Eagle Bluff[1] Elementary School

Rural Case Study

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[1] Eagle Bluff is a pseudonym

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This case is one part of a comparative study of elementary schools designed to investigate implementation of Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS) and the Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR) as they relate to outcomes on CCLS-aligned assessments in New York State. The study sample included both odds-beating and typically performing schools.

Eagle Bluff Elementary School met the criteria as "odds beating" because the difference between expected and actual average performance on the 2013 CCLS-aligned assessments was over one standard deviation higher than that of other schools around the state and statistically significantly higher in three of six comparisons (ELA and mathematics assessments for grades 3-5). Thus, the school is distinctive for exceeding expected performance in multiple subjects and grade levels. The school also has a track record of meeting its annual yearly performance targets (AYP). For example, in 2012, at least two-thirds of students in grades three through five scored a three or four on the state ELA and mathematics assessments. In addition, this school performed well on the prior two rounds of state testing by earning the status of a "high progress" school by high rates of growth and closing performance gaps between subgroups of students.

The intent of this case study is to characterize the processes and practices evident in a school with a history of above-expected student performance outcomes. In the next section, we describe key features of this school and district that might provide guidance or generate ideas as to how particular processes and practices can be developed and supported to achieve targeted student performance outcomes. An overview of the types of data collected and methods used for analysis is available in Appendix A.

School Context

> *I don't think you can have academics unless . . . kids know that they're safe, that they're loved, know that we care about them first as a person, before we care about them as a student.*
> - teacher

Eagle Bluff Elementary School is located in a small rural community in New York. The one-story school sits on a quiet residential street near several churches. Front and center in the building is the library, designed to be open even when school is not in session. Outside the front office, a photograph of the faculty and staff wearing smiles and red T-shirts reflects the school's culture, described by teachers as *fun*. During arrival, students of all ages stream through the principal's open door, having their shoes tied and receiving hugs and words of encouragement, reflecting both a caring culture and a leader committed to building relationships with everyone in the school. The school is one of several elementary schools in the district and serves more than 400 students from pre-kindergarten through sixth grade. Nearly all of the student body is white, and about half of the students qualify for either free or reduced-price lunch. The school houses the district special education programs.

Highlights of School Processes and Practices

Practices in this school that were associated with strong student performance include:

- A caring, student-centered school culture that emphasizes mutual respect and collaboration.
- Teacher autonomy within clearly defined goals and expectations.
- Shared decision making that includes teachers.
- Clear school vision, mission and goals closely aligned to those of the district.
- Hands-on instructional leadership by a principal whose goal is to be in every classroom every day.

A Closer Look

Following a vignette and overview, the rest of this report summarizes the findings from a two-day site visit to the school as well as the results of a school climate survey that was distributed to all staff members. Findings are reported for each line of inquiry that framed the study: district office-school relations, alignment, and coherence; school building leadership; Common Core curriculum and instruction; teachers' instruction and practice; student social and emotional developmental health; and family engagement strategies and community partnerships.

A Dynamite Theme

We visited Eagle Bluff just before administration of the 2014 state ELA assessments. On the morning of our visit a team that had been created to make the testing environment as positive and stress-free as possible was busy. They were planning activities that turn the state assessments into a celebration of learning, rather than a reason for worry. The day before the test, students from kindergarten through sixth grade will have breakfast together. This year, Corn Pops and Rice Krispies will be on the menu, reflecting the "dynamite" theme developed by the team. The prep rally and music video created by the music teacher and speech pathologist also follow the theme. The principal further explained, "All of our younger classes adopt an older class, so a kindergarten class will adopt a third grade class." The younger students write notes of encouragement, create banners to hang in the hallway and wish their buddy classroom luck over the morning announcements. The teachers noted that "younger students bring older students pencils and water." "We come and welcome the students that morning with a balloon arch we made." The principal concluded, "It's absolutely incredible. So that's the kind of tone we set as far as assessments. And everyone is on board." Not least of all, the principal, who leads each class in a cheer before personally delivering each student a test, a pack of Smarties and words of encouragement to try their best. From the superintendent on down, the message is clear; do your best every day; focus on teaching and learning, and the test results will follow.

Overview

The assessment celebration described above reflects the overall climate and culture of the building in which having fun together is emphasized, not only for its own sake, but also in the service of learning and social and emotional health. However, it is not all fun and games at Eagle Bluff. Grade-level teacher teams are working together to implement the new district curriculum, which was revised to align with the Common Core Learning Standards prior to the state's implementation of CCLS statewide in 2010. Similarly, district leaders noted that a comprehensive annual teacher and staff evaluation system had been in place prior to the state APPR (Annual Professional Performance Review) mandate. The forward-thinking leadership of the district enabled them to thoughtfully implement mandated changes in a way that worked for them and fit with the positive things they felt they were already doing. Overall, educators expressed a commitment to collaboration and mutual shared accountability in serving the needs of all students. They also reported being supported by both district and school administrators in meeting the district's and the school's goal to provide a safe, supportive, academically rigorous, and Common Core-aligned learning environment.

