

### **Case Study: Blue Creek Elementary School**

#### **North Colonie Central School District**

*We move forward because we are allowed that opportunity to take that chance and realize this is the class in front of you, “What’s going to work for them?” It’s not what worked last year or years before; it’s in front of you.*

- teacher



#### **School Context**

Blue Creek is one of six elementary schools that make up the large suburban school district of North Colonie, one of two districts that serve Colonie, one of the most populous suburbs of the Capital Region of New York State. Colonie has a long history that dates back to its roots as a Dutch colony, once largely agricultural but always rich with crossroads to more urban and industrialized cities and towns. Now, its remaining farms and hamlets nestle within and between highways and shopping malls in an increasingly diverse community.

The district has seen considerable demographic changes over the past few decades, particularly with regard to the percentages of children growing up in poverty<sup>1</sup>, which has increased from close to 10% in 2006 to 20% in 2016. Thus, approximately one in 5 of the children attending schools in the district today lives in a household that falls below the federal poverty line; although this percentage lies well below the state average, for those in the district “it’s a huge sea change,” reported a district administrator. These changes have required shifts in vision, mission, and priorities as evidenced in the district’s “Legacy Planning”<sup>2</sup> efforts intended to “establish a vision for the school for a decade to come—addressing a wide range of issues including growing enrollment and the capacity of current buildings, along with future program aspirations for all students.”

Blue Creek’s K-6 building serves as a district magnet school for students with significant behavioral issues and is one of the most socioeconomically, culturally, and linguistically diverse elementary schools in the district. In addition to the rising percentages of students living in poverty, the percentage of English language learners (ELLs) attending Blue Creek has also risen from c. 4% to over 6% of the total school population. Of these students, the 33 ELLs studying at Blue Creek in the 2015-16 school year identified the following as their countries of origin: Armenia, China, Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Japan, Korea, Lebanon, Mexico, Pakistan, Puerto Rico, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Yemen, and Zimbabwe. So, while the school serves

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<sup>1</sup> One measure of poverty, and the one used here, is economic disadvantage (see definition at <https://data.nysed.gov/glossary.php?report=reportcards> ).

<sup>2</sup> [http://northcolonielegacyplan.com/North\\_Colonie\\_Legacy\\_Planning\\_Site/Legacy\\_Plan.html](http://northcolonielegacyplan.com/North_Colonie_Legacy_Planning_Site/Legacy_Plan.html)

a moderately higher than average percentage of students classified as “white,” it also serves a slightly higher than average percentage of students classified as “multiracial” or “other” (26% in comparison to the state average of 12%).

Student Demographics 2014-15: Blue Creek Elementary School, North Colonie Central School District

	Blue Creek ES	North Colonie CSD	New York State
Grades Served	K- 6	K-12	K-12
Total Enrollment	482	5,371	2,649,039
Economically Disadvantaged	24%	19%	54%
English Language Learners	6%	3%	8%
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution			
African-American	3%	5%	18%
Hispanic/Latino	4%	4%	25%
White	68%	73%	45%
Multiracial	6%	3%	2%
Other	20%	17%	10%

Demographic data are from the state report cards for 2014-5 (<https://data.nysed.gov/>).

Blue Creek met the criteria of “odds beating” in this study because the difference between ELLs’ expected and actual average performance based on the 2012-13 and 2013-14 English language arts (ELA) and mathematics state assessments was 1.78 standard deviations higher than that of other schools around the state with similar demographics and statistically significantly higher in several comparisons by grade and content area (ELA and math).

This case study<sup>i</sup> describes how district and school leaders and educators have approached serving ELLs, with the next section highlighting those processes and practices that were identified as being most salient to their relatively better ELL performance outcomes.

