

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

Linda Baker, June 2011

Maybrook Elementary School Valley Central School District

Everyone here believes all kids can learn.
– teacher



School Context

Serving fewer than 240 students in grades kindergarten through five, Maybrook is the smallest of the five elementary schools in the Valley Central School District in Orange County. The district serves a rural Hudson Valley area of deep historical roots that has seen significant suburban/exurban growth from families moving “upstate” from the New York City area over the years. Now the district is experiencing declining population. “I think people are moving back to the city in these hard economic times,” Maybrook’s school principal commented.

The village of Maybrook, once the home of the largest rail hub in the East, now features railcars only in its historical exhibits. However, it continues to serve as a transportation and distribution center because of its proximity to Interstate 84, the New York State Thruway, and Stewart International Airport. Village officials have always been supportive of the school, said school staff members, who stressed that the village works with the school to foster recreational and educational opportunities. “They do everything for the kids,” said the principal as she described the commitment village leaders make to youth, adding, “This is a tight-knit community.”

Several educators mentioned the “tremendous outpouring of support” for keeping Maybrook Elementary School open when the district considered closing the building in 2010 because of declining population and financial constraints. “It’s the heart of the community,” noted more than one staff member; as a result of the outcry, Maybrook was “saved.” The principal recalled a community celebration in 2005 commemorating the 80th anniversary of the opening of the building, which was originally a high school. “People came back thrilled to be here. We found the original school song and colors. There were tears in the audience when the little kids sang their alma mater.”

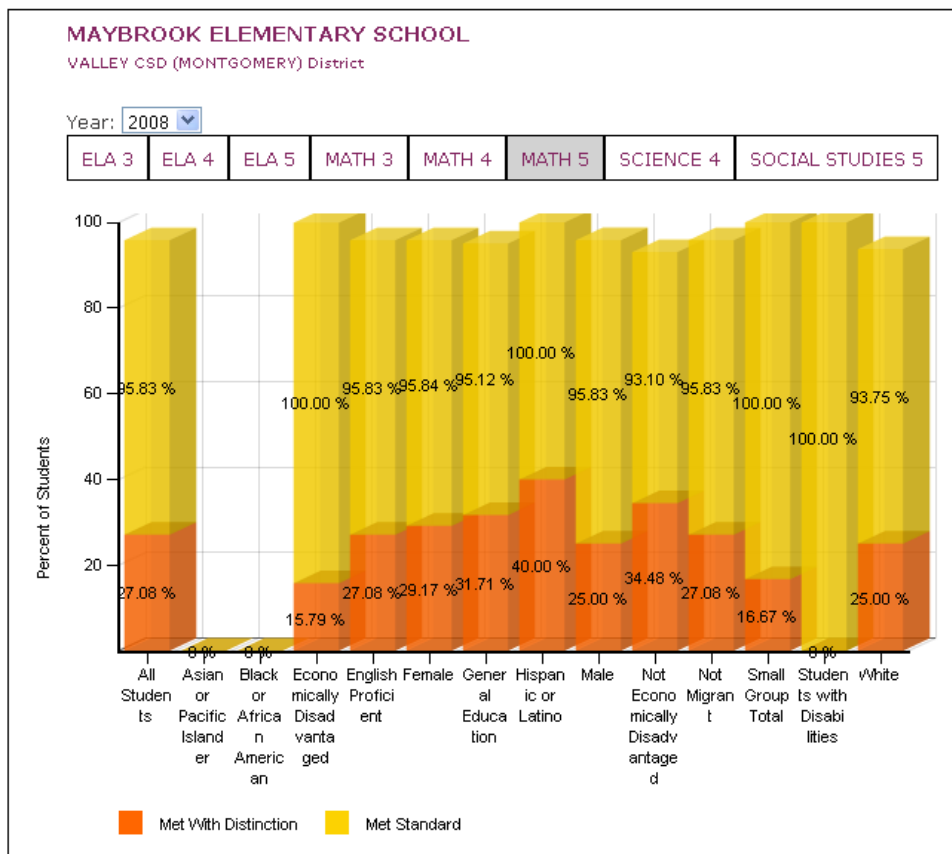
Student Demographics 2009-10: *Maybrook Elementary School, Valley Central SD (Montgomery)*¹

