

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

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John F. Kennedy Magnet School ***Port Chester-Rye Union Free School District***



School Context

When approaching John F. Kennedy Magnet School a visitor gets an immediate sense of the friendliness, order, and pride of this school. The first insight into the culture of this school community is offered by a crossing guard who greets students, parents, and other adults, wishing them “good morning.” Students line up in the school yard waiting for staff to open the doors for the start of another day as the small blue ribbons tied to the surrounding chain link fence wave quietly in the breeze – a proud reminder of their school’s designation as a National Blue Ribbon School for 2010. The caring culture of this school is abundantly apparent in the interactions among administrators, teachers, staff, and students throughout the school. Each school day begins with students in every class gathering together with their teacher at a “morning meeting” to greet classmates, share personal events, or discuss their plans for the day.

Although no longer a magnet school because the district assigns students to schools by neighborhood zones, the official name of the school remains the John F. Kennedy Magnet School. However, it is better known locally as the Kennedy School, or simply JFK, and is the largest of the four elementary schools in the Port Chester-Rye UFSD. Port Chester itself is a village located in Long Island Sound, bordering Connecticut. According to the Westchester County Youth Bureau Annual Report, it has the lowest median household income in the county. It is described by one district administrator as an “immigrant community surrounded by affluence.” This district, somewhat of an anomaly in Westchester County, has needs that more closely resemble those of large urban centers. But “although it has some urban aspects, it’s a very small town,” says one district administrator. “Families have longevity here. It’s a very, very proud community.”

Port Chester-Rye UFSD, with over 4,000 students, has a multi-ethnic culture. Students are predominately Hispanic/Latino, typically from various areas throughout South America. They represent 74% of the district enrollment, and they bring a mix of cultures and even regional differences within some countries to the district. An administrator describes this population as one that respects teachers and principals: “They have the value system of education. My kids are going to do better – it’s the immigrant dream.”

There's a "can do" attitude in Port Chester. With our kids, it doesn't matter who walks in our door or what kind of issues [they bring]. We understand there are all these hurdles with these children, but we still have to educate them. Port Chester stopped making excuses like we can't work with them or there are too many problems and they can't learn. The fact is, it's not true. They can learn. - district administrator

Currently, the Kennedy School serves 750 students, an increase of nearly 100 in just the past two years. It has grown from 400 to 750 students in a ten year span. As a result, the school has an unusual configuration. It is comprised of three buildings. Two buildings are located on one campus with one housing third, fourth, and fifth grades and another, second grade. A few blocks away a second site, the Early Learning Center, was initiated two years ago and is used for Kindergarten/first grade.

Student Demographics 2009-10: John F. Kennedy Magnet School, Port Chester-Rye UFSDⁱ

Grades served: K- 5	John F. Kennedy Magnet School	Port Chester-Rye UF School District	New York State
Eligible for Free/Reduced-Price Lunch	78%	62%	48%
Limited English Proficient	55%	26%	8%
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution			
African-American	10%	7%	19%
Hispanic/Latino	86%	74%	22%
White	3%	18%	50%
Other	2%	1%	8%
Total Enrollment	725	4057	2,692,649

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

It's very diverse here. You walk into a classroom, we have our own melting pot. We learn from that. - teacher