## Promising Practice Highlights

### Celebrating Diversity and Whole-Child Wellness

*Kids are encouraged to share, and teachers aren’t trying to get kids to fit in a mold -- the uniqueness of every kid is cherished.*

- principal

*This school is an eclectic group. It is heavily into character building, and we have a lot of programs and grants that help children to see the ramifications of their actions and to check before they make choices that may not be good for them, and it really shows in the community that the kids are special in that respect. We have a great international group, so we are lucky to have that world view of what goes on in other countries.*

- teacher

As a magnet school for students with behavioral challenges, Blue Creek ES has a long-standing tradition of celebrating each child’s uniqueness and supporting her or his emotional and social well-being. In this “Peaceable School” (a model for conflict resolution and positive behavior),

teachers attest to a shared belief that their primary roles are to embody acceptance of others' differences and to hold high expectations for each child's active participation in the classroom and school.

### **Leading to Build Teacher Efficacy and Commitment**

*Here they [district and school leaders] want us collaborating. They want us trying. They let us know, "Yes, there may be times that you will completely fall on your face and say, 'What was I thinking trying to implement that?'" But they encourage us to go out on that limb and to try and see what happens, because they know that when we continue to go out and try implementing new things, new thoughts, new strategies and we're bringing them together, we're talking about them, what was successful out of it, what was not, we just keep building and building and building.* - teacher

Teachers attest to school and district leaders who support their commitment to work hard to create a "great experience for kids." They do this in part by encouraging experimentation in the use of new programs and strategies in an environment where successes as well as failures are viewed as opportunities for learning. As leaders seek to staff positions in Blue Creek they look for people who are dedicated to putting each child first and working collaboratively to "institutionalize" best practices for their diverse community of learners, according to the principal.

### **Creating an Inclusive and Accessible Environment for ELLs**

*I can very easily slip in a scaffold for an ELL student. No one in the class knows that it is happening, but while they're typing I'm giving them sentence starters or I'm asking questions in the comment bar so they know how to guide their thinking and they're not just left with an open-ended question.* - teacher

Blue Creek teachers recognize that ELLs often need extra language scaffolding and have been provided a variety of multimodal resources to differentiate their lessons. Google Classroom accessories such as Google Translate are on ELLs' Chromebooks or iPads during classes to make content more accessible, and children are encouraged to help their ELL peers in using the technology, deciphering the tasks, and making sense of the content. ELLs also benefit from instructional programs supplemented by resources specifically for them; in addition they have access to resources available for their disabled peers, such as videos depicting content, that enhance their understandings of texts above their reading level.

### **A Closer Look**

These practices — celebrating diversity and whole-child wellness, leading to build teacher efficacy and commitment, and creating an inclusive and accessible environment for ELLs — are evident throughout the five dimensions that frame the study of which this case is one part. The sections below expand on each of these processes and practices within the context of the study's framework.

## Curriculum and Academic Goals

*It [Blue Creek ES] is very kid centered. I'm always worried about how the kid is feeling before the academics. If they're not into it the academics aren't going to happen. So it's making sure everybody's in a good place.*  
- teacher

Keeping academic goals high for ELLs while implementing the Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS) raised challenges for teachers at Blue Creek, as it did for their peers in other schools around the state and the country. Blue Creek teachers pointed to the specific language challenges the Standards pose for ELLs, particularly in ELA, saying, for example, “sometimes your hands are tied because of the language,” but also in math: “They get the math but they can’t read the [word] problem.” And while aligning the curriculum to the CCLS was still a work in progress at the time of this study, teachers pointed to a few approaches toward surmounting the challenges of doing so while making the curriculum as accessible to ELLs as possible. These approaches included: district leaders’ taking a hands-on approach in getting insight on what was needed in the classroom while keeping child wellness at the center of academic goal setting; using an experimental and eclectic approach to curriculum revision; and working toward coherence and clarity of the curriculum.

