

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

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Kristen Campbell Wilcox, April 2011

### Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Elementary School *Utica City School District*



*“We really can’t teach in isolation.”*  
– district administrator



#### School Context

The Utica City School District is one of several urban Upstate New York districts that serve a greater than average percentage of high needs students. With a district population of 9000+, it serves students from over 40 different language groups. Approximately 1450 students are identified for English as a Second Language (ESL) services, and about 2400 students are identified for special education services. One of 10 elementary schools in the district, Martin Luther King Jr. (MLK) was reorganized as a magnet school for science and technology about a decade ago; it was also intended to have smaller class sizes than other schools in the district, although this has changed in recent years. Smaller class size as well as the technology focus was appealing to some of the veteran teachers who opted to move from other schools in the district to work at MLK.

Since its opening, Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary has seen an influx of students from Burma, Puerto Rico, and some African nations, as have other schools in the district. Many of the refugees come from locations where literacy is defined quite differently than it is in a U.S. public school setting. For example, some of their native cultures may focus primarily on oral literacy rather than written. In addition to the challenges of being non-native speakers of English and having different schooling experiences and different approaches toward literacy, some of these students also come with challenging disabilities due to malnutrition and a variety of other emotional traumas they have faced in their young lives. The district superintendent and an ESL administrator explained the challenges raised for teachers trying to prepare a 10-year-old to hold a pencil for the first time and be ready to take a state assessment in little more than a year or to arrange for appropriate testing and instructional services for three blind and learning disabled English learners who arrived at the school mid-year.

The special education population in the district also has raised challenges. According to administrators, most of the classes intended for these students have high enrollments and the district has been operating under state waivers to allow the 12:1:1 (12 students with one teacher and one teaching assistant) classes to serve up to 15 students. At MLK, the resource room teacher has a case load of 25, which is considered quite high in this district. The qualities of needs in the special education population have also changed over time according to some employees who have been with the district for many years. According to one, “Twenty years ago

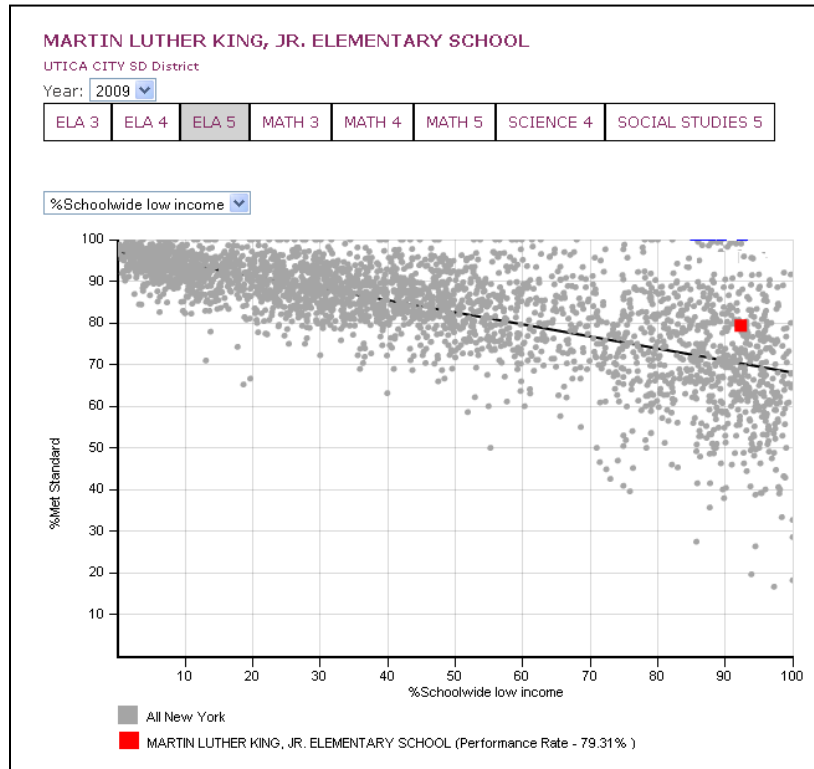
there were more socially and economically deprived students who worked hard and tried hard. You had a huge number with mental health and psychiatric diagnoses and a litany of medications. Now their emotional needs are more intensive.”

**Student Demographics 2009-10: Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School, Utica City SD<sup>i</sup>**

Grades served: K- 5	Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School	Utica City School District	New York State
Eligible for Free/Reduced-Price Lunch	94%	74%	48%
Limited English Proficient	11%	13%	8%
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution			
African-American	52%	29%	19%
Hispanic/Latino	27%	16%	22%
White	11%	44%	50%
Other	10%	11%	8%
Total Enrollment	273	9,390	2,692,649

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

Despite these challenges, the “critical needs” subgroups in grades 3-5 at MLK consistently perform close to or above the state average on state assessments of mathematics and English language arts. For example, the graph below shows results for grade 5 in 2009 on the state ELA assessment.