Grades served: K- 5	Maybrook Elementary School	Valley Central School District	New York State
Eligible for Free/Reduced-Price Lunch	42%	25%	48%
Limited English Proficient	3%	1%	8%
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution			
African-American	15%	10%	19%
Hispanic/Latino	20%	15%	22%
White	62%	72%	50%
Other	3%	2%	8%
Total Enrollment	235	4,853	2,692,649

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

“Maybrook, for its size, has a particularly diverse student body in terms of ethnicity, economics, and English language learners,” noted the district superintendent. In 2009-10, 42% of Maybrook students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, compared to 25% in the district as a whole. Maybrook has a 20% Hispanic/Latino population and a 15% African-American population. The 3% of Maybrook students with limited English proficiency come from a variety of language backgrounds, including Albanian, Chinese, Japanese, and Spanish. “It’s neat that we’re getting to be more and more of a diverse population,” said Maybrook’s principal. Noting the demographic changes they have seen over time, several long-time faculty members said that Maybrook had been “more affluent” in the past and that current residents are mostly “blue-collar” workers. Most Maybrook students attend the school from kindergarten through grade five, although a few “waft in and waft out,” as one teacher observed.

The performance of Maybrook’s critical subgroups – economically disadvantaged, Hispanic, and students with disabilities – is consistently stronger than the average for those groups statewide. For example, in 2008, 100% of students in those subgroups met or exceeded state standards on the Grade 5 Mathematics Assessment. Statewide, the averages for those groups were 54%, 53%, and 29%, respectively.



Performance by subgroup of Maybrook fifth graders on the NYS Mathematics Assessment in 2008; Asian and African American subgroups had too few students to be separately reported. Data are based on publicly 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.

Maybrook educators universally regard the small size of the school as a great advantage. With only two classes at every grade level and an average class size of 21, teachers and principal know every student, and colleagues work closely together to ensure that each student’s needs are met.

The physical building is also small and is arranged to be welcoming and non-intimidating to children and families. “One of the truths about small schools is that you can implement more quickly and with more fidelity,” the superintendent commented. “That’s true whether the population you are trying to teach is a faculty ... or students.”

Best Practice Highlights

A strong sense of cohesiveness and focus pervades the Maybrook school community. All aspects of practice are interwoven, and the effort extends to all students, including those from linguistically and ethnically diverse backgrounds and those with special needs. “Everyone works so closely with one another,” and “We all take the approach that all of our students will get the attention they need to perform well,” educators said. Daily educational routines are highlighted by a unified emphasis on literacy, universally high expectations with customized scaffolding, close collaboration among educators, and connecting family, community, and school.

Unified Emphasis on Literacy

Every staff member echoed Maybrook principal’s statement that “the greatest priority is literacy.” As she explained, “You’ve got to get that in place. Once that is in place, the world opens to you. You can go on and learn and read about science or anything else.”

“When a child comes into my classroom [he or she is] immersed in literacy in all different ways – singing, dancing, writing – all modalities,” said one teacher. Overall, teachers stressed that their literacy initiative used reading and writing to move students “from where they are” to “where we want them to be”—close to or above grade level.

“The principal is committed to literacy 100%,” declared a district administrator. Through this principal’s efforts, he said, Maybrook has taken the lead in a district-wide focus on reading and writing, “showing other elementary schools what can be done.”

Universally High Expectations with Customized Scaffolding

The standards are high at Maybrook. All students are expected to succeed. Maybrook faculty members firmly believe that every child can learn, given the right instruction. “You have to find a way to reach each child. Everyone is different,” said one teacher. “You really have to understand students—where they are, what they really know, and go from there,” stated another.

The culture does not permit excuses or suggest limitations based on what is “developmentally appropriate,” the superintendent emphasized. Using “that language can shut down the belief that a kindergartener can write or that you can achieve great things,” he said. “That’s an excuse for getting out of all kinds of things that we ought to be pushing our kids to do.” Instead, teachers work to determine the specific academic needs of each child and provide the appropriate customized instruction. “You have to individualize and you have to scaffold for them to get them where they need to go,” a teacher explained. “We ask each other what more we can do. ... It’s our job to find out how to proceed.” “We’ve got what we’ve got,” said a colleague, “so we start where they are and we don’t think otherwise about it. We try to see where the needs are and try to supply what the child needs.”

