

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

Linda Ranado, April 2011

Pakanasink Elementary School ***Pine Bush Central School District***



School Context

The Pine Bush Central School District is home to seven schools that together serve 5850 students, with just over 900 identified for special education services and nearly 90 for ESL services. Pakanasink, one of its five elementary schools, not only serves “one of the lower socio-economic populations” in the district but is also “one of the most diverse buildings in the district.” A location seventy-five miles north of New York City in an area with virtually no corporate tax base contributes to the many challenges faced by this school. Among them are the hardships faced by their students’ families. Educators in Pakanasink place a high priority on parental relationships, yet many families are too busy simply trying to make ends meet, whether in single parent households, homes with both parents working, or those in which parents with long commutes find it difficult to find the time to be involved with the school. In addition, some parents cannot communicate in English.

Many parents work for New York City, Rockland County, or New Jersey for the transportation departments, or as police officers and fire fighters. Families are challenged now. . . . Parents can't pay for homes . . . there have been huge recent foreclosures and [the number of students getting] free lunch has gone up. - administrator

In 2009-10, 51% of Pakanasink’s student population was eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, an increase of 4% over the previous year and well above the district average. As the following chart indicates, at Pakanasink, of its 483 enrolled students, over half are African American or Hispanic/Latino. Another eight percent is of Asian, Indian, Urdu, or other cultural origin. In 2009-10, fifteen students were identified for ESL services; however, several non-qualifying students are second and third generation residents who still speak their native tongue at home, where their inherited culture may still be very much alive. For this diverse population, teachers stress the importance of being “mindful” of what may become for some “a sense of isolation.” While these factors present challenges, teachers and administrators alike say they “welcome” such diversity and it is “just who we are.”

Student Demographics 2009-10: Pakanasink Elementary School, Pine Bush Central SDⁱ

Grades served: K- 5	Pakanasink Elementary School	Pine Bush Central School District	New York State
Eligible for Free/Reduced-Price Lunch	51%	31%	48%
Limited English Proficient	3%	1%	8%
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution			
African-American	25%	11%	19%
Hispanic/Latino	31%	12%	22%
White	36%	72%	50%
Other	8%	4%	8%
Total Enrollment	483	5,850	2,692,649