Performance of MLK fifth graders on the NYS ELA Assessment in 2009, compared with all schools in the state in terms of student poverty level. 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 strategies that are helping MLK to consistently keep higher-than-average numbers of ethnically and linguistically diverse students and those with special needs meeting or exceeding state targets have also come with a combination of external and internal pressures to apply new strategies. In a district that has experienced state oversight for not meeting Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) targets among some sub-groups in some schools, prescribed and coherent programs and practices across the district are balanced with latitude for ownership of the “how” of implementation for teachers and school administrators.

The MLK academic intervention services (AIS) coordinator explains that to meet their challenges within the classroom, MLK teachers generally express to their students a “Do your best” message and reports that “children respond positively to this; in fact, students are very willing to stay after school for AIS help or to give up recess time to make progress.” Along with a school climate that encourages students to learn and a general willingness on the part of students to take advantage of opportunities to learn, teachers and administrators at MLK also emphasize the importance of making conscious efforts to connect with their students’ parents and legal guardians.

## **Best Practice Highlights**

The practices listed below capture the essence of what educators in the Utica City School District and Martin Luther King, Jr., Elementary School report as impacting the performance of linguistically and ethnically diverse students and those with special needs. These highlights express what interviews with teachers and administrators and documentary evidence in this study show are most salient to positively impacting student performance.

- Fostering positive and open parent and community connections specifically meant to honor ethnic and linguistic diversity.
- Emphasizing a strong literacy program at the elementary level facilitated through ongoing revision of a prioritized curriculum with addenda to help teachers adapt instruction for English learners and special needs students.
- Supporting the use of evidence-based decision making processes and an overall culture of taking ownership for student performance.
- Enhancing the quality of instruction through professional development focused on the use of differentiated instructional strategies and integration of technologies.
- Consistently assessing student learning through progress monitoring tools and processes.

## **A Closer Look**

These practices are evident throughout the five dimensions that frame the study of which this case is one part. The sections below expand on each of these practices within the context of the study’s framework.

## Curriculum and Academic Goals

*The district's multicultural diversity is a strength and should be viewed as a resource to be developed.*

– Comprehensive School Improvement Summary, 2009-2010

### **Defining and Aligning Goals**

The challenges of a high needs population in Utica have impacted MLK in a variety of ways, particularly in how administration at the school and district levels develop goals and apply resources to achieve those goals.

MLK uses the district's Comprehensive District Educational Plan (CDEP) and its own Shared Decision Making (SDM) team to review data, make decisions based on results, and determine the focus and process of implementation for new initiatives (as indicated in the table of contents of the summary report overview shown below). A school administrator emphasized the importance of setting academic goals and reviewing progress toward them as a shared effort, with teachers involved in every step.

### ***Comprehensive School Improvement Summary, 2009-2010***

#### **Table of Contents**

- Vision, Mission Statements and District Goals
- Data Analysis, School Benchmarks
- School Strengths and Successful Interventions
- School-Wide Goals
- Planning Committee
- New Initiatives 2009-2010
- Individual Goals K-5 and Support Staff 2009-10

### **Prioritizing the Curriculum**

As part of the sanction for not meeting AYP for the special education and ESL student populations in some of their schools, according to the director of elementary education, consultants were brought in and a study conducted. With the state, a three-year action plan with curriculum work as a central component was developed. The result of this effort was a “prioritized curriculum” that the director of elementary education says is in use, consistently reviewed, and linked to their assessment systems. The MLK principal explains how the process unfolds.

*Each year our core subjects are reviewed by a district committee to see what is essential to maintain. If something has been proven to be non-effective with students, it is dropped and something that is more meaningful for achieving results with our students is added. This gives the teachers a voice to express what works with the students we have here in Utica.*

The curriculum at MLK emphasizes a strong literacy component and is aligned with curricula in other schools in the district so there is consistency from school to school. It also includes addenda for adapting the ELA curriculum to the needs of English learners and special education students. A district administrator describes the process to develop this resource:

*One thing we did do is develop a committee of our ELA and ESL teachers and included the special ed. teachers. We developed an “ELA Guide of Instructional Strategies”-- like an addendum. It took about a year and a half and they came up with all different kinds of strategies that could be used for ELA to teach different concepts. The handbook is not necessarily aligned to [the reading series], it’s more of a supplement to it. Then what they did is rolled it out to the ESL and ELA teachers. Other core teachers heard about it, saw it, and asked for it. It’s a guide of instructional strategies that will help students in the classroom. It’s really for all teachers.*

The curriculum revision process and the development of addenda, although described as “tedious” and the products of which are perceived by some as limiting the “freedom” of teachers to explore topics of interest, are, nevertheless, seen as an essential component to meeting district and school goals by ensuring that the most essential content is taught and can be measured.