### **Hands-on and Child-Centered Goal Setting**

*For me it's the child first and then the learning will happen after.*

*That's not the main priority goal in this school -- to do well on a state test -- but our primary goal is the child and the well-being of the child.*  
- classroom teachers

The superintendent attested to a hands-on approach to goal setting by “every Tuesday going out to different buildings” along with the assistant superintendent and human resources director to check the pulse of the district. The product of such work then is formulated into goals, one of which is to expand the coteaching model from the middle school to the elementary schools and, in alignment with this effort, to increase attention to supporting teachers’ collaboration in planning teams.

*We're bringing in the teacher teams at their convenience for a series of four days over the course of the summer for them to look at how they can start their collaborative planning together. We're also making it at the elementary level a priority, which is really hard in the schedule to give them collaborative planning time during the day, so they can sustain the model that we start in the summer. That's a huge focus, so we're trying to put curriculum dollars behind it as well as time during the school year for us.*  
- superintendent

While such goals are a focus, the primary goal at Blue Creek and one that aligns to the district and Blue Creek mission is to provide a safe learning environment that fosters children’s emotional and social well-being. Teachers and school leaders expressed a shared belief that such a focus is right and would contribute to meeting high academic goals. As one teacher illustrated in her response to a question about goals, “It is to prioritize children and not spending four hours making a [curriculum] binder.”

### **Curriculum Adaptations: An Eclectic Approach**

In the spirit of nurturing innovative thinking about meeting ELLs' needs as they approach the curriculum, Blue Creek leaders and teachers take an eclectic approach. One approach has been to adopt a math program that provides specific guidance on how to adapt the curriculum for ELLs. A classroom teacher explained that "it's specifically written to support children who are learning the English language. It's a brief little piece of the page but it's detailed and makes sense." This same program another teacher described as offering "for the ESL student . . . a lot of visual, a lot of modeling, manipulatives, drawings and so forth, which is always good for them and good for everybody." The same rationale was used when adopting the science program, which according to the principal was "actually originally designed for students with special needs, but they realized it's really great for everybody to learn in this way."

To tackle the challenges of shifting to the CCLS specifically, some teachers chose to departmentalize, and so in the words of one teacher, "became masters of our content area instead of trying to juggle it all and we did that for a number of years." While this teacher noted that "there are pros and cons to it," and in the 2015-16 school year they chose to return to the old cross-disciplinary model, this experience and experiment speaks to the eclectic approach used to adapt the curriculum not only to every child's needs, but to teachers' needs as well.

### **Curriculum Alignment and Clarity**

Aligning the curriculum to the CCLS and in ways that made sense for the population North Colonie serves was not a linear process across all levels and all content areas. Rather, according to a district leader, "Across our six buildings there was a different level of readiness for the Common Core," and ELA curriculum mapping lagged behind math for a variety of reasons. As one Blue Creek teacher explained, however, after several years the district's efforts to revamp the curriculum have some pay-offs for teachers: "In little ways it [instruction] changed for the better. We've been given more curriculum. Before, we didn't have a lot of curriculum and we were creating it on our own. So over the years, they've given us more curriculum."

Blue Creek teachers, as one example below shows, generally expressed a clear understanding of what they were supposed to teach and how it contributed to children's learning across the grades.

*We have very clear curriculum, and I know what my colleagues are doing in K-2, because when those students walk in the door, they're where they're supposed to be on entering third grade. And every grade level's very respectful of that. So I know when my students leave third grade in June this is where they are needed to be, and if they're not, there has been a lot of documentation and a lot of support given to these students. So that fourth grade teacher's going to know child X isn't where he should be, but this is what's been going on with him K through three, and the support's going to continue.*

Nonetheless, for those who teach ELLs, the curriculum is still considered extremely challenging. Fortunately, the ENL<sup>3</sup> (English as a New Language) teacher, seen as the "go-to" expert on all things ELL-related for the building, "is so, so good at what she does" and "knows the curriculum" in the words of her colleagues, strives to provide teachers with support to make

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<sup>3</sup> English as a New Language (ENL) has replaced the term English as a Second Language (ESL) in NYS.

adaptations as needed. Even with this support, the ENL teacher herself noted that the curriculum, particularly in the higher grades, “is so incredibly challenging” and taxes teachers who are “feeling pressure” and who feel they “don’t have enough time” to do what is needed to make the curriculum accessible to ELLs.

