Promising Practices for Supporting Achievement of English Language Learners

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Case Study: Catskill Elementary School
Catskill Central School District

I just really love the feeling here in Catskill.
- teacher

This case study of Catskill Elementary School is focused on the English language learners (ELLs) within the school population. As a rural school, Catskill has a small number of ELLs, but those students have demonstrated higher than expected performance on state assessments. What follows is a report on the promising practices in place at Catskill Elementary to support ELL achievement. This report is informed by interviews and focus groups with district and school administrators and teachers who work with ELLs.

School Context

Located two hours north of New York City along the Hudson River, the Town of Catskill is the seat of Greene County and serves as a major point of entry to the northern Catskill Mountains. The town's population, which clusters in a small village and several hamlets, spreads over a rural countryside.

Catskill Central School District (CSD) serves 1,547 students in three schools. Catskill Elementary School serves nearly half of the district's students, with 62% of them living in poverty[1]. One teacher described Catskill as having "a wide variety of economic situations." Even with the challenges of poverty, the educators at Catskill Elementary have high expectations for all students, and many reiterated the belief that all children are capable of academic success. Many of the teachers and support staff interviewed not only live in Catskill currently but also grew up there, giving them personal insight and investment in the town and its schools.

Of the school's approximately 25 ELLs, most are from families that had come from Latin or South America; other families had immigrated from India, Ukraine, or China. Many of these

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

families were reported to have travelled north from New York City in search of work, and the majority of the ELLs at Catskill Elementary had been born in the U.S.

With the priority of integrating their ELLs in the mainstream, and immersing them in English, educators employ a primarily integrated model of ENL[2] instruction, in which teachers "push in" to mainstream classrooms[3]. To further their goal of integration, staff described working hard to make lasting connections with ELLs' families and make them feel "welcome" and "comfortable" at the school.

Student Demographics 2014-15: Catskill Elementary School, Catskill Central School District

	Catskill ES	Catskill CSD	New York State
Grades Served	K-5	K-12	K-12
Total Enrollment	760	1,547	2,649,039
Economically Disadvantaged	62%	57%	54%
English Language Learners	3%	2%	8%

Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution
    African-American
    Hispanic/Latino
    White
    Multiracial
    Other
	
	9%
	9%
	72%
	9%
	1%
		
		11%
		10%
		73%
		5%
		1%
			
			18%
			25%
			45%
			2%
			10%

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

The Catskill Central School District has been identified by the state as a "focus district" for not meeting progress targets in English and mathematics for some sub-populations. As such, Catskill Elementary is a focus school as well, which requires the school to develop an improvement plan. Despite their status as a school in need of improvement, they have experienced comparatively good results with ELLs. Catskill Elementary met the criteria of "odds beating" in this study because the difference between its ELLs' expected and actual average performance based on the state 2012-13 and 2013-14 English language arts (ELA) and mathematics assessments was 0.97 standard deviations higher (statistically significant) than that in other schools around the state with similar demographics.

This case study[i] tells how district and school leaders and educators who serve ELL students have approached serving that population. The next section highlights those processes and practices that were identified as being most salient to their relatively better ELL performance outcomes.

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[2] English as a New Language (ENL) has replaced the term English as a Second Language (ESL) in NYS.
[3] "Integrated" and "stand-alone" are the two models of instruction in NYS.

Promising Practice Highlights

Including and Integrating English Language Learners

When I think of English Language Learners, I think of inclusion. – teacher

When asked what works best for helping ELLs succeed in school, numerous teachers and administrators responded with two words: inclusion and integration. In keeping with these foci, the ENL program is organized so that instruction is given to ELLs in the mainstream classroom instead of pulling them out for stand-alone ENL instruction. With the ENL teacher in the classroom, ELLs are "integrated to the degree that they can be" while still having "their individual needs met right in the classroom," explained a teacher. The mainstream classroom teachers who teach ELLs described the experience in very positive terms and mentioned initiatives to bring more culturally relevant materials into their classrooms to support these students and make them feel more comfortable.