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

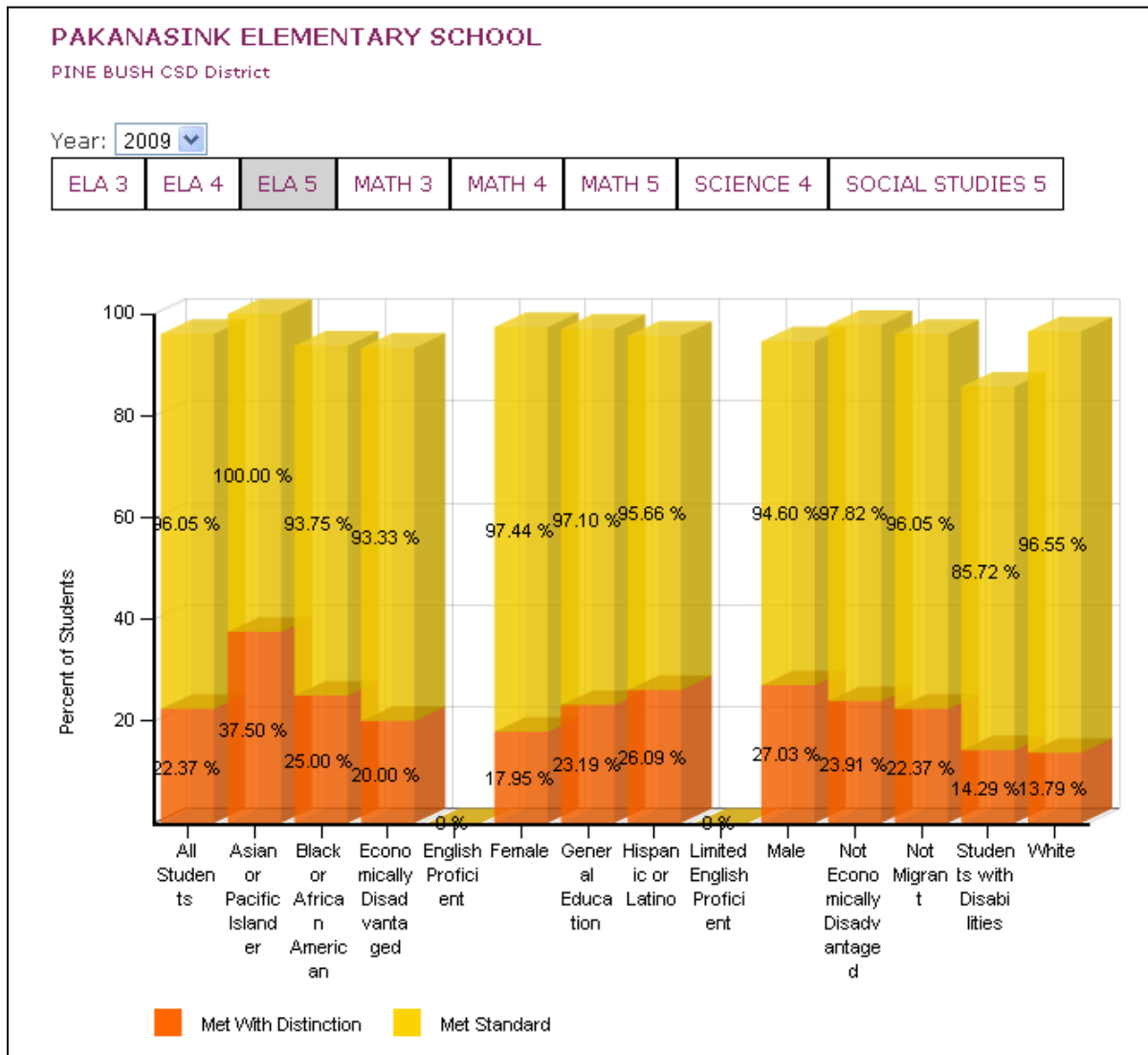
They [special education students] are integrated into the regular classroom. They get exposed to the true curriculum and that's their focus; and it prevents that gap from happening at an early age.
- teacher

A district administrator describes the special education population, both within the district and Pakanasink School, as including those who are “minor disabled, 504 accommodated learning disabled, and those who are health, speech and language impaired but do not require a great deal of assistive support.” The severely handicapped are served by a BOCES (Board of Cooperative Education Services) program, where their safety needs can be better addressed. At Pakanasink she says, finding appropriate curriculum materials that align both with state standards and with students’ special needs is another challenge. This is directly linked with the complexity and diversity of needs that must be met in relationship to time, monies, and staffing available. She attributes a large part of Pakanasink’s success in meeting these challenges to a “blended delivery model” they had been permitted by the State to implement:

It's an integrated coteaching model, but with a lot more services. It allows children to be in classrooms with those not identified . . . and they benefit from having those extra teachers in the classroom. There's no specific student-teacher ratio; it's more of group instruction, based on needs. It's very amorphous with a tremendous amount of auxiliary staff and a high allocated budget to retain those teachers. My problem is moving people along to a more pragmatic model based on budgeting.

With her help, teachers and administrators at Pakanasink have adapted this model and continue to succeed. Rather than an across the board coteaching program, each grade level now includes a mix of models for providing services for students with special needs, each of which has its own set of enrollment, scheduling, staffing, and instructional challenges. One inclusion class, for example, has 28 students. Crucial to adjusting to this change is seeing to it that teachers are well versed in a variety of proven strategies. Then, as the principal puts it, “I’ll find a way to give them whatever it takes” to help them successfully implement them.

Despite its challenges, the staff at Pakanasink Elementary has been able to consistently and positively impact the performance of its diverse student population and those with special needs. This impact is reflected in the 2008-9 NYS School Report Card. Overall, Pakanasink students met or exceeded state standards in Grades 3 through 5, topping NYS averages in all grade levels on both the ELA and the Mathematics assessments. Equally impressive were the results of students with disabilities and the economically disadvantaged. The chart below, for example, shows all students and subgroups performing at a higher level than the state average on the Grade 5 ELA assessment. The overall state average was 82% scoring proficient, with 48% of students classified for special education services reaching proficiency. Nearly 86% of Pakanasink fifth-grade special education students scored at the proficient level on that assessment, which is representative of other grades, assessments, and years.



