

# Practices & Processes of Odds-Beating Elementary Schools: A Cross-Case Research Brief

*What processes and practices distinguish odds-beating from typically performing elementary schools?*

## Introduction

Climates and cultures are important organizational features of elementary schools<sup>1</sup>.

The study of odds-beating schools reported in this brief was designed to examine aspects of elementary schools where students have performed better than expected on NYS assessments, particularly the 2012 math and ELA assessments, the first aligned with the Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS).

The primary research question was: What processes and practices distinguish odds-beating from typically performing elementary schools?

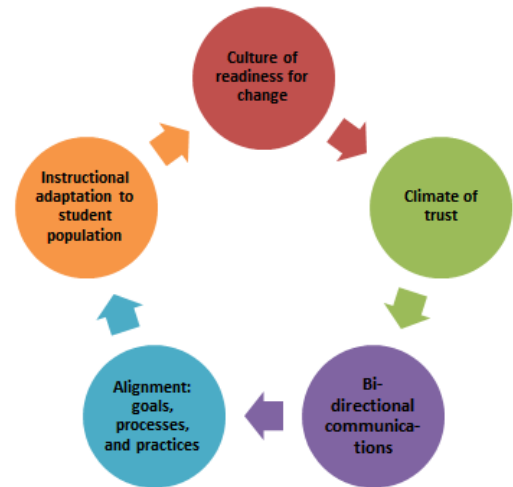
This brief captures the most salient findings from a mixed-method multiple case study designed to answer this question. It details differences found between six odds-beating and three typically performing ele-

mentary schools. The sample was drawn to compare and contrast schools with above-predicted student performance outcomes on CCLS-aligned assessments -- the “odds beaters” -- and schools with predicted student performance outcomes -- the “typical performers” -- on those same assessments.

School climates and cultures and how they are enacted were found to be distinct in some particular

ways in the schools we studied. Specifically we found that a climate of trust and a culture of readiness for change supported by bidirectional communications, aligned goals, processes, and practices, and instructional adaptations related to odds-beating performance.

Findings are summarized according to the priorities of the Diagnostic Tool for District and School Effectiveness (DTSDE) 2.0.



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## DTSDE Tenets

- District Leadership and Capacity
- School Leadership Practices and Decisions
- Curriculum Development and Support
- Teacher Practice and Support
- Student Social and Emotional Developmental Health
- Family and Community Engagement

1. Thapa, A., et al. (2013). A review of school climate research. *Review of Educational Research*, on-line first, DOI: 10.3102/0034654313483907

*Leadership is really about a few things: It's about communication; it's about relationship building; and it's also about following through on clear actions or goals, or both, so all those things are intertwined. The communication could be all aspects of communication: meeting with one person, talking to a group, e-mail, social media, large group meetings, and everywhere in between. But being a strong and consistent communicator is important for a leader.*

District Leader

*You can't lead anything unless there's a high level of trust between the staff and me. If that's not there, really kind of nothing else matters. That's the bedrock foundation.*

Principal

## District Leadership and Capacity

District leaders of odds-beating schools played critical roles in developing and nurturing a climate of trust across the district. They used two-way communication to provide information and direction on the purposes of organizational changes as well as to develop understanding and clarity about these changes.

They listened to school

leaders and staff to gather information before making decisions, particularly about instructional and curricular matters. And they used communications to present change as an opportunity to improve students' social, emotional, and intellectual development.

Proactive and adaptive, they led the development of aligned and coherent vi-

sions, missions, and goals and planned for implementing the CCLS, new Annual Professional Performance reviews (AP), and Data-Driven Instruction (DDI) in advance of the State mandated timelines.

In implementing these changes, they put a priority on teachers' and school leaders' autonomy as instructional leaders.

## School Leadership Practices and Decisions

Building leaders in the odds-beating schools played key roles in creating trusting environments, developing shared goals, and providing instructional leadership. They engage in two-way conversations with teachers, parents, and others and deliberately support teacher collaboration and relationship building.

In the odds-beating schools, principals were likely to have provided genuine

opportunities for teachers to collaborate in decision making – e.g., as members of school improvement teams. In these schools, teachers and principals shared common understandings of CCLS and APPR implementation. In contrast, in schools where principals engaged in more informal ways of involving teachers in decision making, teachers and principals did not seem to be as aligned regarding vision, mission,

and goals .

Teachers at odds-beating schools were more likely to identify their principal as supportive and to have opportunities to collaborate with colleagues, especially in grade-level teams. Such collaboration appears to have contributed to the development of relational trust found in odds-beating schools but found to be absent or inconsistent in typically performing schools.

## Curriculum Development & Support

School leaders and faculty in odds-beating schools reported being ready for CCLS curricular changes because they already had in place curriculum that was aligned to the CCLS and/or they had begun the CCLS implementation process early.

Teachers were more likely in the odds beaters than in the typical performers to work collaboratively to revise or redesign the curriculum to meet local needs by either adapting state rec-

ommended curriculum modules or combining other resources.

Few odds-beating schools adopted the state recommended curriculum modules in their entirety; rather, they used them as a resource, adapting them to fit into an already established curriculum, especially in ELA. More odds beaters adopted the math modules than the ELA modules, with educators saying that the modules helped them to

meet the challenge of teaching math in a new way.