Close Collaboration among Educators

Faculty members reported that talking with their Maybrook colleagues was key to their success: “This is a small school and everyone works closely together. When you only have two classes

per grade level, you know every child in the building.” “Being a small school, ... we get to see the kids grow from kindergarten up. ... We’re able to talk with other teachers who know the student.” “We say, ‘You had this child last year. What did you do when you had trouble with...?’ It’s a group effort. Everyone does work together.”

In addition to informal collegial discussions, formal teams of teachers provide analysis of students’ needs as well as guidance on how to meet them. The main team that works with data is the School Accountability Team comprised of representatives from each grade level as well as a reading and special ed teacher. A school-wide Instructional Support Team (IST) and grade-level teams look closely at how to help any child who is struggling. When teachers mention a student they’re worried about, “another teacher will say, ‘Send him over to me,’” explained one faculty member.

The small size of the building “makes it very easy to talk and get things planned out together.” “We’re a family,” many teachers emphasized.

Connecting Family, Community, and School

The sense of family extends into the community beyond the school. Since many teachers live in the village and/or have worked in the school for a long time, faculty members know the families well. We “have a very good rapport,” one teacher said.

The respect and comfort level travel in both directions. “Parents really care a lot,” one teacher said. Others noted that parents are often working two jobs or have other barriers to participation but do their best to be part of the school community. Immigrant families are particularly supportive, said the principal. Maybrook faculty members expressed high regard for parents and said that parents have high regard for the school.

Maybrook’s principal and teachers described parent outreach programs as including parties, student presentations, informational meetings, and parent/child workshops. One of the most popular is the annual “Invention Convention” featuring demonstrations of machines students have created. “They love it!” one teacher said. “Parents also attend the quarterly Positive Action Assemblies,” the principal said, at which “students are awarded certificates for academics, attendance, participation in our Reading Challenges and for positive actions.” In addition, the PTO sponsors programs for students such as science shows, anti-bullying presentations, and talent shows.

A Closer Look

These practices – an emphasis on literacy, high expectations, collaboration, and connecting school and community -- are evident throughout the five dimensions that frame the study of which this case is one part. The following sections expand on each of these practices within the context of the study’s framework.

Curriculum and Academic Goals

We’re all on the same page. . . . The role of the teacher is to find a way for students to work up to their potential. – teacher

Shared Faculty Vision

Teachers reported being “very involved” in setting goals and determining what they need to accomplish. “You have no choice; there are only two of you per grade level. You are accountable for what you’re responsible for,” said one teacher. “As a staff that works together, the vision is shared of where we want to go,” the principal noted.

District administrators described a process in which the Board of Education identifies certain goals related to academic achievement and environment as part of strategic planning. Individual schools select some of the Board goals and work them into their building goals. The building goals are based partly on data analysis. “So instead of me coming up with it, the schools are telling me what they want to do. ... My job is to work with building principals to provide professional development on their needs,” explained one district administrator.

Every year, Maybrook’s teachers and principal prepare a School Improvement Plan based on board goals and their own study of data. “We’ve had data design training, with some trained to become turnkey trainers [able to train others]. Almost everyone has been trained. We fit into the board goals. We have two goals regarding student achievement, one regarding home/school partnerships, one on learning environment, and one on professional development,” said the principal. “We have half days throughout the year when we work on goals throughout the building. At times we break up by grade level, but since we only have two teachers per grade level we often work k-2 and 3-5. A lot of the goals are similar across the grades,” explained a teacher.

Most important in the view of many teachers is having a vision of high student performance. “I have really high standards. I don’t look at where they are coming from. I look at where they are going. They love it and have fun,” one teacher said. “We definitely hold high expectations for all students, even if they have a disability,” said another. “Once they feel that their teacher has high expectations, they want to do well. You want it to be an intrinsic motivation, too, and hopefully it will gradually turn into that.”

A Curriculum Priority

Having all kids able to read and write effectively is key. – district administrator

The literacy initiative at Maybrook began with a vision by Maybrook’s principal. “She’d always felt that if kids can read and write effectively, the science and social studies will come along. ... At Maybrook, they’ve always had a focus on literacy,” a district administrator emphasized. He added that moving to the current literacy initiative seemed a “no brainer” ten years ago after he and the Maybrook principal visited other schools using that initiative. Maybrook was the first school in the district to use the new program.