Individualizing Instruction

All kids need to learn and all kids can learn. And it's just a matter of figuring out where they are and what they can learn next. - teacher

The philosophy of teaching and learning espoused by many of those interviewed was one of high expectations and the belief that all students are capable of academic success. By using small group instruction, teachers said, they are able to focus on the strengths and weaknesses of particular students, including their ELLs. "It's a very individualized kind of approach," said a member of the support staff. Administrators and teachers also reported collaborating with private consultants to monitor the progress of individual students using data analysis programs.

Connecting with Families

We've made it a point to reach out to parents. – teacher

Many ELL teachers and administrators described the importance of connecting with students' families. The parents of ELLs were described by one teacher as "very eager for their children to do well and extremely supportive." Educators described their efforts to meet new state requirements for servings ELLs (known as CR-Part 154) by translating documents for parents and holding individual conferences with parents. The principal attributed the ELLs achievement to the ENL teacher's "personal touch" with the students and her "connection with the parents." He said, "She meets with all the parents all the time, and her communication with the parents is great. . . . She goes above and beyond with these families and with the students."

A Closer Look

These practices – integrating ELLs, individualizing instruction, and connecting with families – are evident throughout the five dimensions that frame the study of which this case is one part. The following sections expand on these practices within the context of the study's framework.

> *Everybody is included as much as possible. I think it is a positive environment for the kids.*
> – support staff

Making Students Comfortable

Several teachers and administrators stated that an important goal at the elementary school is to create inclusive classrooms for ELLs and make sure they feel comfortable at school. One way this is done is by placing all grade-level ELLs in the same mainstream classroom. This means that one class at each grade has a teacher who has volunteered to work with ELLs as well as collaborate with the ENL teacher. When asked what works for ELLs, one of the ELL grade-level teachers quickly responded that "comfortability" and "acceptance" were the priorities in his classroom. Another teacher articulated a similar goal: "Making them feel comfortable in the environment that they're in, and not to feel that they are deficient."

For teachers, creating comfortable classrooms for ELLs means integration and equitable treatment. One teacher said that he strives to provide high quality instruction by giving ELLs the same group lesson as everyone else in the classroom. "They're totally integrated in with their classroom members," he said. Although Catskill's ENL teacher does pull out some beginner students for stand-alone instruction, the ENL program primarily relies on pushing into classrooms as a way of supporting ELLs without making them feel excluded. As one teacher commented, "[ENL support] is done in kind of an inclusionary way where they're not always looked at as different. [The ENL teacher] could be helping all students and then doing groups or working on skills with a certain student. So I think it is nice in the way that the supports are provided."

Creating a comfortable and inclusive environment for ELLs is, therefore, seen as a prerequisite for academic success. One member of the support staff echoed this idea, stating how happy it made her to know that "students feel good about coming to school." She added, "I think we have a lot of teachers who care very much, and I think it comes through even with the struggles that the students have."

Celebrating Diversity

The diverse cultural background of Catskill's ELL population was described by teachers as a resource and boon to their classrooms. In regards to teaching ELLs, one teacher described himself not only as a teacher but as a "cultural liaison." He added that ELL students provide him an "opportunity to expose [students] to other cultures," and said, "I just couldn't imagine not having them [in class]."

Another teacher of ELLs explained the importance of incorporating students' cultural backgrounds into the curriculum. "I try to stretch it in . . . any place I can find. If I come across a book that goes with a theme, and it features one of the countries or traditions from one of my students of that year, then I will grab it and try to incorporate that." Noting that most of their ELL population came from Central and South America, the teacher nonetheless planned to have a Chinese New Year as well as a Cinco de Mayo celebration in her classroom to make sure that all her students felt included. "We work hard at celebrating diversity," said one building leader.