### **Academic Goals and Families: Making the Connection**

*I believe in something I call “the 60-40 Effect.” That is, 60% of the needs students have are social-emotional concerns and 40% are academic. At other points in the history of our school, I sense 80% of the attention was given to academics or curriculum and 20% of attention was given to the social-emotional needs of the students and their families. Now we realize that if we educate and welcome parents and make them partners in the education of their children, we have a better chance in succeeding with our academic goals. This is especially true given the mobility of our students and the number of foreign students who arrive in Utica due to the Refugee Center located here. - principal*

At MLK, teachers and administrators point to the importance of building learners’ confidence and making them comfortable in school. Part of this effort involves keeping communication open and building trust between the school and community members. The relationship between students’ academic performance and the school-community relationship is something the current principal wants to make clear and reinforce by embedding practices to foster positive relationships. Making the connection with families is part of a larger effort to ensure school personnel are attending to the social and emotional needs of students, which is seen as particularly important when bridging language barriers in a diverse school like MLK.

*One key priority is parent involvement. I want parents to feel welcome and to be part of their children's education. I want parents to feel valued. The presence of parents in the school is evident; they are a part of the school building. – principal*

To meet the goal of promoting student emotional and social health, MLK teachers are using Positive Behavior Intervention System (PBIS) materials, teachers have attended workshops on Social Emotional Learning, and are holding morning meetings in each classroom that are designed not just to organize the day but also to build a classroom community.

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

*R + A = O. Responsibility plus Authority equals Ownership. You can't have true ownership for what you do unless you have both the responsibility and the authority.*  
- superintendent

#### **Sharing Ownership**

From the district offices to the classroom, educators sense that the complexity of adapting instruction for vastly different student needs, shifting resources to attend to the transiency of the population, and looking for and trying out new processes and systems to effectively equip students with the most essential knowledge and skills requires more than distributing leadership; it requires sharing ownership to meet goals. Additionally, in the view of administrators, the kind of complexity inherent in the district cannot be managed well from a purely top-down position; should they attempt to do so, a sense of ownership would not thrive. A balance is sought between ensuring there are mechanisms in place for verifying what is being done while at the same time providing a heavy dose of staff development to assist teachers with providing good instruction and the authority to make decisions.

*You don't get what you expect, you get what you inspect. . . . If you don't check on what people are doing, they may go off the path. – director of elementary education*

*You can't just give teachers [authority] and expect them to succeed unless they've been properly trained.*  
– superintendent

To achieve this balance, the district administration has been conscious of the importance of providing professional development opportunities, supported in large part through grants. The two areas emphasized are diversity and data interpretation. These foci have been intended to have a direct impact on teacher decisions within the classroom and to relieve some of the fears teachers express regarding both increasing class sizes at MLK and an increasing ESL population. As part of this effort, some veteran teachers and additional consultants are being tapped for ideas in how to use interdisciplinary thematic instruction and differentiated techniques. The district has also provided specific training on adapting instruction for autistic and attention deficit disorder children, along with strategies for sheltering instruction for ESL students.

*As a faculty we have availed ourselves of professional development offerings; our faculty knows how to modify curriculum and adapt it to the needs of our students.*  
– AIS director

Taking ownership for the way work is done at MLK is facilitated by administrative support for teacher collaboration. Teachers have grade-level meetings, intended to focus on student performance, and professional learning community (PLC) meetings weekly. The principal sees his role as bringing information to the attention of teachers and then encouraging the “solving of school problems” together.

*The staff is asked by me: “How can we effect change?” As teachers offer suggestions and recommend strategies, teacher buy-in and trust are developed.*  
- principal

To streamline and distribute the work needed to be done in a school with a small faculty, 29 committees were consolidated into seven major working groups. In addition, a vertical teaming initiative was undertaken to align approaches to everything from assessment strategies to identifying areas where professional development might be needed.