Long-time teachers at Maybrook see the current literacy initiative as the biggest positive change they have experienced—and the curriculum priority that leads all other aspects of instruction. It requires a major investment of district resources and significant commitment on everyone’s part but is worth the effort, they said. The program involves eight weeks of training at a university, at a significant cost, a district administrator reported. District-wide “We’ve trained five literacy coordinators at the K-2 level, two at the 3-5 level, and five literacy leaders at the elementary level. They have to go for continued training every year, plus there are costs for furniture, books, etc.,” he said. Now, as the district experiences a “budget crunch” requiring downsizing and cutting staff, Maybrook educators worry about continued funding for the project.

Literacy is the priority for all students, including those with special needs and those learning English. In the past, one teacher said, there was “a disconnect” between reading and other “pullouts.” “I felt strongly that you have to be speaking the same language.” Now, she said, there is a “philosophical marriage” based on shared goals and curricula. Special education and ESL teachers told of modifying lessons in “well-defined” curricula to help students “bridge the gap.”

Building Home & School Connections

Although faculty members routinely described Maybrook parents as caring and doing their best to help their children academically, Maybrook has its share of challenges in collaborating with parents to support academic goals. Often, both parents are working (sometimes two jobs), and it is difficult for them to arrange time off from work. Some have no transportation to school functions. A few families speak no English.

Despite the challenges, Maybrook staff members see parent involvement as important to children’s success. “We do everything we can to help them participate,” a teacher stressed. Staff members credit the determination of their school principal as well as their own creative brainstorming of ideas for a relatively high level of parent participation: “Our principal has taught us to keep working at it.” “You have to let them know way ahead of time.” “If you feed them, they will come.” “They do love to see what their children have accomplished—and learn what they’ll do next.”

Maybrook “truly is a student-first centered school,” one staff member said. Faculty members feel that they have built a culture in which families know that the school cares about them and their children. One of the benefits of being a small community is that “when your eyes are not on your student, the community’s eyes are. The culture is protective and hard working, very hard working, and very open to the needs.” “We help children and parents to set academic goals as soon as they enter kindergarten,” the principal said, “and that sets the tone for their entire school experience.”

Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building

We love our jobs. This is our life. - teacher

The Right Match for the Culture

In selecting educators to be part of the Maybrook faculty, school officials use the “tried and true” district system but note that it’s important for any newly hired staff member to “fit” the close-knit culture that has developed.

A district administrator explained that the process includes posting positions and advertising in publications and at job fairs, accepting on-line applications, screening, and then interviewing. A committee conducts the interviews. “We get a gazillion letters of application in,” said Maybrook’s principal. Then we have a committee – the grade-level teacher plus me, usually a reading teacher. We have a rubric. The district application is on line. We require a writing sample, which is always a good indicator.”

In many cases, new teachers have served as student teachers at Maybrook. Student teachers usually come from two nearby four-year colleges who have partnerships with Maybrook. “Pretty often if you’ve had excellent student teachers, they would come into the interview process.”

Some applicants with no previous knowledge of the district choose not to follow through because “it’s rural” or because the salaries are not in keeping with pay in Westchester County or on Long Island, district officials noted. The district has had more success with candidates who are local or who are from the north or west, an administrator said. “It’s important that they are choosing Maybrook, that they are not just looking for a job.”

School Principal as Instructional Leader

Our principal is wonderful and really sets the tone—for her expectations and for working together.
- teacher

Both Maybrook teachers and district administrators said that Maybrook’s principal is the secret of the school’s success. “Having a principal everyone really respects” is key, one teacher said. Maybrook teachers look to their principal for instructional leadership. “In our own building, the principal knows what we need to know. She knows kids, too,” commented another teacher. A district administrator emphasized, “The principal of Maybrook is a prophet for literacy,” and “a lot of Maybrook’s success” results from that commitment. “It’s contagious. She beats that point home at the school. Science and social studies and math will all benefit from the ability to read and comprehend and speak and write.”

In describing the qualities of a good principal, the superintendent said a good principal really cares and could never be described as “laid back.” “You’ve got to have people who really are going to get the job done.” Maybrook’s principal seemed to concur: “I’m pretty tough in terms of expectations,” she said. “We’re all here to work and have a good time—and learn.” The ethos of hard work—and enjoying the extra effort—is part of the tone that the principal sets, according to her colleagues. “We’re here to work” and “We love what we do” were frequent comments. “She does a good job. She has high expectations, but she’s nice about it. Everyone wants to do a good job. If she asks you to do something, you’re inclined to do it. That’s a big part of it,” a teacher explained.