Teachers who speak some Spanish expressed their willingness to communicate with Spanish-speaking parents and students in their home language. Some teachers include Spanish in their classroom instruction. One teacher told us, "Because I speak Spanish we often will count in Spanish and I'll say phrases to them in Spanish and let the Spanish speakers translate it to the rest of the class. To me it's like an asset," he explained. "I'm sort of a cheerleader for the kids to remain bilingual – don't hide your language ability."

While recognizing the importance of bringing diversity to their classrooms, teachers also strive to maintain a comfortable environment for their students. One teacher described this balance stating, "I don't want to highlight them as different, but I want them to feel comfortable sharing if they want to. . . . So you sort of have to tread carefully where you make them feel welcome and warm and comfortable, but you don't put them on the spot."

Setting High Expectations for English Language Learners
In keeping with the goal of providing equitable treatment for all students, teachers of ELLs reported that they maintain the same expectations for ELLs as they do for all students. Several teachers voiced firm beliefs in the abilities of all students to achieve academic success and take it upon themselves to find ways to meet their needs. In the words of one, "Every child can learn and will learn given the right circumstances. . . . If they're not learning it the way you're teaching it, then we have to change the way we're teaching it and we really have to find what works for them." She told us that this approach yielded significant results, adding, "I've seen some incredible things just by sticking with them and really working at what they need."

Several teachers recognized the importance of adapting to meet the needs of their ELLs. However, they explained that these changes did not entail a reduction in expectations. In the words of one, "We modify obviously, but . . . we keep the expectation at the same level as for the other students. I don't know what would be any different." The interim-superintendent was adamant in her refusal to allow teachers to claim that high-needs students bring down schoolwide performance. "Part of the reason that many schools don't do well," she said, "is because their expectations are too low."

Staff Selection, Leadership and Capacity Building

When I walked in the building for my interview, I just felt like I was at home. – teacher

Community Connections
Most teachers interviewed reported having been in the district for over seven years, with some having worked there for nearly two decades. Many of these teachers described the special relationship they had with Catskill not only as employees but as long-time residents and, in some cases, graduates of the Catskill School District as well.

A member of the support staff mentioned the positives of being involved in the community both inside and outside of school. She said, "It's nice to work with the kids in the community. I see them outside of school, and you know we talk and connect and so I feel like I have a real connection to the community." Another teacher reported that she enjoys being personally connected to the families of students that she teaches at school: "I see ten different families when I go to the grocery store on the weekend." With their own children in the Catskill School

District, many teachers expressed a dedication to providing a high quality education for students of the community.

Strong Leadership from District Offices
The Catskill School District has recently hired several new district leaders in a continued effort to raise student achievement as well as address budgetary concerns. The district-level administrators interviewed have experience working in struggling schools and promote a philosophy of strong leadership from district offices. The interim-superintendent embraces the responsibility of being a decision-maker in the district saying, "Ultimately it's going to be my decision."

District leaders welcome faculty involvement in decision-making, but expressed that they take the responsibility for the final outcomes. As the interim-superintendent said, "I'm going to make the final decision, but I need a lot of input." The principal mentioned his willingness to incorporate feedback even though the final decision was his to make. "I'm more of a collaborator; I'm willing to listen," he said. "We pretty much decide on things by committee and by vote, but bottom line is that my vote counts more." These district and school leaders recognized that they are in the "limelight" in a close-knit community that expects results from their schools. Leadership, as they defined it, required strength to "lead by example" and not to "be afraid" to make the most important decisions.

Setting the Standard for ELL Support
Several teachers and administrators attribute the relatively higher performance of ELLs to the work of the ENL teacher, saying that she serves as a model to mainstream teachers of exemplary ENL instruction. The freedom and flexibility afforded to the ENL teacher allows for an individualized approach with students, yet it also requires her to shoulder many additional responsibilities. As one mainstream classroom teacher put it, "Your ELL teacher needs to be a super star."