Summary of Site-Visit Findings

District Office-School Relations, Alignment, and Coherence

> *We really want kids to learn. We strive to really figure out what is it kids need to be able to do and are required to know relative to that expectation for the world beyond 12th grade. What do kids need to be able to do to be successful? And to have opportunities? So we kind of worked from a backwards design; so if students need to have this set of characteristics that they need to know and be able to do in relation to a set of educational standards, but also a set of characteristics of work ethic, respect, responsibility, those pieces are as important as the others in helping to determine what students will look like, sound like, and feel like as they leave us prepared to be able to be productive citizens and have opportunities. So when we know what that looks like as a 12th grader, then what does that look like as an 11th grader, as a 10th grader? So we work backwards with that in mind.*   - district administrator

Vision, Mission, Values, and Goals. The district's vision is to be a district of distinction and to be valued by the community. The mission of the district is to "serve the community by preparing individuals to value challenges, learning opportunities, diversity and civic responsibility." The belief statements of the district include creating challenges and choices for learners, creating a safe and supportive environment for learning, working as a community to ensure the health and mental health of all students to support learning, and creating a dynamic school environment to prepare students for a changing world. The district has three overarching goals: 1) collaboration among all stakeholders to support high levels of student learning needed for success in the 21st century; 2) creating a safe and emotionally supportive school environment; and 3) teachers, parents, staff and community members exhibiting the character attributes needed to be successful in a diverse world.

The district's vision, mission, beliefs, and goal statements are posted widely in the school. Additionally, the district website includes a philosophy of education and a philosophy of leadership description, as well as a vision for teachers, students and the organization; these reflect the importance of lifelong learning and individualized personal growth for students and teachers in a supportive environment, the responsibility of teachers to create a safe and challenging learning environment, the role of leadership to empower and inspire others, and the importance of creating an organization in which all members share a common vision.

Throughout the district, educators expressed the belief that all children can and will learn. District administrators emphasized the importance of selecting teachers and principals who share the same beliefs about teaching and learning. District leaders to building leaders to teachers also emphasized a "no excuses" philosophy of personal and shared responsibility for children's social and emotional well-being and learning. District administrators stated that these beliefs guide the selection process for teachers and principals; they require candidates to craft a philosophy of education which is then probed through the interview process and further developed through professional development, coaching, and mentoring after hiring

Educators at Eagle Bluff strive to prepare students academically and socially to be successful in post-secondary education or to enter the workforce with the ability to pursue post-secondary education later. According to a district administrator, at district offices they backwards-map from the academic skills and social characteristics students need to be successful beyond 12th grade in order to determine goals for each grade level. These goals include academic skills but also character development, including a strong work ethic, personal responsibility, and respect for others. Rather than focusing solely on numerical data, this administrator emphasized what a graduate of the district should look like and sound like, reflecting an approach to data that combines quantitative and qualitative measures. A similar approach was observed in teachers' descriptions of the ways they use student data.

In order to meet its overarching goals, the district uses a series of cascading goals from the school board to the district administration to school leaders to more specific goals at the classroom level. This provides coherence and alignment throughout the system. Widespread communication of these goals encourages everyone to move in the same direction. Data, including qualitative data, are used to set goals. For example, a focus group with recent graduates revealed that they felt unprepared for writing on the college level. The district worked with a local post-secondary institution to identify the writing skills that incoming freshman need in order to be successful. The district then revised writing goals, curriculum, and assessments across the district. As part of the continuous improvement process, the writing curriculum was revised again to match students' increased proficiency based on initial changes in instruction.

Leadership Structures, Strategies, and Philosophies. The district's philosophy of distributed leadership was reflected by the superintendent, who stated that her job was to hire competent people and provide them opportunities to lead in their position to be part of a continual professional growth process. As a small rural district, there are few central office administrators, and the superintendent looks to school administrators and teachers to provide leadership on curriculum and other committees. The superintendent's commitment to continual professional growth was evidenced in her ongoing mentoring of the principals, including bi-monthly meetings with all of the building leaders and monthly one-on-one meetings.

Additionally, the superintendent stated that her role was to set the vision for the district and to articulate this vision. She expressed that she set the tone for the district's accountability measures by sending the message to teachers that good instruction will lead to strong assessment results. Her attention to the APPR regulations allowed the district to develop a plan with a districtwide student learning outcome to encourage cooperation and reduce competition among teachers. Teachers reported receiving the message from the principal and the superintendent not to let either APPR or testing be a source of stress.