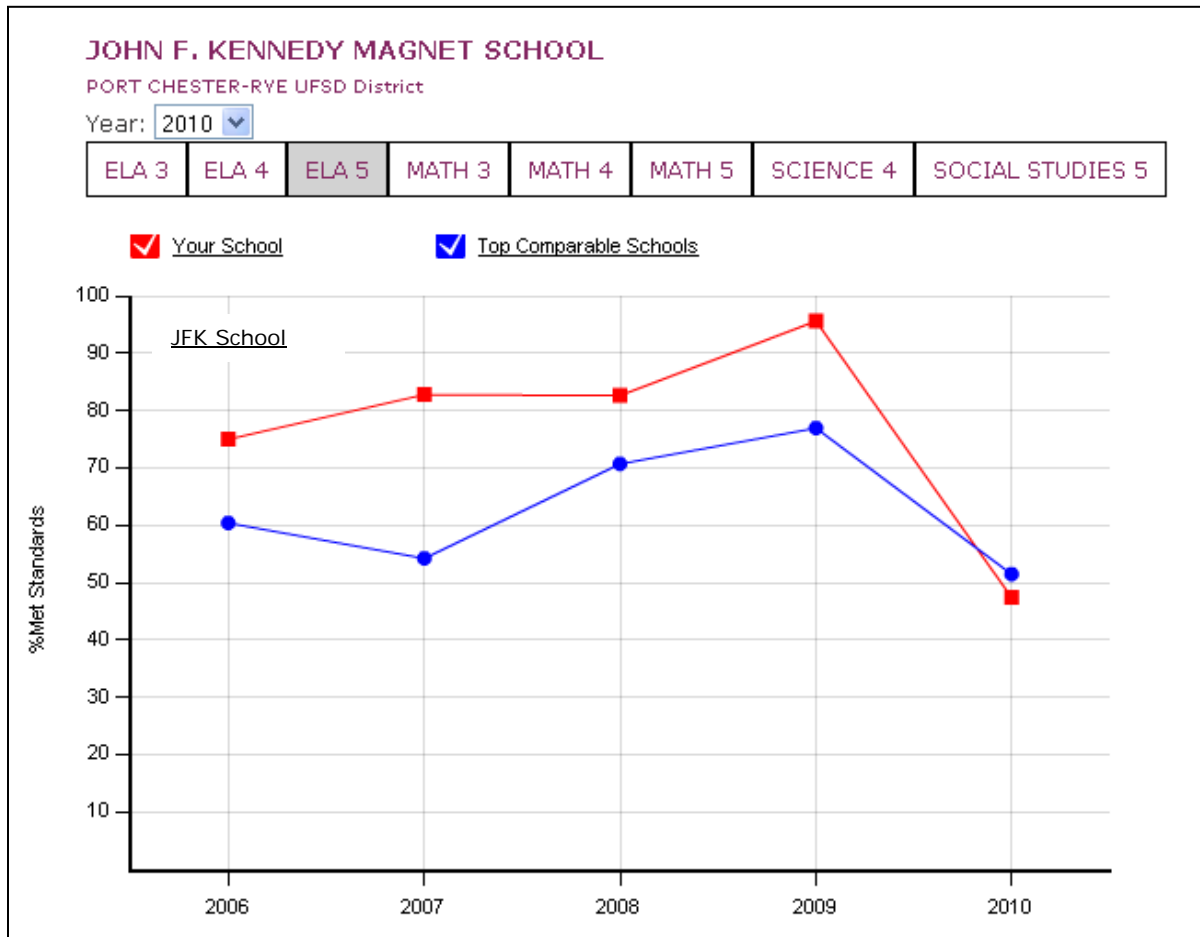
The school serves a large, diverse, and needy population, with 78% of the students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch in 2009-10. 86% of students are Hispanic and come from Spanish-speaking homes, with 55% of students identified as English language learners (ELLs). These percentages at JFK exceed both the districtwide profile for these subgroups as well as state averages. As the principal proudly states, "We're a community school." The diversity of cultures in this school community is viewed as a positive part of its identity.

We don't feel poor; if anything, we feel like we're rich. Our job is to give this community a school of excellence, so indeed they can be proud of their neighborhood school, proud of the education their children receive. We take this business very seriously. - principal

In recognition of these bilingual needs, the school website, newsletters, progress reports and other materials are provided in both English and Spanish. As noted on its website, the mission at JFK is:

*To provide our students with a safe, academically challenging school program. . . .
Nuestra meta es proveer a nuestros estudiantes una escuela limpia y segura y un programa escolar que es exigente.*

Despite its relative poverty, diversity, and mix of cultures, the Kennedy School is an academic success story. For example, since 2006 its students have consistently outperformed students in similar schools on state mathematics and English language arts assessments, including the most successful schools serving similar populations of students (top comparable schools).



Performance of JFK fifth graders on the NYS ELA Assessment, 2006-2010, compared with the average performance of the top ten schools serving similar students. Data are based on publicly available data as displayed at <http://knowyourschoolsny.org>. For results for additional grades and assessments, click on "Find Your School" on the website.