In the odds beaters professional development programs were targeted and strategic. Teachers had autonomy to choose the professional development that they needed to fill in the gaps of moving to a CCLS-aligned curriculum; at the same time, administrators provided professional development that had everyone in the building "speaking the same language."

## Teacher Practice and Support

Instructional practices in odds-beating schools were distinct from those in typical performers in many ways, but overall the differences related to the emphasis on active cognitive engagement. For example, teachers in odds beaters used a larger variety of differentiation strategies, and these were more prevalent from classroom to classroom; they

focused more on higher-order thinking; and they stressed engaging students both cognitively and affectively.

Their differentiation strategies related to their use of materials, groupings, routines, and assessments. In contrast, their peers in typical performers spoke about challenges related to using differentiation strate-

gies when teaching the CCLS-aligned curriculum modules.

Through both the integration of interesting content and the rigor of academic activities, students in odds-beating schools were witnessed being actively engaged in learning.

*I absolutely feel that they are an excellent set of standards [i.e. CCLS], and I feel that I understand them very, very well. I feel that we have been given a lot of professional development around unpacking the Standards and understand them and understand that they are just that – standards not a curriculum.*

Teacher

## Student Social-Emotional Developmental Health

Odds-beating schools stood out from typical performers in the way their vision, mission, and goals have created a philosophical rationale for the social and emotional developmental health programming they provide to students and families.

These schools have developed programs to fit the unique needs of their student populations, and staff are trained in character development and positive behavior management.

The programming related to social and emotional developmental health is cohesive, formalized, and systematic.

In contrast, typically-performing schools did not tend to mention vision, mission, and goals related to student social-emotional developmental health or the use of support services. They discussed programs at length and all schools demonstrated that they have some sort of character

education program in place. Yet the difference is how those programs are implemented, to what degree they are implemented and integrated into the culture of the school, and to what degree faculty and staff are all part of the process. Typically-performing schools show that they are making progress, but that they are still working to systematize their programming.

## Family and Community Engagement

Odds-beating elementary schools were distinct from typical performers in three main ways with regard to family and community engagement.

First, they placed emphasis on developing relational trust with parents. Educators expressed believing that they needed support from parents and that they needed to help parents support

and nurture their children. They also understood the challenges some parents faced in being involved but were committed to reducing barriers to parent involvement.

Odds-beating school educators engaged in constructive, mutually beneficial, two-way communications with parents and families. Educators in the odds beaters reached

out to assist and support parents using positive communications and used a variety of strategies including home visits when appropriate.

Finally, odds-beating schools had more learning-oriented partnerships than their typically-performing peers. For example, they partnered with higher education institutions, churches, and a variety of other community-based organizations.

*Our mission here is building dreams, minds, and futures. With that we look at the whole child with everything that we do. The district, of course, is always working to increase student achievement whatever it takes. Dealing with the population we have here, it's very important not just to look at the academic side but to look at the physical, social, and emotional as well.*

School leader

## Considerations

The findings outlined on pages 2 and 3 lead to several considerations for practice, a selection of which follow:

### For District Leaders

- Focus on systems thinking, adult learning, action research, and data-driven, evidence-guided decision making to achieve priority goals, to learn, and to improve district-school leadership team meetings.
- Prioritize regular, high-quality communications focused on the district's vision, mission, and SMART goals with all relevant stakeholder groups (school boards, governmental officials, business leaders, community agency heads, parents, and students), while seeking their feedback on both the communications and the main message.
- Create a relationship with school leaders based on mutual respect, joint planning, and collaborative decision making. Explore how district officials can increase each building leaders' commitments, competencies, and performance.
- Communicate goals and priorities to school leaders, helping them to develop new mental models for improvement and preparing them to do the same with their respective constituencies.
- Lead and manage by "walking around," routinely visiting classrooms as permitted by union contracts. Expand each school leader's commitments to, and competencies for, staff evaluation, professional development, and performance improvement.

### For School Leaders

- Recognize that teaching-learning shifts require customized professional development. Anticipate how much time it will take to completely implement the CCLS and share this with district leaders, urging them to allocate human and fiscal resources accordingly.
- Act toward district office leaders as well as toward the staff in your building as you wish them to act toward you, remaining mindful that the quality of treatment and interaction among and between school and district staff is a key facilitator for innovation implementation in service of children.
- Communicate frequently both vertically and horizontally and encourage bi-directional communication to promote curricular and instructional alignment and meeting districtwide goals.

### For Teachers and Other School Staff

- Make your classroom a place where students take ownership of their learning as you empower them to make decisions and critically think about what and how they learn.
- Engage your students by providing clear and consistent norms for behavior, encouraging positive self-image through a focus on individual growth, and celebrating individual and collective accomplishments.
- Prioritize developing students' higher-order thinking through purposeful use of such approaches as student self-questioning, metacognitive writing activities, and self- and peer-evaluation.
- Use collaboration time effectively, focusing on positive outcomes for students.

*Kristen C. Wilcox  
Karen Gregory  
Janet I. Angelis  
Francesca T. Durand  
Kathryn S. Schiller  
Sarah Zuckerman  
Nisa Felicia  
Hal A. Lawson*

**School of Education  
University at Albany, SUNY  
1400 Washington Avenue  
Albany, NY 12222**

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