Constant Collaboration

It’s a family here. – teacher

The idea that teachers share ideas and collaborate “like a family” was repeated often. Teachers credited the small size of the school and the principal-led culture of cooperation for much of the success and pride that they feel in the “family.” Faculty members described an expectation that everyone will help each other. Classroom teachers told of the help they receive from colleagues at other grade levels and from special education, reading, and ESL teachers. Those working with children to provide reading, linguistic, or special education assistance described the help they receive from classroom teachers and from other specialized staff members.

Although not every teacher experiences as much in-class assistance as the descriptions below, they demonstrate the collaborative nature of the building.

I see it from the perspective of having another set of eyes and ears, and continuing advice. I feel that because we have a lot of students with special needs in the class. The reading teacher comes in three days a week, remedial [AIS] math comes in three days a week. There are so many people helping out, figuring out how to be successful. There may be two to three teachers in the room plus a one-to-one aide for an autistic student.

There are a lot of adults in the class. We just did a math lesson with groups of four students and an adult with every group.

Someone comes in and does math, science, social studies, and math AIS. We tag team each other. We also plan together. She knows what I'm doing in language arts block, and I know what she is doing. We have two planning periods a week together.

Collaboration all depends on who you're teaching with. I never wanted to be the type who said this is how we're doing it. You would never know who is the regular ed and the special ed [teacher in the room]. Or who are regular ed and special ed kids. ... As far as my role, [I do] whatever the students need, because what they need changes all the time. Of course, she [my coteacher] has to make sure that modifications are followed for special ed. Right now, this group needs this. The students may not be special ed, they might be ESL, as to what they need. We definitely have to keep in mind what modifications are needed, what the IEP says. You get to memorize those IEP lists. . . . I think it helps so much having two of us in the classroom. Six of 21 students are special ed.

- teachers

An ESL teacher looked at collaboration from another perspective:

The teachers are great to collaborate with. I talk to them, sometimes formally, sometimes in the hallway. We manage to get information to each other, how each other is doing. They give me ideas about the content areas they are working on I can help with. We are constantly sharing how the children are doing.

“We’re a team,” explained several faculty members, including special education teachers. Seeking help is the norm. “Within this school no one is ashamed to say, ‘Is there something I’m doing wrong? Is there something else I could be doing?’” explained one teacher.

The schedule supports collaboration by providing common planning time for teachers at each grade level. Teachers also consult with each other to address individual student problems during other times, for example when students are outside. “We have days when IST meets – everyone will meet concerning students,” a teacher commented. “It’s been great for teachers to have time to get together and discuss how we’re doing, how we’re teaching and what’s successful. So many things come out – little things – this is what I do for that. It is so helpful to really talk,” one teacher emphasized.

Professional Development

Professional development at Maybrook emphasizes the literacy initiative but also includes new-teacher instruction in an experiential learning model, training on assessments and interpretation of data, and specialized workshops for ESL teachers and special education teachers. The district is “very supportive” of teachers’ attending conferences and taking courses to improve their teaching, faculty members reported.

Literacy coaching provides the most intensive professional development. “We’ve been trained” was a common refrain as teachers explained their literacy initiative. In addition to presenting workshops, the literacy coach goes into each classroom twice a month to observe and offer suggestions: “I’m looking at what the students are getting from the teacher. I’m not being judgmental. Are the children getting what you wanted them to get?” Explaining that the dialogue

does not revolve around only the workshops or classroom observations, Maybrook’s literacy coach noted that “it’s an open field day” in which teachers ask questions at any time.

Called “triangle days” because of the symbol on the school calendar, district-wide staff development workshops often focus on understanding state assessment data and planning strategies for addressing gaps in student learning. A district professional development committee of teachers, building principals, and central office administrators has been in place for many years.

“I let my kids know I’m a lifelong learner,” said one teacher. Several staff members mentioned recent courses and conferences—writing workshops, balanced math, understanding autism, bilingual education, technology in the classroom. Maybrook’s principal was among those who noted the positive support the district gives for professional development, “even for people who want to go and get their doctorate.”