Many practices at John F. Kennedy Magnet School provide both academic and social-emotional support for students and their families. The principal as well as several staff members proudly list one of their most important principles as their persistence. As one teacher states, "We never give up on what can help a student."

Our belief system and expectations create a willingness to do whatever it takes to support success for every student. . . . In so doing, we have become a family, a team of leaders.

- Blue Ribbon Application

Best Practice Highlights

John F. Kennedy Magnet School is characterized by the following best practices:

- Individualized instructional practices
- Visionary and tenacious leadership
- A focus on bilingual education
- Strong belief in emotional as well as academic support

Individualized Instructional Practices

We really get to know our students. It's all about planning, and planning for that individual child. Everyone needs something different. Timing, planning, really getting to know them – that's what sets us apart. - teacher

The positive school climate at JFK is punctuated by a focus on differentiated instructional practices. A consistent set of beliefs about students and learning is expressed often by the principal, teachers, and other staff. As one teacher says, “Everything is done with the students in mind.” Teaching with a focus on improving student performance is intentional and woven throughout this school community. The value placed on this belief is seen as a contributing factor to creating a caring school climate.

The motto, “Success for Every Student,” is not just a motto at the Kennedy School. When the staff talk about success for every student, it is a belief, as demonstrated by a teacher sharing an example of one student who had been encountering some learning difficulties saying, “Well the principal always says we haven’t done enough for *this* child.” The concept that there are no excuses for students not learning is embedded into teachers’ instructional practice. As a result there is a tireless, individualized approach to teaching and learning.

Visionary and Tenacious Leadership

Leadership requires tenacity. You can't be afraid to take risks. - district administrator

The leadership skills of the principal at JFK are seen as a critical element in the significant changes in the culture, curriculum, and academic improvement of students over the past ten years. District-level administrators as well as teachers credit much of this change to his leadership skills. They say he demonstrates a leadership style that is visionary in his approach to meeting the educational and social-emotional needs of each and every student at JFK, and he is tenacious in his ability to convince those around him to embrace his vision. One district administrator summarizes his leadership this way: “The Kennedy School principal’s leadership is to never take no for an answer. It’s not acceptable . . . and do whatever it takes to get things done.”

The key priorities of his leadership style are communication and teamwork. Changes in the curriculum, the adoption of a program that emphasizes social and emotional support to help foster academic performance, and the focus on individual student achievement have been

developed with the support of teachers. The principal clearly credits this by saying, “Staff is everything.” Reflecting on what makes the Kennedy School work, he adds, “Teamwork beyond all else is what makes this school special. Providing professional development to teachers so they can grow and share . . . leading by example . . . supporting teachers as leaders. Being willing to give teachers time to meet and find a way to give teachers time – shared decision-making.” And teachers concur, saying they are empowered to be leaders. Staff members say they are encouraged and supported in their collective mission to meet the needs of each student.

A Focus on Bilingual Education

In a perfect world, we'd have three out of six classes at each grade level that are bilingual.
- principal

At JFK the approach to bilingual education K-5 is founded on the belief that instruction in native language is critical, especially at the primary level, while increasing explicit instruction in English each year. Ultimately the goal is to have students with equal skills in both languages by fifth grade. As one teacher says, “If you give a child the tools they need in their native language, it will transfer over to the dominant language.” Both principal and teachers express their hopes that all ethnically and/or linguistically diverse students would be “balanced-bilingual.” The performance goal for these students is to be equally skilled in reading, writing, and thinking, the earmarks of bilingualism.

One thing that distinguishes us is how comfortable we are teaching our Spanish-speaking students in Spanish. We build such a strong foundation. Half our students in Kindergarten are in bilingual classes. We know what's key for these kids being successful in the future is their transfer into English. You only need to learn the strategies once. It all naturally happens to them. . . . The explicit instruction in English increases year by year.
- teacher

This philosophy at the Kennedy School is based on research as well as a strong desire to have all students and their parents integrated into the school community. To this end 90% of the teachers have bilingual certification and/or ESL (teaching English as a Second Language) certification.