The superintendent expressed a personal interest in assuring goals are met. For example, she works with the high school principal to monitor drop outs and students at risk of dropping out to help them get back into school and graduate. The district has a goal of a 100% graduation rate, and the recent rate has been above 90%.

Resource Allocation and Monitoring. Resources are allocated based on student numbers, identified needs, and district priorities. Recently, the district purchased a new K-8 math series that was reviewed by a district-level curriculum team to assess alignment to the CCLS. The selection was made with input of teachers and administrators. One factor that contributed to the selection of this math series was the online component that students can access from home or from a mobile device, extending the math series as a resource for teachers to being a resource for students and parents. The series also combines a textbook and workbook, allowing students to take them home at the end of the year as a resource. The superintendent asked each building, including the high school, to contribute money from their budgets to purchase the new series, reflecting cooperation rather than competition for resources.

Student needs drive the allocation of special education staff and educators expressed that they are diligent in preventing students with disabilities from being placed outside of the district. Reflecting the cooperative nature of the district, in addition to special education teachers, reading teachers are utilized to provide direct instruction for students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). However, challenges in meeting all students' academic needs with the resources available still exist. Academic Intervention Services (AIS) teachers report a larger case load than in the past due to budget cuts, and reductions in support staff have also decreased the amount of time teachers have to collaborate due to the increase in teachers' non-instructional duties.

Eagle Bluff administrators have used a variety of strategies to cope with a tight fiscal situation. While a gifted and talented enrichment program has been cut due to budget concerns, teachers provide enrichment activities in a voluntary capacity. Similarly, the district was able to meet the school board's request to reduce the number of administrators by training existing school leaders and district administrators to take on additional roles. For example, a special education director with a talent for finance was mentored to take on those additional responsibilities. Furthermore, the current superintendent was mentored as she moved from an assistant superintendent position, while at the same time providing mentorship to another assistant superintendent. The reduction in administrative staff was seen as an opportunity to increase the capacity of existing staff, rather than a challenge.

School Building Leadership

I lead by example. My sleeves are up, just like anybody else's. I would never ask anyone of them to do something that I wouldn't be willing to do myself. . . . That goes from unclogging a toilet if it's overflowing, or sitting inside with a student reading. There's nothing I haven't done since I've been here. And I think that speaks volumes to them, so that there's really nothing I can't ask. And most times I don't have to ask. But it's no different than what you do as a teacher in a classroom. You model the behaviors you want to see. And I do the same thing in here, whether I'm serving as a model for the ladies out there in the office or the students who come in or the parents. I just think you model the way you want it to be. - principal

Vision, Mission, Values, and Goals. The building leadership team, comprised of teacher representatives from each grade-level team, explained that the vision of the school is to create a safe and happy place for students, one where they want to come and learn. In alignment with the district vision, the school improvement planning team expressed wanting students to become respectful and responsible citizens, along with academically successful. Individual teachers also stated that the vision is to create a safe environment for students to take risks in their learning. Both teachers and the principal mentioned the importance of the supportive culture, the fun activities, and the positive relationships between teachers and students, as well as between teachers, as being in alignment with the school's vision.

The district's cascading goals document guides alignment between district goals and school goals. Teachers were able to articulate how their goals fit within the goals of the building and how the building goals fit within the district goals. Reflecting the district's vision, mission, values and goals, the school's goals for students are to provide a safe environment where students feel cared for, as well as providing them with the academic and social skills they will need after the graduate, whether they go to college or not. Teachers and administrators referenced the district's goals, including student safety and emotional support. At the building level the principal and the leadership team revisit the building-level goals annually each spring to determine whether they have been met and to set goals for the coming school year. While the leadership team includes representatives from all of the grade-level teams, the draft goals are circulated to the whole faculty for feedback. Teachers also stated that their goals for students are to meet them where they are academically and take them as far as possible in a school year. They emphasized that students are individuals and that they set individual goals for students, as well as their overall class goals. Teachers use formal and informal assessments to drive goal setting for their students in the classroom.

Leadership Structures, Strategies, and Philosophies. The principal expressed a collaborative and hands-on approach to leadership that emphasized modeling high expectations and a "can do" attitude for teachers. She sought teachers' input on many decisions and has an open door policy for teachers and parents alike. However, she also felt comfortable making some decisions unilaterally, including refusing to let teachers use test prep materials in their classrooms. As an instructional leader, the principal said that she tries to be in all of the classrooms every day. In addition to providing feedback during formal observations, she leaves teachers written comments

on her walk-throughs. She noted the importance of always leaving teachers a positive note along with constructive feedback. Teachers stated that the principal incorporated professional development around instructional strategies into faculty meetings and staff development days. Teachers reported that they felt supported and trusted by the principal. The principal mentioned that she tries to take as much off the teachers' plates as possible to allow teachers to focus on teaching and learning. The teachers credited the principal with setting the fun and relaxed tone for the building, with prioritizing positive relationships, and with increasing involvement in the community.