Performance of Pakanasink fifth-grade subgroups on the NYS ELA Assessment in 2009, except for the limited English proficient subgroup, which contained too few students to be separately reported. Data are based on publically available data as displayed at <http://knowyourschoolsny.org>. For results for additional grades, years, and assessments, click on "Find Your School" on the website.

The school's approach includes a "whole child" philosophy of learning because, as one teacher says, "Learning good behavior gives them that mindset of being ready to learn the basics and skills." A mix of high expectations and lots of positive reinforcement to "do one's best," along with data-driven curriculum and instruction, is said to help students of all abilities to do just that. Another teacher further attributes their success to "consistency, very highly structured programs, well qualified and well trained teachers and, to some degree, parent support." At the heart of it all, however, is a positive, family-like atmosphere where students give hugs to principals and share recess with teachers to get extra help, and all stakeholders know the "door is always open."

Best Practice Highlights

Communication as a Key to Success

Keeping all channels of communication open is a high priority at Pakanasink Elementary and is viewed as playing an integral role in academic and behavioral success. This may be between faculty and administration: "[We have] good principals and assistants who have goals and know what they want and work with and listen to teachers and their ideas, reports one teacher." Or it may be between teachers who feel they "can stop into each others' classrooms to discuss problems or share positive things."

This extends to staff and student relationship as described by teachers: "I will talk to students about why there is no work done and how it affects them . . . let them know we're here to help, not hurt." Another tells of how an administrator "went in the halls and looked at the kids' works and . . . wrote something about each child's work and gave it to the teacher to share with the students."

While it is recognized that some language barriers exist, and desired parties cannot always be reached, a far-reaching communication network is in place to counteract this problem. The district has a Diversity Task Force and a website designed specifically as a resource for parents of special needs students. Administrators also report "a strong ESL teacher group that reaches out and has established cultural events like potluck dinners where they also speak to parents about their children's needs and show off students' works." At the building level, PTA meetings, parent conferences, weekly newsletters, and the monthly *Pakanagram* are among the numerous communications options in place. As a result, parents have every opportunity to stay informed and to become actively involved in their child's academic and social growth.

Emphasis on Continuity and Consistency

If we're not on the same page, it won't work.

[We] collaborate not only with our own grade level, but also with those above or below.

- teachers

The "consistency of information sharing" cited in the current Building Leadership Plan, along with the alignment of district and building plan goals and the implementation of programs and assessment tools adopted district wide, are all ways those at Pakanasink "stay on the same page."

This emphasis on the importance of consistency, they say, helps to keep expectations clear and collaboration more meaningful at all levels. It appears in the form of the Parent Homework Handbook that delineates the expectations and responsibilities of both parent and student in regard to what is referred to as a “very stringent homework policy.” This practice manifests itself in various ways in the classroom, as well. To encourage academic growth, one teacher explains how “it helps to be consistent in assignments and for [students] to know expectations.”

A Positive, Flexible, and Resourceful Approach to Overcoming Obstacles

I love my job, love the building I'm in; I'm happy, despite the frustrations. - teacher

This upbeat attitude was reflected throughout interviews conducted at the school and district, even as the threat of drastic budget cuts loomed over everyone’s heads. Besides financial concerns, challenges revolving around parental involvement and meeting the special needs of each student were also addressed. For administrators, it went one step further to the importance of meeting the needs of each teacher.

The resounding response to such challenges is one of determination to meet them “head on.” In doing so, all spoke repeatedly about the necessity of flexibility, whether through adjustments and modifications, or through utilization of resources already available in new ways (materials and people). When loss of funding cut into professional development, both the district and Pakanasink “tapped into everybody’s strengths.” The loss of collaboration time within the daily schedule led to the negotiation of a half hour “before school” collaboration time. Teachers say they continue to collaborate throughout the day and even at home of their own initiative. When a new playground was needed, school personnel, the PTA, and the local cultural and business communities joined forces. The end result of their fundraising was not only the needed \$80,000 but also a colorful display of framed, painted tiles that now adorn the hallways.