Instructional Programs, Practices and Arrangements

Stressing the importance of “the basics” and hard work, Maybrook’s principal described the school as “a kind of combo of old and new school. We never left the fact that children need to learn their multiplication tables and other facts,” she said. “We believe that homework is important. We have very high, good consistent standards, which is probably the most important part of it.” However, Maybrook also prides itself on being current in the latest data analysis and instructional techniques, “such as differentiated instruction,” she added.

The Literacy Initiative

The “beauty” of Maybrook’s literacy initiative is that “it meets kids where they are and they get to move individually and no one’s being held back any more. You need to have those basics in place. There’s no getting around it,” said Maybrook’s principal.

A main component of the initiative is having literacy coaches/coordinators go into classrooms to teach some of the language arts block and also work with other teachers (regular education, reading, and special education), particularly providing feedback on language arts lesson. “I make suggestions and talk with teachers about how they felt the lesson went.” The process includes a pre-observation conference, the observation, and a post-observation conference.

In a first-grade classroom, the language arts block includes writing workshop, phonics, and reading. Components change somewhat as students move into the upper grades. The fifth grade literacy program prepares students for moving to the middle school courses and culture.

One long-time teacher described herself as a “cheerleader” for the literacy initiative and called the results of the program “mind-boggling” compared to previous accomplishments. The initiative “breaks it all down on how to” teach each child. “Every child is taken from their level to the next. For a diverse population, it exposes kids to things they are not exposed to in their families. . . . We didn’t used to have have the tools to teach them. Now we do.”

Teachers frequently noted the changes that the literacy initiative has fostered in students’ reading and writing skills. It’s a cumulative change, educators said— the longer students have been part of the initiative, the more improvement teachers see. It was especially interesting to study the

improved achievement for the first kindergarten class in the literacy initiative as those students moved through the elementary grades, one teacher commented.

Preparing, Engaging, and Differentiating

You have to find a way to reach each kid. - teacher

Both teachers and administrators highlighted the importance of three aspects of instruction: preparing lessons carefully, engaging students in meaningful learning, and differentiating content and strategies to meet the needs of individual students.

“I really am looking for someone who is prepared—someone who is prepared to teach. I don’t like the ‘wing it’ model,” a district administrator explained. He expects to see lessons that are “organized and structured,” he said. The district instructs new teachers in an experiential learning model that includes clear objectives; an anticipatory set (hook); standards/expectations; direct instruction with input, modeling, direction giving, checking for understanding; guided practice; closure; and independent practice.

Students need to be fully engaged in the learning, educators stressed. “If no one’s listening, it’s not going anywhere,” said an administrator. “I’m a big believer in hands-on learning,” said one teacher. Another faculty member gave an example of an ELA sequencing lesson in which students seemed particularly engaged: “Each student had to write their own sequencing for carving a pumpkin. They felt ownership. A winner was selected, and everyone followed the instructions of that one student.”

Maybrook’s teachers are now expected to know every student’s level of achievement in content components before a lesson starts, and to assess students closely to see where they may have gaps in understanding. While general concepts are often presented initially to an entire class, there must also be differentiated instruction to small groups or individuals, teachers reported. “In a good lesson, teachers are aware of different levels and teach so that it’s not just the upper kids who get it. They need to know what they’re doing from the beginning to the end of the lesson and everything in between,” commented a district administrator.

Every child is different. There are so many different modalities. I learn all the time. I had to learn new ways to do things to reach them this year. I still love teaching. It changes, and you have to go with the changes.
- teacher

Learning the English Language

The eight English language learners at Maybrook in 2010-11 speak four different languages, although the parents of most ELL students speak Spanish. Information, including report cards, is now translated into all the languages for all the students, using on line translation services as necessary.

Valley Central’s approach to teaching English as a second language is both content based and literacy based, said an ESL teacher, who serves the students at Maybrook as well as those in another building. Overall, three ESL teachers (two full-time and one part-time) provide English instruction to district students from a variety of language backgrounds. “The typical student sees me every day, and the length of time depends on the level. Beginning to intermediate students get 72 minutes; advanced, 36 minutes. I see them one to two at a time or in a small group,” said the ESL teacher.