These challenges are mitigated by the close monitoring of the schools by district leaders, clear and consistent messages about maintaining a child-centered focus, encouragement of experimentation, and team-generated efforts to revise the curriculum and associated programs.

### **Staff Selection, Leadership and Capacity Building**

*This school from day one, from back in 1988 to today, is truly a dedicated group of faculty and staff without a doubt. I’ve worked for 28 years here. I’ve seen teachers leave as they retire. They miss it. They’re sad. Our new teachers that come on board are just immersed right into it. It’s a very, very dedicated school.* - teacher

How is such dedication fostered in Blue Creek? A few particular processes and practices stand out: First, North Colonie and Blue Creek leaders tended to voice alignment in their vision and mission for the school, and these centered on proactively embracing the changing demographic of the community while staying both focused on the well-being of children as well as providing a challenging academic experience. Second, the Blue Creek principal, and according to reports of those who knew the principal before her, is likely to recommend for hire educators who fit the profile of high dedication, particularly to children with diverse social, emotional, and academic needs. The current principal reported that she tends to select future Blue Creek educators in part based on their willingness to be team players. Complementing these leadership and staffing qualities, a few capacity-building strategies were reported as key to Blue Creek’s functioning, namely, the use of teaming and collaborative mechanisms for sharing work, and the allowance of measured teacher autonomy and exercise of professional judgment.

### **Consistency of Vision and Mission**

*All students are provided the opportunity and necessary support to engage in relevant, challenging work, which contributes to their academic and social growth and development. All staff, teachers and administrators are part of a larger learning community working together to build collective capacity in order to provide a high-quality, relevant, equitable education for all.* - district mission statement

The clarity and consistency of district and school leaders’ vision and mission guides practice at Blue Creek. Teachers’ and support staff employees’ understandings of the vision and mission were consistent in their attention to selfless dedication to high academic standards and the well-being of each and every child:

*We’re all supportive. No one’s out to just to make themselves look good. It’s never been like that.*

*She [the principal] wants every child to be what they can be, the best they can be. She wants this to be a safe learning environment where they’re comfortable and able to learn.*

Since the norm in the district and the school is serving children from various backgrounds and with very different needs, Blue Creek educators describe a culture of compassion and one where ELLs are generally not seen as a drag on the pace of learning, but an asset in line with the district mission.

*We're very compassionate towards all. We're always trying to make sure that people from low incomes have what they need. That's a really big thing here at this school. We're always doing different things for different students who need it. We have a tight family relationship with everybody.*

*When I first started here, there were very few ENL learners, very few. That population has grown over the years, which has been great! because it really diversifies our school, which is wonderful, and so we enjoy that.*

### **Staffing for Commitment and Dedication to Diverse Students**

For teachers to feel comfortable in this environment and to be successful, leaders select carefully who can work at Blue Creek, with an eye toward commitment and dedication. First and foremost, district and school leaders filter their candidates to those who, in the words of the principal, are “amazing.” They rely upon these amazing individuals to be dedicated to each other, the children, and their families.

*So we look for people who are positive, cheerful, hardworking, excited, motivated to join the team.* - teacher

*We hire amazing people and we rely a lot on the fact that we hire amazing people to do a lot of the lift rather than having fabulous curriculum sometimes. We rely on people being unbelievably dedicated to providing a great experience for kids. I feel like we're really moving in the direction of institutionalizing a lot of our good work rather than relying on the work of individuals.* - principal

In addition to this quality of generally high commitment, looking to teachers' beliefs about difference is a key practice when hiring or seeking to retain employees. The principal recounted a time when children came to her to call out a substitute teacher for making comments about a child the substitute assumed was Asian yet was not. As an example of how this kind of situation is handled, the principal explained the issue to the substitute, who reportedly didn't understand the problem, so the substitute was never invited back.