Strong Belief in Emotional as Well as Academic Support

Expectations work, because when you expect them to succeed, they see that people care about them.
- teacher

Over and over the words of administrators, staff members, and teachers at the Kennedy School echo the belief that the social aspects of school are of equal importance to the academic aspects. Teachers are clear in articulating their holistic approach to instruction. They set high expectations for students and regardless of any issues – social, emotional, or academic – the goal is the same: Success for every student.

We treat the social aspect of education and we weigh it as equally as the academic piece of it. We teach the whole child. We take everything into consideration . . . that's what separates us. Everybody knows everybody, and we have seven hundred [students] on

*three campuses. The nurse, the custodian call the kids by names. We're a family . . .
teaching the entire child.* – teacher

Communication between teachers and parents is another component of achieving academic success with students at the Kennedy School. In this collaborative school environment parents are encouraged to become part of the learning process. One teacher credits this for the school's success, saying, "It's the teachers' communication with parents, the closeness with the students that the teachers have, most of them. They teach them as their own children. You make sure they're okay socially, emotionally."

A Closer Look

The culture of the John F. Kennedy Magnet School has been formed by the characteristics described above and reflected as "best practices." These characteristics, individualized instructional practices, visionary and tenacious leadership, a focus on bilingual education, and a strong belief in emotional as well as academic support, have shaped this caring culture of learning. The sections that follow expand on these characteristics as demonstrated in each of the five dimensions that frame the larger study of which this case is one part.

Curriculum and Academic Goals

You can't make advances unless you're aligned and working toward the same goals.
- teacher

The Kennedy School is a Math, Science and Technology (MST) theme-based school. An underpinning to the instructional program is a bilingual educational approach for those students who are Spanish dominant English language learners. The integrated math program and an inquiry-based, constructivist science program are viewed as critical components of the core curriculum. Instructional technology is integrated into all curricular areas. Interactive white boards in grades K-5, individualized learning software, and wireless netbook labs are used to enhance instruction. The school's application for federal Blue Ribbon designation states, "We believe seamless use of instructional technology will enable students to enter a world that requires digital literacy, experience, and imagination."

Teachers use the workshop model to teach reading and writing, devoting at least two hours per day to literacy development. Instructionally the focus in K-5 is on small groups in guided reading, strategy lessons, small group conferencing, and one-to-one conferring. The principal feels that this practice reflects "the art of differentiated instruction." This balanced literacy approach is aligned using a teacher-developed, year-long language arts curriculum calendar. Recently the school began implementing a literacy program designed to provide more consistent instruction as well as to ensure that every child will not only be able to read and write, but will love doing so. Teachers cite this as a valuable instructional approach that has provided more opportunities for students to read.

With the social-emotional aspects of educating students considered of equal importance to academic goals, the school has adopted an approach school wide that is considered to be a key component of the curriculum and is credited with helping develop a safe and caring school culture. It provides the tools for every member of the staff to interact with students consistently using a common language. As one teacher proudly says, “We focus on the social aspects of our community.”

Using this program, the school day in each classroom starts with a morning meeting that teachers believe is an essential part of the day. Part of the paradigm shift in the culture within this school community was created by the commitment of administration and staff to this approach with students. When asked what has made the program so successful, one teacher responds, “We were all on board – staff, teachers, administrators. It changes how students treat each other. We want to instill empathy and respect in them. It was a huge commitment. It really changed our school.”

Staff Selection, Leadership and Capacity Building

Teamwork, fairness, and trust. You can't run a school of this size without those three things. But leadership is what I preach to everyone coming in – everyone's expected to fill those shoes.
– principal

Although the district is currently in the midst of hiring a new superintendent, several administrators with many years of district experience provide a consistent philosophy of leadership and expectations. One district administrator has worked at Port Chester-Rye for nearly 40 years as well as having been a student in the district. This institutional knowledge seems to be what makes the district such an essential part of its community. Administrators display a unified sense of the importance of leadership, including the perception that each person in the school is a leader, not just the principal. Teachers are key. One district administrator commented, “The teachers -- they're the meat and potatoes of our district. Nothing gets done without them.”

The building principal appears to have had near autonomy in the selection of teachers, although staff are very much involved in the hiring process. Collaboration with area colleges has provided a resource for the colleges to use the school for placement of education students as well as an opportunity for the school to become familiar with aspiring teachers who match the philosophy of the Kennedy School. Every chance to hire a new teacher is seen as an opportunity to hire a bilingual speaker.