Following the distributed leadership model of the district, the principal also serves as the leader of several departments across all of the schools, as well as serving on other districtwide committees. Similarly, teacher leadership was evident in the building math liaison. Working with the principal and the teacher leader of the math department, she helped to facilitate pre-K to 12th grade and 5th through 8th grade vertical planning days. She was part of the team that selected the new Common Core-aligned math textbook and served as a point person for communication about math in the building. In this role, she also provides support to teachers and distributes math materials.

Results from the climate survey (See Appendix B for full details) echo what was found in observations and focus groups, namely that all school staff expressed that the principal was supportive and respectful to all and that they in turn respect and support the principal.

Resource Allocation and Monitoring. Teachers said that they had adequate materials for instruction and are encouraged to gather and share CCLS-aligned materials and lessons. Teachers reported that they could use test prep materials to provide question banks to use in their instruction to increase students' exposure to the types of questions they will see on state assessments. However, the principal remains steadfastly against the use of test prep materials, preferring the teachers focus on sound instruction. The one area of resource need identified by teachers was in response to recent reductions in staffing levels, which resulted in larger class sizes and increased non-instructional duties for teachers. Increased non-instructional duties has limited common planning time for teachers; however they said that they found time to work together, including during their lunch breaks.

An example of how the principal monitors and reallocates resources is in the restructuring of the AIS program. When she became principal of Eagle Bluff, AIS was a year-long process, one students often were in year after year, rather than a short-term, targeted intervention program. She worked with the AIS team over time to shift to a more flexible, short-term model that has allowed AIS teachers to be able to provide push-in support for students, in addition to pull-out instruction, despite larger case loads. AIS teachers reported that it was helpful to "push in" to classrooms because it gave them more context in working with students. Decisions on which students are selected for AIS services are made using multiple measures, including formative assessments, classwork, quizzes and teacher observations, reflecting the school's whole child approach. Additionally, at the primary grades, instructional aides have been utilized to provide support for low-performing students.

Teachers reported professional development opportunities, including classroom management and instructional strategies training, that many have attended through a private educational enterprise, as well as trainings through the local BOCES, including on the CCLS. They also reported financial support to pursue professional development opportunities but noted

that there was not as much financial support as there used to be. In-house professional development utilizes teacher and administrator expertise as well.

School Climate. The school climate survey was administered electronically to all adults who work in Eagle Bluff Elementary School in any capacity. Approximately 35 anonymous results were collected (60% response rate) and results were tabulated and are presented in full in Appendix B. Overall, according the survey results, Eagle Bluff employees provide a picture of a positive work environment where staff reported positive relationships with school leaders, student behavior problems were dealt with consistently, and students respect and respond to adults. Additionally, all respondents reported that students are actively engaged in learning at Eagle Bluff and that they personally believed that all students can learn. Finally, almost all Eagle Bluff staff reported that they felt accepted by and respected by each other and that staff interact in positive ways.

Common Core Curriculum and Instruction

The district superintendent foresaw the advent of the CCLS before it was mandated by the state and took the time to examine their curriculum and align it with the draft Standards. This gave the district a head start in implementing the CCLS. In both math and English language arts, the district has not adopted the curricular modules from the state but has made them available as resources to the teachers, along with the new math series that was assessed by the district committee to be CCLS aligned..

Math. Following the district's commitment to adapt, rather than adopt, state-mandated changes, the vertical department team and the grade-level teams examined the existing math curriculum in light of the CCLS. They then realigned the scope and sequence of the curriculum, instructional strategies, and assessments to the CCLS ahead of the state officially mandating the Standards. Teacher teams worked to revise the curriculum over several summers. They decided to revise what they already had in place rather than adopt the New York State modules as their curriculum and took time to identify a math series that the K-12 math department determined was truly aligned to the CCLS. Revisions of curriculum, instructional strategies, and assessments are ongoing to meet student needs and to align with the CCLS. For example, the district's quarterly math assessments were revised to match the changes of topics between grade levels and have since been redone to match the rigor of the new state assessments.

Teachers reported having flexibility and autonomy to teach to the Standards in a way that makes sense to them, rather than adopting the CCLS-aligned modules from New York State. The teachers also expressed that the new math series was a resource, not the be all and end all of their instruction. Teachers were scheduled to receive professional development on the new math series shortly after the site visit, in anticipation of a "soft implementation" for the remainder of the school year. Teachers expressed that they liked the differentiated instructions and different approaches provided by the new text series, as well as the online resources and workbooks students can take home at the end of the year. Teachers voiced that the math series was meant to be a resource for instruction, not something to be followed prescriptively. District administrators have taken a similar view of the New York State CCLS-aligned curricular modules as a resource for teachers, rather than what they saw as a scripted program. Given this view, they felt that

printing hard copies for each teacher was prohibitively expensive; however, they have made the modules available to teachers on the district's server.