Teachers described the diversity brought by English language learners as “beneficial” to everyone in the school. They spoke of classmates’ learning about other cultures as these students were learning English. The biggest challenge occurs with older students who “aren’t literate in their home language,” teachers agreed. Younger children learn the English language and literacy skills simultaneously, they said, but for many older children, teachers need to be creative in exposing the children to beginning reading. Teachers told of asking older students to accompany them to classrooms in earlier grades so that older children could “help” and thus learn along with the younger students. The ESL teacher noted that Maybrook’s literacy initiative “functions as a safety net to bring up all kids who are struggling.”

Regular education teachers take pride in seeing the progress English learners make. A primary level teacher said that the four students who came into her class this year “not speaking a word of English” are now “on grade level for reading and writing. They are sponges, and they are immersed in literacy the entire time they’re in my classroom.” “I feel good about our level of success. All roads lead to the NYSESLAT. They go up levels each year.

Meeting Special Needs

All students learn the same curriculum. I scaffold a lot depending on the need. - teacher

Maybrook has two full time and one part-time special education teacher; one half-time psychologist (two days a week); a student assistance counselor three days a week; and part time physical, occupational, and speech therapists. “It’s a small staff, one based on need and financially responsible budgeting,” reported a district administrator.

Emphasizing that the curriculum is the same for all students and that her job is to provide the “scaffolding” students need, one special education teacher explained:

For one student I might put on the page number of where to find the information; for another, I might put the page and paragraph – or tell them the word to look for. Then I keep taking things [the scaffolds] away. . . . They are given the exact same materials [as the other students], but it might be presented differently. For most of the [special ed] students, it’s too much. I want them to learn it rather than memorize it. In math I’m the lead teacher in the class. We do a lot of consistent review of math in the morning work. Math review is part of the balanced math program. . . . Every day they’re given a math review - six boxes. In each box is something they’ve learned. With this review, they remember. Special ed kids often can’t retain. In math you have to know something to know something else. This is a great way to keep it in their heads.

Regular education teachers explained the processes they and their special education co-teachers use in their classrooms:

Because there are two of us, it’s so beneficial. If we teach in a whole group for a very short amount of time, then we split up – a million different ways. We never do special ed/regular ed. We are always mixing it up. We have 20 kids in my room. We use the framework of the curriculum I set forth and then she and I, both of us, will look at IEPs to see what needs to be different, changed. Some kids we have to supply notes for. I’ll give it to them, the coteacher will be redoing the notes so that she staples them into their notebooks. We modify the homework, whatever is on the IEP we need to be following. Our students do not know why they have two teachers in the room. They have no idea. We

have different assessments — math club every Thursday during lunch time for any of them. If a student doesn't get it, they come in and work with us. Whole group doesn't work. Kids get so distracted. Teaching in small groups is much better.

As students progress through the grades, teachers emphasize developing independence and becoming advocates for themselves. In fifth grade, there is “a real fine line” between encouraging them to “be confident” about doing work on their own and “giving them enough help that they feel success.” As fifth graders prepare for middle school, both regular education and special education teachers “really focus on their strengths and use their strengths to help them succeed and progress.”

Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data

I know so much about each child. We're accountable now. It's made me a better teacher, for sure. I know these kids. - teacher

Maybrook uses a variety of tests and procedures to monitor students' progress. Teachers emphasized the satisfaction of knowing how their students are doing in general on different parts of the assessments and being able to identify specific gaps in the knowledge of particular students. Administrators described a comprehensive accountability plan process that “ties everything together very nicely.”

Gathering and Interpreting Data

“We know exactly what our students are doing at all times,” one teacher asserted. “I have a CFA (Common Formative Assessment) for every state standard. I developed them myself. . . . I assess first. Based on that assessment, I direct my teaching – what and to whom. After I've taught it, I give another CFA, then I go one-to-one. For kids who didn't get it, they stay with me to [catch them up] . . . in social studies, reading, writing, Where are you now? Are you meeting the standards or not? If not, what else do I need to do?”

Teachers described conducting benchmark testing for reading three times a year, using an observation survey three times a year (at the primary level), and assessing through district writing prompts four times a year, in addition to daily assessment of each child. “We also monitor reading and writing on a daily basis when we conference with them. With guided reading, you are taking notes and taking notes We take a lot of notes. They get used to the teacher taking a lot of notes – doing running records. They're writing sentences and stories in kindergarten.” For daily assessment, another teacher described classroom processes: “We do almost a reading comprehension – 12 questions. Maybe a predicting, maybe an inferencing, then assess them – these five students need inferencing -- and we take the group and work on skills based on their needs. We do daily math review. Every morning we give five questions and two mental math questions to assess information they've done in the past. Basic computation or word problems or draw a pentagon – things not taught at the moment, but we keep going back. For us that seems to work really well.”