Hiring practices may be somewhat individualized, perhaps even unique at the Kennedy School. The culture requires rigor. There are really two choices: you embrace the challenges or you leave.
- district administrator

High expectations, professional development, and ongoing mentoring of teachers are key components to the support system for novice as well as veteran teachers. Teachers speak about training programs and professional development positively as special opportunities to learn. The district is highly supportive of cohesive professional development and provides extensive resources for staff with a focus always on the goal of enhancing student learning.

This distributive leadership approach is an important component of the development of leadership skills and responsibilities for all teachers. Site-based management is essential. Administrator/teacher teams have been critical to the success of developing elementary programs. Teachers help select or pilot new curriculum or programs. There are numerous grade-level and school wide work teams. Everyone is expected to volunteer for something; it's just the culture at JFK.

The principal isn't just the principal who makes all the decisions in the school. We have site-based teams. It's coming from teachers. He makes sure we're on track. He provides vision. It's always shared, which builds community and camaraderie so we're all working toward the same goals.

- teacher

Instructional Programs, Practices and Arrangements

We believe that great teaching will always defeat poverty and language barriers.

- Principal's Report to the Board of Education.

Despite the fact that the Kennedy School is housed in three separate buildings, the staff think and act as if it were one. The principal is an active agent in creating this unity of purpose. He enthusiastically promotes curriculum changes, appraisal of practices, and professional development, particularly in technology integration. Staff development is provided with a singular vision of supporting the needs of students socially, emotionally, and academically and a laser focus on the needs of students with disabilities or English language learners. Diversity is not an obstacle. At JFK, despite a poverty rate of 78%, high academic achievement is the expectation for all students. Teachers are guided by the unofficial operating principle, "There are no excuses. There is always more we can do to help a student."

District administrators also speak in one voice about the priority of meeting the needs of the English language learners (ELLs). The importance of offering native language support for ELL students is clear. One administrator says, "If the kids cannot understand what you're saying, there's no way they can understand the content that gets more difficult."

The goal of the bilingual program at the Kennedy School is to enable students to learn English while simultaneously keeping pace in the content area with their English-speaking peers. These programs provide a strong foundation for students and accelerate opportunities to succeed in general education and meet state learning standards.

At the Kennedy School students with disabilities, which make up 8% of the student population, are integrated in every way possible into the larger school community. "We've moved toward a more inclusive model," notes one classroom teacher. Students are immersed in the regular education classroom. The academic support is seamless between their regular education classroom and their individualized support groups that are provided by the special education staff.

The instructional program is enhanced by partnerships with area businesses and universities, which provide essential components of the instructional technology and opportunities for

students and staff at JFK. Currently a partnership with Verizon has supplied rolling wireless netbook labs and technical training support for teachers. Working liaisons with IBM, Columbia University's Hispanic Engineering Program, Pace University, and the Jacob Burns Film Center offer special real-life learning experiences for students as well as training for staff.

Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data

I can see that the school has changed over the years. We used to be a school that was an identified school. We worked hard to pull it up. - teacher

The whole idea of learning was changing. We set the stage to change the belief that demographics don't dictate destiny. - district administrator

Data as I see it make a huge difference. I'm able to see which areas they need help in. Not that I didn't see it before, but now I use the data. - teacher

The Kennedy School has evolved from a school that once struggled to one that is solidly meeting and exceeding learning standards on state assessments. This performance shift is the result of a change in the culture of the school. Reflecting on this performance shift, a district administrator describes JFK as being “driven by data,” which allows for a meaningful conversation about students and learning. The focus of teachers now is viewing students individually and collectively in a different way. Data are a significant component of analyzing students holistically. The principal has provided much of the leadership to view data as a way to improve instruction and in a way he believes has “changed the mindset of staff.”