Reflecting their professional autonomy, grade-level teams have taken different approaches to providing mathematics instruction. In one grade, one teacher took on all math instruction, another science. In other grades, the team felt it was important for all teachers to gain experience with both ELA and Math Standards. Teachers are being encouraged to share resources, strategies and lesson plans, and teachers reported working together to implement the Standards at their grade level as well as across grade levels.

Implementing the Common Core Learning Standards in math appears to have been challenging for teachers, particularly as it required moving content between the grades. Teachers also felt that the math Standards overlooked content they feel is important, including telling time and money, so they opted to continue to include these topics in their curriculum. In addition, teachers mentioned that at the upper grades they had to teach the grade-level Standards, as well as building foundational skills students did not get in the previous math curriculum. They also expressed that long-term student contact, or looping, made implementing the CCLS more challenging as they taught new curriculum two years in a row. Although they found implementing the new Standards challenging, they feel that the new Standards are valuable and would benefit the students who experience CCLS-aligned instruction from Kindergarten up. Similarly, the special education and AIS teachers have found the shift challenging as they work with students who are lowest performing. However, they appeared committed to adapting the curriculum for their students and exposing them to the grade-level Standards, as well as providing instruction at their performance levels.

Literacy. Much of the discussion of the CCLS focused on mathematics, rather than literacy. Teachers noted that regardless of the Standards, literacy has the same fundamentals and that students need to be able to decode and comprehend what they read. Teachers also stated that identifying learning gaps in literacy is more difficult and that the rigor of the comprehension questions has proven difficult for students who struggle with literacy. The principal identified other areas of concern in implementing the literacy CCLS, such as vocabulary, increasing the amount of writing for students, and changing the types of questions used to focus on students explanations of their understanding. Both the principal and the teachers expressed that working with the CCLS and the shifts was a continual learning process for themselves, one which they were working on together.

One teacher summed up the frustration around the demands of the CCLS, stating, "We're reading a third-grade novel, chapter book . . . because it's a good kid's book and you want to expose them to that. I want them reading. I don't want them reading because they have to answer which detail from paragraph seven supports the main idea from paragraph three. I don't think that that is going to create a child that is a lifelong reader and loves reading. I think reading books does that and talking about the books does that. . . . Because if they don't understand what they're reading, it doesn't matter if they can find paragraph seven. It just doesn't make any difference. They just need to be able to read and understand the major elements that go into making a story, in my opinion. And you can nuance it later. I think it's a little early, truthfully, for that kind of stuff."

In the one literacy lesson we observed, a number of different student tasks were utilized, including answering multiple choice vocabulary inference questions using poetry, Readers'

Theater using a Brazilian folk tale, and students working in pairs to identify the theme of the selection. Throughout the observed lesson, classroom management strategies included the use of cold calls, timers, pair work, and think time. Students were asked to write a single sentence with their partners.

The increased focus on mathematics in implementing the CCLS may be due in part to the strengths of the teachers. This was also reflected in the school's overall stronger performance in mathematics than literacy on the prior year's state assessments.

Teachers' Instruction and Practice

Our folks districtwide have been going to a professional development opportunity that teaches instructional strategies that are very user friendly, very practical, and that make a lot of sense in terms of instructional strategies. What it does is provide a common platform, a common terminology, and a common way of instructing across the district. So as students come up through each elementary and when they get to the middle school, they see the same types of instructional strategies. The teachers are talking the same language. - district administrator

Following the alignment of goals throughout the school and district, teachers' instructional practices and classroom management have been aligned through the use of a common professional development opportunity provided by a local group. Teachers, administrators and district officials all mentioned these strategies, and they were evident in each of the classrooms observed. The common set of instructional and classroom management strategies provide consistency within the building and between buildings as students' progress through the grades. Direct observations of these strategies included the use of timers for student activities, having students repeat directions, the inclusion of thinking time, the use of partner and small group conversations prior to answering questions, and cold calling on students to keep them all on their toes and engaged. Teachers probed students' thinking to explain answers and provided sufficient time for students to formulate answers.

In math class observations, lessons began with "morning math" and reviewing certain skills and problem solving. Teachers modeled problem solving and provided guided instruction, in which they elicited student input at each step. Teachers provided summaries of student thinking and feedback. In addition to guided instruction around problems projected on a white board, several teachers incorporated hands on and kinesthetic activities for students. Exit tickets, in which students had to correctly answer a question based on the lesson in order to leave, were observed in several classrooms

In the ELA observation, the teacher used many of these same classroom management strategies, including the use of a timer, partner work, and cold calls. This lesson also provided students with a variety of activities including choral reading, Readers Theater, partnering students to answer questions and having students answer multiple choice questions independently with their heads down. This allowed each student to respond and the teacher was able to easily see which students answered correctly.