To monitor the effect of the literacy initiative, the district analyzes data from state assessments. The easiest place to see gains and talk about gains is in Kindergarten and 1st grade, said a district administrator. “The Kindergarten teachers are amazed at how much more they're doing with Kindergarteners than ever before. They are light years from what they did 10 years ago. Kids are going into 1st grade stronger. These are the reports we're getting from Maybrook,” he noted.

The ability to access individual students' records in various assessments over time has been especially helpful, several teachers commented. The reading teacher, for example, keeps extensive records of student progress as they move through the levels, and teachers can review that progress and identify areas of continuing instructional need.

Sharing of Information

It's not just having the data but sharing it and using it that make a real difference in student performance, Maybrook educators said. Everyone has all the information, and both the size of the school and the collaborative culture foster sharing. Everyone attends the early-morning multi-grade meetings where data are discussed and interpreted, teachers said. "We ask why kids are not getting this. Is it because it's hard, or did we teach it wrong?" one teacher noted. Reading, special education, and ESL teachers are part of the teams, everyone stressed, because all teachers need to identify student needs and work to meet them.

Recognition, Interventions, and Adjustments

Collaboration

Identifying appropriate plans for intervention and adjustments is a cooperative process, led school-wide by an intervention team, described by one teacher as a key reason for student success. To refer students to the IST, teachers fill out a two-to-three page form telling what they've tried, provide a sample of student work, and ask to be put on the calendar. As one participating teacher explained,

We meet every Wednesday morning. Kids who are struggling are brought up, and we brainstorm strategies to help them. There's not one teacher who feels like they're failing because they need help or other ideas. [Someone] might know an older sister or the parents. Background and history helps a lot. ... [A strategy] might be to borrow a 5th grade student to help out in Kindergarten. Special ed kids are often the ones going down and helping.

Intervention includes communicating with parents and working together to develop and implement strategies. Maybrook's teachers and principal described "a tremendous amount" of parent outreach and parent/child workshops. Often the workshops will model academic help that parents can give children. "K-1 does a Reading Safari -- 15-20 minutes at a station. We show parents modeling a read-aloud, a little finger puppet thing. We have math nights where they set a little school store in one station. We do about eight of these -- four and four, literacy and math. It's a good way to pull parents in" so they can help children at home, the principal said.

The "hardest part" is often the lack of cultural experience that children have, commented several teachers. ESL, reading, and special education teachers find themselves supplementing classroom experiences with interventions that provide more cultural background knowledge to children.

Academic Intervention Service (AIS) programs focus on extra help in ELA and Math. "Right now after school we have one intervention to help get students ready for the state tests. We are incorporating in it more fun things. We used to have AIS in the morning and after school. That doesn't happen so much anymore. Being in a collaborative classroom with two teachers, one teacher can take a student aside while other students are getting instruction," a teacher commented.

Special Education

Most students at Maybrook who are classified for special education services are served in co-taught inclusion classes, with one special education teacher in the school daily for a half day to serve 15 students. Students who require self-contained classrooms are sent to other elementary facilities because of Maybrook's limited size. Before teachers refer a student to the Committee on Special Education (CSE), they will have brought their concerns to the IST and consulted with colleagues about potential interventions. In addition, according to a district administrator, "A new requirement in the ... process is that we need to show proof of an intervention" [before referral].

The secret to Maybrook's success with special education students, educators said, is the unwavering insistence that every child can meet high academic standards through data-based identification of instructional needs and strategic collaboration to meet those needs.

In a Nutshell

Close attention to the academic needs of each student is the norm at Maybrook Elementary School. Maybrook educators feel ownership of the interwoven best practices that bring success despite the high needs of their students. Teachers and principal are united in focusing on literacy, expecting all students to succeed with customized scaffolding, building capacity through close collaboration among staff members, and connecting family, community, and school.

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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 can be

found on the project web sites: www.albany.edu/aire/kids and <http://knowyourschoolsny.org>.