Clearly the focus on data has been a positive one that has become an embedded practice of the instructional program. This focus on data is supported by monthly Grade-Level Teams that review data and the instructional goals for students. Student performance is the focus of the teacher-based school Literacy Team, Data Team, and Instructional Support Team (IST). As a result, these teams continually review data and differentiate instruction to affect improved student achievement. A combination of formal testing and informal assessments is included as part of this data review process. It may include: a pre-school bilingual screening, literacy profiles starting in Kindergarten, district-developed interim assessments in math and ELA for Grades 3-5, and results of four instructional software packages, as well as teacher observations or a review of student portfolios. For a large number of students at JFK, testing and assessment data in both English and Spanish are gathered. These are then used to inform instruction and regroup students based on English/Spanish language arts skills as well as other areas of need.

As part of a Response to Intervention (RTI) initiative, which according to one teacher, “just formalized what we were already doing,” educators at the Kennedy School have recently developed a new model to provide RTI called the *iBlock*. This is an emerging practice considered to be a “work in progress.” The *iBlock* structure was developed as a direct outgrowth of the use of data. It includes a schedule that creates a block of time and uses all classroom teachers and support staff at one grade level, called “interventionists,” to provide instruction during that same block. This new configuration allows for a significantly lower student:teacher ratio and highly individualized instruction during this block.

We're in an exploratory manner. We're trying to find a set of best practices. – principal

Every year, I feel more like a reading teacher. My work for the majority of the time is reading. I use my special education training to facilitate that. A lot of it has to do with RTI because we're grouping our kids not so much on whether they're classified, but on their needs. - special education teacher

The classroom teacher is the primary interventionist in this model. During the *iBlock*, students receive small group or individual, targeted instruction with language arts teachers, special education teachers, or speech therapists, for example, while the classroom teacher has a smaller group of students who receive reinforcement or enrichment activities. This also allows for additional support for ELL or bilingual students and students with special needs. Students are not pulled out for anything during the *iBlock*. Along with this approach is a critical look at student performance and a continual review of data to differentiate instruction and improve the achievement levels of students. The ongoing communication, teamwork, and academic collaboration among these educators about student performance is a key component of the success of this new *iBlock* model. As one teacher says, “We learn from each other.”

Currently the district is also in the process of implementing a new student management system that will make it possible to use data more effectively. It will consolidate grades, attendance, progress reports, and demographic data as well as provide a uniform electronic report card that is also available to parents in Spanish.

Recognition, Interventions and Adjustments

Intervention period is the best thing we've done – building that time into our schedule. It's a sacred time every day for teacher-supported intervention. - teacher

In addition to the within school day *iBlock* discussed above, the Kennedy School provides extensive services beyond the typical school day. It is described as a full-service community school, with before and after school programs allowing for a supervised school day from 7:30 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. It also provides an academic extended day and summer programs for students who need them. Grant funding and partnerships with other community programs support these additional services. A clinical social worker assigned to the school, who works with students and families through Family Services of Westchester, fulfills a critical need at this school. An Open Door School-Based Health Center allows for medical coverage for all students, with on-site medical and mental health services. As a result, a nurse practitioner has become part of the staff at JFK. Having these services and a full-time school psychologist in the building provides an important support system and a network of services for students and families in this school community.

The PTA is also a vital contributor to the school community. The principal and many teachers laud the dedication and hard work that the PTA has provided. Its fund-raising efforts have created opportunities for child-centered events, books for the library, afterschool activities, visiting authors, and educational field trips. In addition the PTA was credited with making an

outreach to Hispanic families, which has resulted in increased attendance at school events and helped create a more inclusive school community. The PTA sponsors family literacy nights with teachers who model different reading strategies and do read alouds in both English and Spanish. “Parents loved that; it was a huge success,” teachers report.

Every teacher here looks at every one of the 750 as their own kids. We don't think twice. We leave or bring our families. We've developed such a great relationship with families and the PTA. They don't need to tell us that you have to go to a PTA meeting.

- teacher

In a Nutshell

The John F. Kennedy Magnet School provides an example of a school community that strives to provide the highest level of education – both emotional and academic – for each student, despite what would seem for some schools to be insurmountable odds. A collaborative and caring approach to teaching and learning is the main component of their strong student performance and helped transform the school culture. As the principal says, “We create hopes and dreams.” A visit to this compassionate school community brings to mind a quote from Margaret Mead: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.” The educators in Port Chester-Rye UFSD and the John F. Kennedy Magnet School may not be changing the whole world, but they certainly are changing the lives of the students in their small part of the world.

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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 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>.