### **Valuing Learning from Each Other and from Failure**

*I think everybody here feels so comfortable with each other that I can go over and completely admit this lesson just bombed. I did terrible. The kids are lost. “How did it go for you?” and if it worked, “What did you do? What did I do that maybe could be changed?” because we all reflect, but knowing and feeling comfortable to be able to go to your colleagues and openly and honestly reflect and be able to take that constructive feedback and not take it as, “Oh, my goodness, I didn't do a good job.”* - teacher

Blue Creek teachers tend to talk about their opportunities to collaborate and take ownership over their work as enjoyable parts of their jobs. A sixth-grade teacher, for example, described their



routines of meeting prior to the beginning of the school year to come up with “a good game plan” to make sure they clarified “specific expectations” for their classes, with associated “checklists” so “students knew right when they came in where everything was, what the expectation was. It was very consistent and coherent among us.” These kinds of teacher-initiated collaborations are ones the principal supports, as explained by one teacher,

*What I love about her [the principal] is she’s not a micromanager. She respects us. We respect her. She knows we’re all doing our job, that we love what we do, and there’s no one slacking.*

This kind of collaboration occurs in a district climate that the superintendent described as encouraging being “very open and honest about where we are in a culture that doesn’t judge, but that just says, ‘Let’s look at it; let’s look at what we need, then how do we best fill the gaps?’ and then changing our structures all the time.” In this environment, teachers at Blue Creek expressed a desire to communicate with each other about successes as well as failures, all in an effort focused squarely on how to help children be as successful as possible. A classroom teacher illustrated this recurrent theme saying, “We feel like the more united we are, the more consistency the kids feel and the more successful they are.”

In sum, consistency in vision, mission, and commitments were related directly to staffing and capacity-building processes and practices to meet ELLs’ needs.

### **Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements**

*I want to share about what I feel before and entering the school year. So before it’s I have summer holiday. First I was so nervous because my English was not very well, and I was like, “What if they don’t understand me?” and I like the little guy who don’t understand English now. And then I thought about, “What if there’s other student who come from another country?” and I was like better, and then I thought about, “Oh, I can teach them Chinese and I will make friends.” I was so excited at the, the like I think like one week before the school year start and when I walk into school on the first day, I was like, “Ooohh, this is our school.”*  
- ELL student

ELLs like the one quoted above receive a genuine welcoming to Blue Creek, one that starts them on their way to being part of the “peaceable” community where their unique contributions are valued and they receive ample support in figuring out the routines and resources that will support their learning. Teachers attest that the secret sauce behind ELLs’ academic performance resides in their ENL teacher’s untiring commitment and adeptness at communicating effectively with the children, their classroom teachers, other support staff, and the principal and parents as needed. In the mainstream classroom, ELLs are taught by teachers who are expected to and do differentiate their lessons in a variety of ways, and students have access to technologies that assist their access to the content. Blue Creek also offers ELLs both pull-out ENL instruction as well as push-in as needed, with assistance from reading specialists, also as needed.



## **ENL Instructional Programming**

The qualities needed of an ENL teacher (and sole one, in the case of Blue Creek) span pedagogical knowledge in ENL, but also other content areas as well as a mélange of personal qualities that make her approachable to children and other teachers as well as parents. The Blue Creek ENL teacher embodies these qualities and with a style of calm caring. Teacher after teacher attested to the ENL teacher's essential role in supporting their ELLs' adjustment to the school, integration in the school community, and academic success. As one teacher described her, "She's excellent. She's the reason why this whole thing goes down," and another described her expansive understanding as a true asset to the school: "She knows the whole curriculum across the board in every grade. So she is ready to support. She's ready to make any kind of adaptations that need to be made."