### Instructional Programs, Practices and Arrangements

#### **Technology and Differentiation**

Teachers and school and district administrators work to ensure the highest performance of their diverse and high needs population by using approaches developed within the district along with some brought from the outside. In alignment with its science and technology magnet status, MLK has turned to technologies for instructional purposes and for monitoring student performance. SMART Boards, literacy-building software programs, and programs for monitoring student progress are consistently used and linked into progress monitoring systems. The district also has received grant money to purchase one-to-one computers for MLK students. In discussing the one-to-one computers and the uncertainty among some about doing too much with technology before teachers were ready, the superintendent expressed the need to aggressively pursue the integration of new technologies to help the most students stay engaged in school and graduate:

*This is the area where we don’t have longitudinal studies done. We have snippets of things going on and all the data we’re getting right now is positive, very positive about kids getting engaged with one-to-one computing. It’s not a panacea it’s not a cure all. It’s a tool – that’s what it is – a tool.*

In addition to utilizing technologies in the classroom, MLK educators characterize their instruction as differentiated and as emphasizing small group activity.

*As a faculty we believe in small group instruction as a means of effectively interacting with and observing the progress of our students. We use differentiated instruction; we know children have different learning styles and we respond to that by creating lessons and activities that are responsive to modalities like visual, kinesthetic, tactile, auditory, etc.*  
- AIS director

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

*Our district requires a variety of assessments that are given at specific points in the academic year. These assessments provide me timely information on each student's progress.*

- teacher

### **Infusing Data Literacy**

How instructional techniques are working is measured consistently at MLK and this is embedded in a larger district culture where there is a clear expectation for the use of student performance data to inform improvements.

*The skill of each teacher to understand and interpret data has been key. It has really allowed them to make decisions about curriculum and instruction and what is needed and/or in the best interest of their students.*

- principal

As mentioned earlier, what data are seen as most relevant is connected directly to the Comprehensive District Education Plan (CDEP). Every month, the MLK principal is expected to discuss student performance with district administration. The director of elementary education says she encourages the principals to bring “best practices to the meetings and share what’s working and what’s not working for them.” The discussions are also meant to get into the data from assessments that are given every six weeks and aligned to the prioritized curriculum.

At MLK, progress monitoring sheets provide an example of how student performance is being monitored. The progress monitoring sheets, expected of every teacher (including ESL), show each student’s performance on a variety of measures during a particular period. Teachers also attest to using a variety of other measures such as portfolios, mock testing, and their own observations in their assessment of student progress. The example in the table below shows a student’s performance on high frequency word recognition, phonics, comprehension and fluency. In other portions of the progress monitoring sheets teachers can see how many of their students have reached proficiency.

<b>ELA PROGRESS MONITORING</b>				
<b>Grade 2 ELA Assessment Data - Baseline</b>			School Year: 2010-2011	
Teacher:			School: <u>MLK</u>	
September	High Freq. Wds	Phonics	Comprehension	Fluency
2010	(15/20)	(8/12)	(6/9)	(40 wpm)

Overall, a “show me the evidence [that something is working]” motto (superintendent) guides the use of standardized measures of performance like the progress monitoring sheets. However, this is balanced with the value placed on teachers’ ownership for interpreting not only those data but also other forms of data they collect in their classrooms.



## Recognition, Interventions and Adjustments

### **Calibrating Resources to Need**

With nearly 300 students at MLK in 2010-11, 180 of whom are eligible for AIS and many others considered “high needs,” the task of systematizing intervention services is monumental. Formal interventions at the school level are coordinated through an AIS director, while at the district level, communication around available grants and how they might be utilized is ongoing and consistent so that staffing resources, material resources, and professional development are in place to meet current and potential future needs.

In addition to AIS, Response to Intervention (RTI) processes are being used; in MLK, this includes targeting specific skills through the use of a computer program in addition to extra instructional time. Closely watching individual student performance also allows for what the director of elementary education calls “small IEPs” for those students who are not identified for special education services, yet are not meeting proficiency targets. Also, to raise the percentages of students on grade level, particularly in ELA, a district administrator sees the importance of increasing the numbers of students who attend the district’s pre-Kindergarten programs and ensuring that all students are receiving sufficient instructional time.

### **In a Nutshell**

“Utica is an anomaly,” says the Superintendent in characterizing the home of the Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School -- a place with high needs, yet signs of meeting challenges head-on. Both smaller class sizes than other similar schools and greater financial resources due to Title I funding help MLK educators help their students achieve; however, without several of the best practices described here, that performance is unlikely to have been achieved. Their successes are rooted in honoring the diversity of their community, emphasizing close monitoring of essential knowledge and skills as defined in a prioritized curriculum, and providing differentiated instructional strategies and integration of technologies.

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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://knowyourschoolsny.org>.