Student Engagement.

It's a very kid oriented, and we talk about how we focus on the whole child . . . and the academics; that you have to have the [emotional support] in place and then they'll feel happy and safe to be here. - teacher

For the most part we all make personal connections with our kids and that's huge, too. When a kid can connect to you personally . . . you share with them and then they share with you. And they have that comfort level and trusting. It's nice for them to see that you're human. We're all here after school for the afterschool activities. A good majority of us stay to do the community things. Come back in June, you can see us marching in the town parade. I feel like a celebrity, because I've been here 17 years, so everyone knows me. - teacher

These two quotes represent the school's three main focuses on student engagement: creating a safe and welcoming, child-centered school environment; creating positive relationships; and reaching out to the community. The commitment to providing a fun, safe environment for students to learn academic and social and emotional skills was reiterated in descriptions of the weekly whole school morning meeting. During these meetings teachers put on skits, sing songs, and role play, with a focus on character development and anti-bullying. This commitment to making learning fun was also seen in engaging academic activities, including several whole school math activities: classes earning popcorn for math fact mastery and a family feud style fluency competition. Several teachers and administrators mentioned an initiative to incorporate art with science, technology, engineering and math. The principal explained this initiative as incorporating many of the hands-on science projects teachers have been doing for years. One of the big projects in the upper grades will be students drafting a proposal for revamping a local amusement park that they hope to present to the owners.

On the social-emotional side, the team that focuses on creating a positive testing and learning environment also provides child-centered activities throughout the school. As our visit was conducted not long before the state ELA assessments, the team was busy planning events around the test, including songs, a music video, special breakfast treats and confetti. As described in the vignette, each of the primary grade classrooms adopts an intermediate grade classroom to bring treats to and cheer them on. Other team activities included a reading parade and a celebration of learning picnic for the end of the school year. Afterschool activities appear to be a big draw for students, including spaghetti dinners, the Thanksgiving feast, astronomy nights, and greeting a local international sports star.

At the classroom level, teachers were observed using a variety of student engagement strategies, including small group and pair work, and cold calls. Hands on and kinesthetic activities were observed in some classrooms. Math lessons were particularly fast paced, moving through several activities during each block.

Assessment and Data-Driven Instruction (DDI). Teachers mentioned the use of student data in their goal setting and instruction. Sources of data included district-created quarterly math assessments designed to align with the CCLS and match the rigor of the state assessments. These assessments are given using Scantron sheets, and the results are immediately available via the

district's web-based data system to allow teachers to pinpoint where students are struggling. In literacy, teachers mentioned purchased assessment programs such as Fountas & Pinnell and the DIBELS for literacy, which are also tracked in the district's data system. In addition to formal assessments, teachers mentioned formative assessments and student observations in their instructional decision making. Teachers were observed using formative assessment techniques in the classroom, including the use of exit tickets. Teachers also track behavior data with logs in the classroom or help students develop the ability to keep and track these data themselves.

Data are used to determine which students will receive AIS interventions, and these decisions are made by looking at student data across subject areas. Teachers and school leaders shared that these decisions also include teachers' knowledge of the whole child and whether outside factors may be temporarily affecting their school performance.

Student Social and Emotional Developmental Health

> *Physical, social, and emotional safety . . . comes first. Because if we don't get [that] . . . we can't ever get to anything else.* - principal

Positive Youth Development Priorities and Strategies. The principal, superintendent, and many school staff mentioned the part of the district's overarching goal that includes student physical, social and emotional well-being, which reflects the whole-child focus of both school and district. Educators at the school level work to accomplish this goal through the creation of a caring school climate in which adults make personal connections with students through the modeling of mutual respect and compassion among adults and through clear behavior expectations that are consistently enforced by all. They also work on meeting these goals through the work of the team for positive testing and learning in planning school-wide events, through afterschool activities, and through the weekly morning program that focuses on character education, with teacher led skits, songs and role play. In addition to work with small groups and individual students, the school social worker also provides a district-developed character education curriculum. The priorities of this curriculum are on good citizenship, anti-bullying, personal safety, alcohol and drug prevention, and seven habits of highly effective students.

Other efforts are designed to create relationships among students across grades. The fifth and sixth grade students serve as buddies for the primary classrooms to do arts and crafts activities and read with them. The older students serve as role models for the younger students. The primary grades return the favor when they adopt an older classroom for the assessment celebration activities. High school students also serve as mentors and role models in the building.