While staffing constraints precluded the use of a coteaching model at the time of this study, in response to state regulations teachers were to begin piloting one in 2016-17 in particular classes. Meanwhile the instructional program follows a pull-out with some push-in model for ENL instruction. The ENL teacher described her approach toward planning instruction:

*I try to follow what the classroom teachers are doing but I use my own materials. If I know the classroom teacher is focusing on a fictional unit, fables, well I have my own material. I always teach this anyway, but they give me their lesson plans, a lot of them, or I will just talk with them in person. If I know that this week they're doing fables, then I'm going to concentrate on fables with my lesson plans, because a lot of my students still need that time in my classroom.*

The lubricant for the program's success relies upon good communications between teachers and reliance upon teachers' professional judgement to provide the appropriate instruction based on students' needs. As one teacher described it, "She [the ENL teacher] might take them after the concept's introduced to explain further; and she pulls them out, pushes in, so it's a variety of teaching methods."

## **Adapting and Differentiating in the Classroom**

In a culture that embraces acceptance of difference and change as well as encourages teachers to make professional judgements and work collaboratively, instructional adaptations are not only encouraged, but expected. In the mainstream classroom, teachers utilize, in the words of one, "a lot of visuals, a lot of modeling, manipulatives, drawings and so forth," and they use Chromebooks and other technologies that are in the hands of children to use in making sense of content. The ELL students' words highlighted below explain how their teacher's use of multimodal resources, small group activities, and technologies help their learning.

*We do experiment and we can like sometimes we watch a video and take notes. That's my favorite part, yeah, and we like it's kind a cool when the whole notebook is done and we write with a lot of things, yeah, and we have small groups which are lumped together.*

*It helps me with the Chromebook. And she'll, if I ask her [teacher] for help, she could um like answer me back on the computer, like she could type a comment on the computer and that's how we like I would compare and she helps me like that.*

Ultimately, as one teacher explained, “It comes down to knowing our children. We know when our ELL students need the scaffold. We know when they need to be pulled into that small group for reading the text because they can’t do it independently, and that’s a lot of it.” Overall, the Blue Creek approach toward instruction is reliant upon good communications among teachers, with students and their parents, and at times with other support staff. It is also reliant upon the willingness and skill of teachers to monitor ELLs’ understanding, engage them actively in the classroom, and be willing to differentiate as needed.

### **Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis and Use of Data**

*This district suffers from the disease of “if it can be done, we can do it better.” - principal*

As explained earlier, Blue Creek educators see their roles as not only monitors of academic performance, but monitors of children’s well-being and every aspect of their school experience that might contribute to it. The principal and teachers use a variety of tools and strategies to monitor and use data to “do it better,” in the words of the principal. One strategy is to support learning through delicate handling of ELL performance data. Another is to engage in systematic analysis of variations in things like parent participation in school events. Yet another is to administer and report benchmark and other formative assessment data with open and honest follow-up conversations around successes as well as failures. They also seek out new technologies and programs that help with the collection, analysis, and dissemination of data.

### **First and Foremost: The Child’s Well-Being**

In alignment with the vision and mission for the district and school, the grading of ELLs is handled delicately. According to the ENL teacher, classroom teachers are encouraged to “grade on content not form, so they might not look at how grammatical [a student’s written response to a test prompt]” is. In this way, ELLs’ report card grades represent teachers’ best assessment of their content understanding, and for beginning English learners narrative descriptions are provided instead of a grade.

### **Variations in Participation and Performance to Drive Improvement**

According to a district leader, the principal is “constantly looking and using her faculty meetings for [sharing data analysis]. ‘Okay, here’s a problem that I identified because of the data. What are some things that we can try?’” For example, the principal noted gaps in attendance at open houses and parent teacher conferences and then engaged in an intervention:

*She [the principal] was looking at who is coming to open-house night, who’s coming to conferences, who’s not, and realizing which subpopulations and which families weren’t able to get to those. So she worked with the transportation director to get a school bus to go to some of these populated apartment complexes and bring the people, because they didn’t necessarily have a way to get a ride to school for these things. - a district leader*