No place, however, were the attributes of flexibility, resourcefulness, and positive thinking more apparent than in the discussion of instruction and content. When asked what qualities are desired when selecting a special education teacher, a district administrator responded, “a good sense of humor and the sway factor . . . a lot of give . . . anyone rigid or locked in can’t be versatile.” This was echoed by a teacher, “Being flexible is the most important thing when working with students who are challenging.” Others reported altering materials or holding parent conferences in the evenings or by phone. Most important to all, however, is the practice of flexibly differentiating instruction in order to meet the special needs of each child.

A Closer Look

The characteristics highlighted above are evident across the five broad themes that frame the study of which this case is one part. The sections that follow discuss specific practices at Pakanasink Elementary that reflect these characteristics within the themes of the framework.

Curriculum and Academic Goals

For special ed it is making a certain amount of progress and growth in comparison to where they are and where they were and not if they score a 4 on a state test.

The goals are not all that different from regular ed. The expectations are the same, as the state demands all be held at the same level of accountability. - teachers

Goals in Pine Bush are established at three levels. Annually, broad district and board goals are established, as are building goals that are aligned with these broad goals at a more practical level. The Building Leadership Team also puts forth a revised plan every three years. The 2010-11 district goals clearly show that curriculum, especially in regard to students with critical needs, is a priority, as reflected in Goal 1 and its objectives. Goal 1: “To review instructional programs over a three-year period. This includes examining curriculum, instructional strategies, and use of data to evaluate and improve student achievement.” Objectives within this goal emphasize assessment, differentiated instruction, and development of “our alternative program and curriculum that meet the needs of our at-risk students.”

The Pakanasink Building Leadership Plan’s goals align with district objectives by aiming at information sharing through collaborative meetings, including the Collaborative Assistance Team (CAT) and Committee on Special Education (CSE). It also commits to mapping “instruction for every grade level cross the content areas . . . one per month during faculty meetings,” in order to align the curriculum by “grade level content and resources” to NYS Standards.

In developing a curriculum, the primary focus for special needs students is on reading and math because, as one teacher puts it, “Without gains in these areas, students won’t absorb content.” Many administrators in both district and school have a special education background and say that when looking for new programs and materials, they “always take into account how they will impact on special needs,” but they find “texts are overwhelmingly difficult for special needs students.” Because of this, a major challenge in selecting curriculum materials and programs centers on their readability levels, as there is no separate program for students with special needs or ESL services. Administrators note that the district mandates the literacy program and certain texts and materials in other disciplines with the intent “to build consistency, rather than each teacher/building doing their own thing.” Each building principal, however, “has the latitude to select a program as long as it reflects a strong instructional practice and goes with what is in place already.”

Teachers also have latitude to make further adjustments in meeting the special needs of their students. This may be accomplished by using technology, alternate plans, and supplemental materials provided by some programs or of their own devise. One teacher speaks of taking “content and what they need to know” and modifying it. Another tells of purchasing a reading series for the library through a PTA mini-grant, as books in the library may be too difficult for her special needs students.

Faculty and administrators alike feel the most effective recent reform in the area of curriculum has been the adoption of a new literacy program that offers guided reading and “serves as a

springboard to other curriculum.” While the curriculum and program adoption process varies throughout the district, the process at Pakanasink is used in all disciplines.

The elementary level has reps who work under the direction of administrators. They reach out to providers and get samples. For the literature series, they brought all samples to the building, took model lessons, got feedback, and discussed which would be best aligned to standards and how they could be used. - teacher

Evaluating curriculum is the principal’s responsibility and is achieved through “white cards and mandatory assessments agreed upon,” as well as “observation and classroom visits.”

Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building

Staff Selection

We have very dedicated, sharing teachers who are up to date with techniques. - teacher

Hiring involves all levels of administration and building team stakeholders, although presently the district must hire from the layoff list if an opening arises. When in place, the hiring procedure is the same for all, including special education candidates, with an emphasis on looking at subject competencies, classroom management and collaborative skills, and a patient and dedicated personality. An administrator says observation is also crucial to the selection process because an interview alone can be deceptive. While the district participates in several job fairs and uses the statewide On-Line Application System (OLAS) website to scan resumes to recruit prospective candidates, many who have been hired for Pakanasink had a prior connection to the district, whether as an involved parent, a substitute or student teacher, or as a former student. Others had been part of the system already but operating in another school or capacity. These prior connections most likely contribute to the high retention rate of staff.

The effectiveness and progress of non-tenured teachers are assessed through their choice of a monitored goal plan culminating in a formal observation or of the traditional three formal observations during their period of non-tenure (in the case of special education teachers, one of these observations is by the special education director, and students’ Individualized Education Programs [IEPs] are monitored). Administrators also provide support and say they “follow a strong annual review based on stringent . . . rubrics, which they have developed and refined.”

Leadership

A big part is leadership. [Administrators are] involved in what happens in the classroom and willing to do whatever helps bring success. - teacher

This praise for leadership was echoed repeatedly, whether by a special education teacher speaking of “positive rapport with the special ed director” or by a teacher telling of how the principal “has always worked as [part of] a team.” This sentiment appears to stem from the respect and encouragement administrators show staff as is evident when the principal speaks of an “awesome teacher” with a special class whose results have convinced her of the value of a self-contained class. To administrators, mutual respect and collaboration, visibility, and

accessibility are clearly essential components of their success. They readily share their expertise through modeling instructional approaches, training or assisting in the implementation of new programs, or collaborating in areas such as problem solving. For example, the principal speaks of frequently visiting classrooms and personally checking to see if kids are doing their homework. She gives “pep talks” before testing, pulls those needing accommodations into her office during testing, and “weighs in with teachers” afterwards. This is so “they know she cares” and, hopefully, it will help instill in them “a strong sense of school pride.”

Capacity Building

They have a contract that teachers are required to get 30 hours of professional development throughout the year. This allows . . . 90 minutes a month with special needs participants and ESL to focus on needs. . . . It promotes the support they need and keeps them up to date with all the resources and materials available for that population.

– district administrator

When asked how well their training had prepared them to teach students with special needs, most teachers agree that “no class will prepare you until you experience it.” To address this need, a few years ago they participated in full and half-day workshops relating to multiculturalism. At another workshop, a presenter acted out how a special needs student feels and looks, which is said to have moved many to tears. These types of experiences, a teacher says, “wakes us up and refreshes us to open up and be more compassionate.”

To counter budget cuts, one morning each week a half hour is set aside for professional development, which is often dependent upon the expertise of colleagues. This ranges from technology training to training in implementing newly adopted programs. Teachers also train other teachers individually, as is the case of one special education teacher training another in the administration and use of an assessment instrument. Even the Building Leadership Plan includes required professional reading assignments to be discussed at designated meetings as a means of keeping staff updated on theories and practices. This form of capacity building is not limited to faculty. Teaching assistants (TAs) go to meetings and trainings on a regular basis as well. Also, “in the hope of preventing burnout,” according to a district administrator, administrators are required to attend a summer institute for professional development.

Teachers reported that the majority of their reading and math planning, the development of individual modifications, and rubrics scoring are all the end result of the ongoing and omnipresent practice of collaboration evident throughout the school. Besides the negotiated morning collaboration time, one resource teacher tells how “every day we collaborate, running back and forth planning projects and lessons.” A district administrator also notes that “buildings have team meetings and meet with grade-level peers to discuss instruction, its components and planning.” These meetings, combined with regular faculty meetings, Collaborative Assistance Team meetings, and daily conversations, are just a sampling of the many and varied approaches to collaboration at Pakanasink. This collaboration is further supported by the principal, who is “constantly scheduling common prep times where possible” and “sometimes, when working on new projects, will get rotating subs or TAs” to cover classes in order to “get knowledge out or keep consistent or discuss trends and difficulties.”

Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements

According to the principal, the State’s accountability system has “highly impacted” instructional practices and, “though it is challenging and difficult, it is positive in that it provides a common set of standards and goals. The challenge is to make it work for the kids.” Making it work calls for a lot of collaboration and differentiated instruction, practices that are reported to be integral in all special programs. These include inclusion classes, resource rooms, self-contained classrooms, ESL classes, looping of classified 4th and 5th graders, and AIS, all of which assure that “special needs students have in-room support, lesson modifications, and a lightened workload.”

Differentiated instruction is evident in the myriad settings and approaches found in a single classroom throughout the course of the day. Teachers report using both heterogeneous and homogeneous grouping as well as moving in and out of small group, whole group, and individualized instruction as deemed appropriate. Determining factors include student classifications, formal assessment results, and personal observations. One teacher describes her “typical week: I start the week as a whole class, based on the . . . reading series. The rest of the week students are in small groups at four stations. Those with weaker math skills go with the assistant for extra help.” She explains how two days are spent on math in small groups and one in direct instruction, while another may offer a tub station allowing for hands-on or gaming activities, a computer station, or doing pen and pencil work. Other teachers speak of “up and out” and “partnering lessons” and of gearing lessons towards students’ strengths to “keep a more positive attitude.”

Collaboration is widespread and wide ranging. One teacher speaks of how “input and strategies are helpful from the inclusion (co-teaching) teacher.” Others praise the ESL teacher, “who shares what works best with these children” and of how they try, as a result, to relate the English to the student’s native language “and get kids to share what they are thinking about from their background” to make it more concrete so they can relate better. Still another talks of “using everyone available for help,” including the special education teacher or TA who sometimes comes into the classroom and sometimes serves students in the resource room. The school psychologist and administrators also play an active role in these collaborative efforts.

These practices lead to the development of numerous strategies and arrangements in an effort to meet all students’ needs “as best they can.” Among these are modeling lessons and assigning “preferential seating” as well as using a lot of “drill-oriented practice.” Translators may be brought in for ELL students, who keep communication logs. Special tools such as number lines, direction “strips” on desks, and highlighters are also said to be helpful. Above all, as one teacher puts it, is the need for “positive reinforcement . . . directed and guided by the teacher. I never tell them they are wrong. I tell them ‘good try.’”

Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data

Effectiveness is determined by looking at data, attendance, mobility rate of our populations, classification rates, results on New York State Assessments, AIS or RTI numbers, levels of support, number of parents coming into conferences.

– district administrator

Administrators say that because “results are always a priority,” they set “high expectations for all students to achieve.” To ensure this, numerous assessments are interwoven into the school year and daily curriculum to allow teachers to “look at data and focus on skills and concepts where students are the weakest.” One assessment program that is high on their list aligns with state elements and “serves as a predictor of how [students] may do” on the state ELA assessment. Its results are also useful in guiding instruction and determining placement in Academic Intervention Services (AIS) classes. Teachers and administrators alike are excited about the introduction of the literacy benchmark assessment system recently adopted, with its monitoring and analytic capabilities that have a direct correlation to instruction. As a teacher points out, it “provides us with running data and is a great tool for us that I can share with parents.”

Curriculum based assessment programs are also in place and are said to be helpful in graphing student progress over the year and serving as “an indicator of IEP growth.” Teachers cite IEP goals, authentic assessment, integrated theme tests, self-created assessments, portfolios passed on from year to year, and “daily observations and interactions” among other ways they monitor student progress. According to one special education teacher, “We are constantly looking at and analyzing performance for strengths and weaknesses and adjusting teaching to it with certain constraints to adhere to required curriculum.” This sentiment is in line with a district administrator, who sees her role in helping special education teachers, in part, to “assist them in classroom differentiation by looking at data and breaking it down into practical applications.” The principal, who is “big on data,” takes this a step further and points out how data can be used “for class groupings, test prep, Collaborative Assistance Team collaborations, the Committee on Special Education, and for parent meetings. “ All parties stress its importance in backing up cases being brought up for referral.

