

UAlbany identifies factors explaining higher performance among 'critical needs' elementary students

By Janet I. Angelis
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The mission of every school district is to foster the academic success of all students, including those in critical needs subgroups – special needs students and English language learners, as well as students from low income families and students from traditionally disadvantaged racial backgrounds. Generally, schools that serve large numbers of critical needs students have lower student performance than schools with fewer students identified for special education services or serving primarily white, economically advantaged, native English speakers. But there are exceptions. A research team at the University at Albany School of Education recently conducted a study on why critical needs students in some schools consistently outperform peers in similar schools.

Using state assessment results for ELA and mathematics for Grades 3-6 for 2007, 2008, and 2009, the team identified schools in which these critical needs groups consistently performed better than predicted (higher performers) as well as schools in which these groups performed as expected (average performers). The researchers investigated a sample of 10 higher-performing and five demographically similar but average-performing schools to learn what practices are in place in the first group but absent or under-developed in the latter.

Results of the study suggest that higher performance among critical needs students at the elementary level is related to four elements:

- Close engagement with and understanding of the population.
- Literacy- and technology-enriched instruction.
- An evidence-based approach to curriculum and performance.
- Fluid adaptation and deployment of resources.

In the higher performers, all of these elements are in place, whereas in the average performers, some or all of the elements are missing or underdeveloped, as described below.

Engaging and understanding the population

Educators in the higher-performing schools seek to know, understand, and engage with students with the most critical needs. They speak of their work as an inviting "challenge" and see their roles as nurturing and caring while also taking responsibility for students' academic achievement. For instance, a teacher at the John F. Kennedy Magnet School in Westchester County's Port Chester Public Schools advises, "You have to know your population and teach your population, despite the outside factors. You have to know who's in front of you." Faculty in higher-performing schools have a positive attitude toward the diversity in linguistic backgrounds, ethnicities, and physical and mental challenges their students bring to school. In order to bridge the home and school divide, they deliberately reach out to parents in a multitude of ways – e.g., school picnics, visits to homes.



At Dr. Charles T. Lunsford School #19 in Rochester, students hug teacher Kelly Ottmar. From left are Jayonna Price, Brandon Jenkins, Ariel Martinez Thompson, Ottmar and Kameron McDonald.
Photo courtesy of Dr. Charles T. Lunsford School #19

In the average-performing schools, efforts to connect with all students to help them thrive as people and as students as well as outreach to parents were found to be weaker and less pervasive.

Literacy- and technology-enriched instruction

Believing that "a student must know how to read before they enter grade 3," educators in the higher-performing schools "do everything in our power within the classroom and within AIS (academic intervention services) to reach this goal," reports a teacher at Martin Luther King, Jr. Elementary School in Utica. "Everything" includes "direct instruction, AIS, after school tutoring, as well as computer-aided instruction." It also includes extra support in the classroom, as needed. Across the higher performers, administrators have worked to build all teachers' capacities to use a variety of programs and practices for developing literacy among diverse learners. Teachers focus intensively on literacy-building in the early elementary years and use technology to help monitor literacy development while at the same time motivating students to keep working at their own pace.

In the average-performing schools, the approach to

literacy instruction is inconsistent from teacher to teacher, ESL instruction is likely to be separate from mainstream instruction, and technology is typically controlled by the teacher rather than put at the fingertips of students.

Evidence-based approach to curriculum and performance

Teachers and administrators in the higher performing schools also attribute their students' success to a coherent curriculum, which has been mapped and paced for students with different needs (e.g., ELLs and special needs), and aligned with frequent formative assessments. At Maybrook Elementary School in Orange County's Valley Central School District, for example, an administrator credits curriculum alignment for "setting clear alignment maps in terms of what students should know and be able to do. These are consistently upheld school-wide, district-wide and classroom-wide." A well-articulated K-12 curriculum accompa-

nied by ongoing formative assessment helps facilitate teacher capacity to flexibly use a variety of good instructional practices adapted to the population of students served and provides built-in feedback loops to inform needed changes. Especially when achievement targets are not hit, these feedback loops include rethinking what is emphasized in the curriculum and how. In addition, the curriculum in many of the higher performing schools has been adapted to the needs of special education and ESL students, and these adaptations are understood and enacted in mainstream classrooms.

In comparison, curriculum revision in the average-performing schools is seen more as an activity to produce a required (yet often underutilized) product than as an ongoing revelatory process to inform instruction and assessment.

Fluid adaptation and deployment of resources

Being able to adapt and deploy resources to best meet critical needs is the lubricant that enables the structures undergirding teaching and learning (e.g. curriculum, instructional programs, assessments, and material resources) to function effectively. In higher performing schools these resources are deployed in line with the school's emphasis on grade-level or above literacy attainment for all students and on ensuring that all students can access an aligned curriculum that includes essential skills and knowledge. Thus they provide maximum levels of inclusion for ELL and special needs students, use an extensive array of intervention strategies including response to intervention (RTI), and pursue and successfully garner funding for extra support targeted specifically to ELLs and special needs students.

In the average-performing schools, efforts for inclusion and RTI are in their infancy and/or are being resisted.

Janet Angelis and Kristen Wilcox are, respectively, the director and principal investigator of the Know Your Schools-for NY Kids project, formerly known as Just for the Kids-NY, which conducted the study. Read the full report at www.albany.edu/nykids.

Top elementary schools for 'critical needs' students

SCHOOL DISTRICT

Malverne UFSD
Mount Vernon City SD
New Rochelle City SD
Pine Bush Central SD
Port Chester-Rye UFSD
Rochester City SD

Roosevelt UFSD
Utica City SD
Valley Central SD
Valley Stream 30 UFSD

SCHOOL

Davison Avenue
Lincoln
Columbus
Pakanasink
John F. Kennedy
Dr. Charles T. Lunsford School 19
Centennial Avenue
Martin Luther King Jr.
Maybrook
Forest Road

Source: www.albany.edu/nykids