the cracks.” A variety of tables and graphs are used to disaggregate data by student and skill. These meetings and data analysis tools help inform interventions and adjustments, the focus of the next section.

Recognition, Intervention and Adjustments: Building Resilience

Making Response to Intervention Their Own

*I believe that people feel that poverty is a barrier between kids and education.
The challenge is finding that resilience.* – social worker

In School 19 one of the primary pathways to ensuring interventions are in place so students have the best chance to succeed is through Response to Intervention (RTI). When RTI came to the school, it was one of the first schools in the district to use it. One teacher reflected that besides a couple of district meetings, teachers were pretty much “on their own” in figuring out how to employ RTI. However, as one teacher noted, while in other schools “people were arguing about when they were going to meet to talk about RTI, we had dinner and just got together.” Just as in their approach to previous reform efforts and the Rochester Curriculum, School 19 teachers collaborated to make RTI their own: They condensed information down to the most essential, used a tool kit they got off the internet and pulled from “every resource we could,” including hiring back a particularly skilled retired teacher to make RTI work for them. All of this did not happen without feeling “overwhelmed” at times, as one teacher lamented. When a new director of special education came in recently, Individualized Education Plans (IEP) were also expected to be more detailed than previously. This on top of still working out the kinks of their RTI processes was met with some resistance according to one teacher, but ultimately they rose to these challenges. As one teacher asserted, “We were reminded that we could push forward and come up with something great and we ended up adapting.”

Managing Behavior Management

You have to be aware where [a behavior management plan] is not working and fix it. We’re not doing anything you couldn’t reproduce anywhere else. It’s about being proactive, and not having 100 initiatives: Less is more. - principal

Beyond academic interventions such as those provided through IEPs, School 19 teachers use a behavior management system meant to recognize good conduct and provide clear and consistent messages for students across all of their classrooms. This plan, as mentioned earlier, was co-constructed and “gives them [teachers] the accountability piece,” according to the principal. Part of this plan is known as CTLS, which stands for “think Caring, Totally prepared, Learn safely, and make Smart choices.” It includes descriptions of what each of these sounds and looks like in classes, hallways, the cafeteria, playground, and during arrival and dismissal.

The principal said this plan has “changed the climate in our building. Students aren’t being sent to the office because they threw a pencil anymore.” Bullying is still an issue, as is developing a better process for dealing with “strong consequences” for repeat offenders. Special education students are held to the same expectations as the others, and this is part of what one teacher characterized as a building-wide approach to being “open-minded and “inclusive” of all students.

We have the same expectations for behavior – everybody does their best to work within students’ needs and concerns. Even self-contained students have worked with my students. They are integrated in special subjects too. - teacher

In a Nutshell

Working off both their successes and mistakes, School 19 educators have built an approach toward their work that results in better than average performance for their high need students. Leadership’s commitment to taking care of the School 19 “family,” envisioned as those who work and study in the school and more broadly to those in the School 19 community, serves as the foundation. Shared ownership of success defined as growth of the whole child is then enacted in how teachers approach their work as professionals, how instructional modifications are developed and implemented, how data are used to inform instruction, and, finally, how interventions and adjustments are approached.

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ⁱ 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 sixty to 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 web sites: www.albany.edu/aire/kids and <http://knowyourschoolsny.org>.