Complementing these strategies, Blue Creek teachers also gather a variety of benchmark and formative assessments, and ELLs take the same assessments as their peers, with reading benchmarks administered in September, January, and May. These are used to identify, “sight word growth, letter sounds, knowledge of letters, and . . . progress with reading,” according to a

classroom teacher. In math, ELLs take chapter tests and a middle and end-of-year assessment on the computer, at which time they are offered the accommodation of question read alouds. Teachers provide “benchmark profile sheets” to the principal and upload their letter grades to the online portal called “Infinite Campus” that allows for the sharing of data. A reading specialist explained how data are shared with the classroom and ENL teacher:

*Usually once we do assessments, we record all of our students on a class form and return it to the teacher, and usually at some point we end up touching base with the ENL teacher in person or through email to let her know about student progress. She’ll ask us, “How are they doing?” It’s just really very informal, but we kind of have an open line of communication, too, because we do share so many students, so we do just have an open conversation with her or emails especially.*

### **Technologies for Data Collection and Use**

The principal explained that in an effort to be more systematic in their assessments of children’s learning, clickers and class sets of Chromebooks have been purchased. Blue Creek children, including ELLs, as mentioned earlier, use Google Classroom, which provides teachers access to children’s responses at the end of class, providing important formative assessment data in real time. In addition, programs like the new science program are chosen because they include accessories like “I-checks” to provide formative assessment data.

While district and school leaders alike attested to being “behind with where we want to be with our understanding and use of data,” they are also on the path toward encouraging the use of data more systematically to inform instruction and adjustments as needed to benefit ELL students.

### **Recognitions, Interventions and Adjustments**

*I’ll tell teachers, “Don’t make a child choose between respecting you or respecting themselves,” because if I had to pick – I’d vote for the kid every time. - principal*

*Our kids love coming to school, and when it’s school vacation week, we have kids who literally get upset because they won’t be here. - teacher*

The Blue Creek principal provides a clear vision for the school: “Everything we do needs to be in support of them [students] developing a genuine, positive self-concept. It’s not like everyone gets a trophy. It’s about everyone supporting positive behavior in a way that’s going to let them develop this positive self-concept in a genuine way.” This emphasis on positive behavior and developing self-esteem filters through the ways children and adults at Blue Creek are recognized for their efforts, the ways interventions are approached, and the kinds of adjustments that are made to accommodate individual students’ needs. It begins with a rooting in the Peaceable School model.

### **The Peaceable School: Recognizing Contributions to a Culture of Kindness and Acceptance**

*The Peaceable Schools program. It’s part of the lifeblood of the culture of the building of Blue Creek. What I really like about it and what I mean by ‘lifeblood’ is, it’s not just, “Okay, I’m the teacher and I worry about your academic concerns, and you’re the counselor over here and you worry about the affective needs of the children.” I think whether they’re doing*

*classroom meetings, whether they're doing friendship clubs, and whether the counselor's coming into the class and coteaching with the teacher, I think everybody is all hands on deck in supporting students, so everybody feels it's a comfortable and safe space. - district leader*

With many schools around the country doubling and redoubling efforts to combat bullying in their schools, Blue Creek staff, children, and their families benefit from a long tradition of being a Peaceable School. As described by a classroom teacher below, this model provides a framework for many of the routines that keep Blue Creek a safe place where ELLs can thrive.



*We as a school chose to embrace a Peaceable School philosophy, and we have a school success team. We started with a common language, and it's on the poster there [see figure] rather than just, "Be quiet, pay attention." We have a common language throughout the building — common language for whole body listening and what that entails. We have signals to pay attention, a school pledge that we say every morning, and each month focuses on a character ed word. These are things we did before it [anti-bullying mandates] all came to be.*

Another teacher described playing “acts of kindness” bingo with children in her classroom as well as the faculty. Other recognitions of kindness are rewarded with “little coupons” called “bugs” throughout the school year that go into a raffle for little prizes. In addition to “Dove Awards” for children exemplifying the character every month, during “Smile Week,” a tradition at Blue Creek, a variety of activities derived from the school success team engage everyone in the school in talking about how they will “pay forward” kindness to others.