Recognition, Interventions, and Adjustments

Recognition

A tour through Pakanasink Elementary, where a display case outside the front office is the responsibility of a different grade each month, reveals how much positive reinforcement plays a crucial role in academic and social success, and how the two go hand in hand. Bulletin boards announce “Homework Stars,” “Students of the Month,” “Outstanding Trimester 5th Graders,” and “Cafeteria Champions.” The Pakanasink Citizens Award Ceremony recognizes three students from each class with a certificate for being model citizens and is held annually to coincide with budget vote day. At year’s end, Moving Up Day honors those moving on to middle school. Other incentives, such as ice cream or weekly rewards, exist in various classrooms. Even teachers receive annual service pins and are recognized in the cafeteria’s “The Sky’s the Limit” display.

Interventions

While formal recognition of success is obviously important, it is clear that staff and administration realize that for many, success cannot be achieved without another form of recognition taking place -- that of a student’s strengths and weaknesses and the interventions needed to build upon the first and address the latter. Teacher referrals, parent requests, data, and the Collaborative Assistance Team all factor into whether or not a student is determined to need

intervention, or if referrals need to be taken a step further to the district-wide Committee on Special Education (CSE). At the classroom level, teachers are observing and responding to students' needs daily as reflected in the following words of one resource teacher:

Today 3 out of 10 struggled with a fraction exercise. I sat the ones who got it with the TA and revisited exercises with those struggling. It changes from day to day . . . week to week. Six out of 11 in my group do [a remedial reading program]; the others don't because it's not needed.

Each building's Collaborative Assistance Team plays an instrumental role in the intervention process and includes the principal, school nurse and psychologist and other specialists. A teacher relates how "if we see a struggling student, we fill out the paperwork and do testing and bring the data to the [CAT] team" with the purpose of "getting ideas from throughout the building as to how the child is succeeding. We discuss the areas of strengths and come up with strategies to help." From there, if a problem persists, the team determines if a referral to the Committee on Special Education is needed. A similar approach is taken towards declassifying a student. If declassification is agreed upon, "we might go to a transitional year with someone monitoring [the students being declassified] to be sure they don't get pushed aside."

Several options exist for students classified as in need of special education services at Pakanasink. As earlier noted, the district serves minor disabled and 504 accommodated learning, as well as health, speech and language impaired students. A BOCES satellite school "in house" operates separately from Pakanasink Elementary, and those students are integrated at times. Depending on the classification, some special needs students may be placed in the self-contained classroom or one of the grade-level inclusion classes that provide a coteaching environment. Those in the self-contained "special" class are accompanied by a TA when they are included in regular science or social studies classes, fulfilling the goal of giving these students "some inclusion."

Students who fail to score at the proficient level on the State ELA Assessment or the predictor assessment automatically are placed in the Academic Intervention Services (AIS) program. With the Collaborative Assistance Team's approval, the door is open for other students to participate in AIS as well, because school personnel "want to help as many kids as [they] can," a practice true of all extra assistance programs, including speech therapy. The stages of AIS intervention are based on a High-Moderate-Low format that follows the RTI (Response to Intervention) strategy and was developed by the assistant superintendent.

"Potential ESL students' needs are evaluated and gone over on a regular basis," and those qualifying attend an ESL class. The ESL teacher is also available to assist general education teachers. One teacher tells of how with a Ukrainian student, besides using translators, she "used a lot of modeling . . . a lot of one-on-one. She went on to say she "gives extra time when allowed, as well as making use of a variety of learning aids." The CSE deals with parental concerns of the ESL population as well as those of other special needs students.

In a Nutshell

Pakanasink has the highest percentage of students with special needs in the Pine Bush Central School District. Yet repeatedly one hears how “diversity is a way of life here” and how all students, regardless of ethnicity or ability, are accepted as equals and given the same opportunity to reach their maximum potential. One teacher’s comment, in particular, sheds light on a major reason behind the school’s success: “The really positive thing about our building is everyone just genuinely cares about each other, which makes a positive impact on all – we’re like family.” This sense of family lends itself to a highly collaborative atmosphere in which mutual respect and open communication combine with an equally high level of professionalism. Teachers recognize the necessity of flexibility while still maintaining consistency and report that they are constantly altering instructional approaches and curriculum materials in response to student assessments, knowing administrators are there to step in and give them guidance and support at all times.

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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>.