Academic Support, Mental Health, Physical Health, and Social Services. The student support team is made up of the principal, a special education teacher, school psychologist, social worker, nurse, speech therapist, and occupational therapist and meets with classroom teachers who bring student data. This group meets once a week and develops pre-referral action plans for students experiencing academic, social or medical difficulties. These plans identify a student's current functional level, including areas of strengths and needs, and describe specific actions to support the student. Parents are involved in this process, receive a copy of the plan, and meet with the team regularly to review progress, preventing students from being lost in the shuffle.

Academic interventions are provided by AIS teachers in literacy and math. Despite increased caseload size, the principal's focus on making AIS a flexible, short-term intervention has allowed the AIS teachers to deliver more services in the classroom. In one observed math lesson, the AIS teacher provided support by checking in, asking questions, and giving reminders to specific students. The push-in support helps preserve continuity of students' academics.

The social worker is able to meet with students during their lunches, at recess, or after school, thus preserving instructional time. The social worker and nurse run an afterschool "friends" club that provides social time for students with adult support. The superintendent identified this process as a key step that prevents students from being identified for special education services, although students who are not making progress after interventions are put in place will be referred to the committee on special education.

In addition to looking after the social and emotional development of students, it is clear that the adults also support one another inside and outside of school. For example, teachers described meeting in hallways to share instructional tips and strategies, meeting after school as teams to develop curricular plans, and developing school wide programs on the needs of special education students, particularly students with autism, because a teacher requested it based on her classroom needs.

Family Engagement Strategies and Community Partnerships

> *One of the things that we're very proud of is our connections to the community. We really work hard to provide realistic, authentic, learning opportunities for our students and so we feel that's a way of contextualizing. Now it's the Common Core, but whatever the body of knowledge and experiences that a student needs to take with them, it's important to contextualize that, to bring meaning to that. So we think that one of the ways to do that is to bring people from the outside in and also to bring our kids out into the community as well and work with different experiences or people who can provide that contextual piece.*
> — district administrator

Educators in both the district and school work to provide connections with the community. A district administrator noted that elementary students work with staff of a local greenhouse, both at the school and on-site. Career fairs with parents are another way the district tries to connect students with local resources. The district also engages the community through events held in partnership with the booster club and events to recognize local seniors and firefighters. District leaders explained that these events are ways to bring people into the schools, have discussions about education, and build new relationships. They also noted that although only about twenty-five percent of residents have students in the schools, the school budget typically passes by seventy-five percent, which they attribute to the educational experiences they provide, as well as the partnerships in the community.

Although the superintendent mentioned that there are few community agencies in the local area, both district- and school-level leaders have worked to partner with some of them. Several agencies were mentioned as providers of professional development for teachers on specific disabilities and behavior needs. Both district and school level staff mentioned that they connect students with local social service agencies, such as Catholic Charities. The school may also refer

students for mental health support with a local organization. Churches in the area donate school supplies for students.

The district has partnered with several local colleges. For example, one was included in the redesign of the writing curriculum in order to assure that students would be able to write at a post-secondary level after graduation. Graduate students in education from another college serve as reading buddies at the school, working with students from second through sixth grade after school.

In terms of family engagement, there are many activities at the school aimed at parents. An annual Thanksgiving feast was mentioned as one of the largest activities, with parent volunteers cooking and taking part in a family-style meal. The celebration of learning picnic in the spring was also mentioned as a big draw for parents, who help grill and run games for students. Another draw was a recent spaghetti dinner. Teachers reported taking part in afterschool events for families. Teachers have also offered parents activities around understanding the new CCLS so they can support their children at home, and the district offers programs for parents on the curriculum and issues such as internet safety. Teachers, support staff and principals mentioned multiple ways of connecting with parents, including home visits, and including them in decision making around their child's education. The building leadership team also mentioned that they have a parent on the team.

In a Nutshell

From district administrators to teachers, many educators mentioned there was no place else they would want to work. This sentiment is a testament to the positive climate, strong relationships, and child-centered focus of both the school and district. Teachers feel supported and trusted by the administration and, in turn, expressed trust and support of administrators. There is clear alignment of vision and goals from the school board to the central office, to the school and to the classroom. These goals include increasing academic achievement, as well as providing students with the social-emotional and behavior development the district believes will support their graduates' abilities to not only pursue post-secondary education or work, but also to be independent and productive citizens. The proactive leadership of the central office resulted in rewriting the district curriculum to align with Common Core Learning Standards prior to the state mandate, giving teachers a head start in implementation. District leadership was also proactive in adapting their existing staff evaluation system to meet the requirements of new Annual Professional Performance Review mandates, but in a way that fit with the district's cooperative environment. District and school leaders send teachers the message of trust and encourage them to focus on teaching and learning rather than on state assessments.