### **Intervening as the Norm**

For ELLs entering Blue Creek such consistent expectations for behavior are comforting, and the general focus on accepting difference makes interventions and adjustments to their schedules seem typical rather than strange. As one classroom teacher explained,

*We also have academic skills groups in this school, so there's all types of different learners and types of kids with emotional needs, which is very important because the children see that and are very much more accepting of people that may be different than them, and I think that's the best thing about this school.*

With three speech therapists available to them, Blue Creek ELLs and their families benefit from language development supports some schools might not offer. They also benefit from efforts on the part of school staff to reach out to parents and collaborate with colleagues to get appropriate interventions in place. If an ELL student is struggling, the principal recounted some of the things that they do:

*So that might look like conferring with the parent. Sometimes it's, "Yeah, he was late to talk" or "He's my youngest kid" who doesn't express himself. So now we're expecting a disability. How are we going to provide some additional instruction? So maybe in*

*addition to ENL, we'll get an additional person to work on sound-symbol relationships with letters outside of ENL. So we might kind of pull in our other instructional supports, a remedial reading teacher for instance.*

### **Supporting ELLs and Their Families beyond the Classroom**

With the idea that the language and content knowledge development needed to succeed in school should continue beyond the dismissal bell, and the work to bridge cultural and linguistic divides spreads beyond the school walls, Blue Creek ELLs enjoy a slew of other supports for their academic development and social inclusion. One example is the Tuesday and Thursday homework club. The ENL teacher hosts this club and is assisted by high school students who work with the children and, as one support teacher reported, “They [ELLs] love their tutors!” In addition, for those ELLs and other children living in poverty Blue Creek staff and students offer food donations they can take home to their families on weekends. Translators are hired to speak with and translate documents for family members as needed, and the principal has reached out to local religious leaders to include them in school events and decision making.

### **In a Nutshell**

Blue Creek with its diverse student needs has managed to weave together several qualities that educators relate to their relatively better ELL performance outcomes. These include, all staff supporting a culture wherein they and children celebrate diversity and emotional and social wellness; leaders purposefully building teacher efficacy and commitment by providing clear and consistent messages about vision and mission and measured autonomy for teachers to use professional judgement; and educators creating an inclusive and accessible environment for ELLs to succeed academically and socially.

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<sup>i</sup> This case study is one of a series of studies conducted by Know Your Schools~for NY Kids since 2005. In 2015-16, research teams investigated 6 elementary schools. In comparison to schools serving similar populations at each grade level, these odds-beating schools are ones in which ELLs exceeded expected average performance on the 2012-13 and 2013-14 state mathematics and English language arts assessments across multiple grade levels and subjects. Comparisons were for grades three through six. Average scores on the 2012-13 and 2013-14 state assessments were compared for all schools in the state outside of New York City to those with similar rates of economically disadvantaged students and ELLs. Using regression analysis, an expected average performance level was obtained for each subject at each grade level for a total of sixteen estimates. By comparing expected to actual average performance, schools were classified as “odds beating” if they met the following criteria: The difference between expected and actual performance was on average close to one standard deviation greater than the mean difference for all schools in the state. Out of 1,378 schools serving grades three through six (outside of NYC), 127 (9.2%) met the selection criteria. Schools serving more disadvantaged populations (higher than average rates of economically disadvantaged, English language learners, ethnic/racial diversity) and those with average or below average fiscal resources (per-pupil expenditures, combined wealth ratio, % of expenditures on instruction) were preferred in the final sample. Researchers used site-based interviews of teachers and administrators, as well as analyses of supportive documentation in all schools; in four of the schools student interviews and classroom

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observations were also conducted. Results of the cross-site analysis and details regarding the project, its studies, and methods may be found at [www.albany.edu/nykids](http://www.albany.edu/nykids).