Appendix A

A detailed description of the methods used in this study are provided in the Methods and Procedures Report (Wilcox et al., 2014). Here we provide a brief overview of the types of data collected at Eagle Bluff.

Table 1. Data Collected

Educators	No of Data collection points
District Administrators	
Superintendent	1
Assistant Superintendent	1
Others	1
School administrators	
Principals	1
Others	4
Support staff	1
Teachers	
Grade 3	2
Grade 4	4
Grade 5	3
Others	3
Specialists	
Special education	1
Others	1
TOTAL	**23**

Appendix B

A school climate survey was designed to explore how the school's personnel feel about several topics related to the quality of school life and character. The survey was distributed electronically to all staff members prior to the visit. A total of 35 responses (approximately 60% response rate) were received. To keep responses anonymous, identifying information was not collected. School personnel were asked to respond to a series of statements about their perceptions of the school's principal, their beliefs about student behavior at the school, their beliefs about student learning and engagement, and their beliefs about school climate and respect. They were asked to respond on a 4-point scale (Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, or Strongly Disagree). Responses are reported in aggregate form, as a percentage of total responses, in Table 2 and summarized below.

Attitudes and Beliefs about the Principal (Part A). Overall, respondents were overwhelmingly positive in their responses about the principal. All (100%) of respondents reported that they

either agreed or strongly agreed that "the principal supports and encourages staff members" (74% strongly agreeing) and that "they in turn support and respect her" (66% strongly agreeing). Additionally, the vast majority (86%) strongly agreed that "the principal sets and communicates what kind of school she wants."

Attitudes and Beliefs about Student Behavior (Part B). Most respondents responded positively about student behavior. When asked whether they agreed or disagreed that the "principal enforces student conduct rules," 100% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. Additionally, 97% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that "school staff consistently enforce student behavior rules." Respondents also expressed positive beliefs that "students at the school respect and respond to adults"; all (100%) strongly agreed or agreed with this statement.

Attitudes and Beliefs about Engagement with Learning (Part C). Respondents were very positive in their responses about student learning. When asked whether they agreed or disagreed that "students are actively engaged in learning at school," all (100%) respondents strongly agreed or agreed with this statement. Additionally, 100% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "I believe all students can learn." All responders agreed or strongly agreed that "it was part of their responsibility to help all students learn and achieve at this school," with 89% strongly agreeing.

Respondents' Attitudes and Beliefs about School Climate and Respect (Part D). Almost all respondents were positive in their beliefs about cooperative work and mutually respectful relationships within Eagle Bluff. Almost all respondents (94%) reported agreement (Strongly Agree or Agree) with statements about "feeling accepted and respected by other staff members" and all (100% agreed or strongly agreed) responded that "students respect one another and interact in positive ways." Additionally, 97% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that "staff members work cooperatively at this school." Respondents generally agreed with a statement (82% agreed or strongly agreed) about "receiving a great deal of support from parents."

Table 2: Staff Beliefs

Staff members were asked to what extent they agree with the following statements:	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
A. Responses concerning the principal				
Overall, the principal consistently supports and encourages staff members.	74%	26%	---	---
The majority of staff members respects and supports the principal.	66%	34%	---	---
The principal sets priorities, makes plans, and sees that plans are carried out.	74%	23%	---	---
The principal communicates to the staff what kind of school he or she wants.	86%	14%	---	---
B. Responses concerning student conduct				
My principal enforces school rules for student conduct.	83%	17%	---	---
My principal backs me up when I address student behavior.	89%	11%	---	---

Rules for student behavior are consistently enforced by staff in this school.	74%	23%	---	---
Overall, the students at my school respect and respond to adults.	74%	26%	---	---
C. Responses concerning student engagement & learning				
Overall, our students are actively engaged in learning while at school.	80%	20%	---	---
I believe all students can learn.	86%	14%	---	---
I am certain I am making a difference in the lives of the students attending this school.	74%	26%	---	---
I feel it is part of my responsibility to help all students learn and achieve at this school.	89%	11%	---	---
D. Responses concerning school climate & respect				
I receive a great deal of support from parents for the work that I do.	24%	59%	18%	---
Staff members routinely cooperate and work together at this school.	71%	26%	---	---
I feel accepted and respected by most staff members.	60%	34%	6%	---
I feel it is part of my responsibility to help students treat each other respectfully.	94%	6%	---	---
Overall, students respect each other and interact in positive ways.	68%	32%	---	---
Overall, school staff members respect each other and interact in positive ways.	54%	43%	---	---

Reference

Wilcox, K.C., Schiller, K.S., Durand, F., Lawson, H.A., & Gregory, K. (2014). *Common Core Odds-Beating Study: Methods and Procedures*. A report for the New York State Education Department as part of the School Improvement Study. University at Albany, State University of New York.