For example, the ENL teacher took on the role of not only supporting ELLs but also reaching out to their families. One support staff member referred to her as the "go-to person" who most teachers would contact for advice regarding any issues with ELLs. As she explained, teachers with concerns about an ELL "will definitely touch base with [the ENL teacher] first." A classroom teacher said that the ENL teacher made extra efforts to "make that family connection." This extra work entails making calls home, arranging for the translations, planning and attending parent-teacher conferences.

The ENL teacher also works to provide extra help for students whose parents may not be able to assist them with their homework. As she explained, "[Parents] are very eager for their children to do well and are extremely supportive; [however,] in the majority of cases they cannot help them at home. Their own English is not up to doing or supervising their homework assignments." To address this issue, the ENL teacher created a morning homework program so that ENL students can come to her classroom before school begins for extra support. This way, students go to class feeling confident, with their homework completed. Additionally, she emphasized the importance of having a late bus, which allows students to stay after school for extra help without having to arrange a ride home.

Collaborating to Support ELLs

At Catskill Elementary, the ENL teacher collaborates closely with grade-level teachers who have specifically volunteered to work with ELLs. She calls these teachers her "classroom partners," and described how this arrangement first began when she started teaching at the school about ten years ago:

> *A kindergarten teacher stepped up and said, "I will take all the kindergarten ELLs," and I pushed in to her class, and she spoke so favorably about it, that all of a sudden I had people coming to me and saying, "I would be willing to do that in first grade. I would be willing to do that in third grade." And by September of the following year it just flowed beautifully.*

The ENL teacher reported that she has been working with the same cadre of teachers for at least seven or eight years now, and that she sees the benefit of this type of collaboration:

> *It's a benefit in that I can be in there for the hour and sometimes an hour and ten or fifteen minutes that I* never *would be able to do if I had to go to two or three first grade classes. Secondly I think they [ELLs] have the support of one another, which is very important, and they're also with a teacher that has asked for them, which I think is extremely important. I know when APPR[4] came in I was kind of holding my breath because I thought, Are they going to stay with me? Are they going to be concerned that these children might affect their score? And not one of them backed out. Every one of them stayed with me, so I think that tells you something about the people I'm lucky enough to work with.*

The mainstream teachers who partner with the ENL teacher reported that they wholeheartedly embrace the opportunity to have ELLs in their classes. One teacher who described his initial hesitancy to work with ELLs later saw this opportunity as "a blessing in disguise," adding that he "will keep [these students] throughout my career if it's my choice."

Mainstream "partner" teachers and the ENL teacher reported a high level of mutual respect that had developed over many years of collaboration. Teachers described themselves as "fortunate" for having the opportunity to work with one another and mentioned how comfortable they were as colleagues. One teacher said, "And once you've worked with someone for so many years, she [the ENL teacher] knows my program for the most part. She understands my expectations."

Teachers' schedules permit several opportunities for collaboration. The Professional Learning Community (PLC) and monthly Morning Meetings were both mentioned as places for teachers and administrators to collaborate. The principal explained that in the PLC, teachers and administrators meet to discuss assessment data. "We analyze it. We break it down," he said, and teachers are then able to use the "data to drive their instruction."

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[4] APPR is the Annual Professional Performance Review, a teacher evaluation program in NYS.

When needed, teachers also reported making time before and after classes to meet. One teacher described the way she collaborates with the ENL teacher in the following way: "Her classroom is two doors down from mine, and she gets to school early, and I get to school early. And I stay late, and she stays late. So I see her all the time."

Modeling, Modifying, and Scaffolding
While teachers typically seek to treat ELLs equally in their classrooms as much as possible, they as well as leaders mentioned several strategies to accommodate the particular needs of their English language learners. These include modeling and using visuals, as well as preparing different materials. The interim-superintendent, for example, defined high-quality instruction as the use of "repetition, a lot of visuals, [and] a lot of sight-sound pieces." One teacher mentioned using more "graphic organizers" for ELLs to improve their writing, and another teacher said that she posts schedules and rotation charts so that ELLs know what they need to do in the class without getting confused. Math class was emphasized as an area in which ELLs benefit from a "hands-on" approach through the use of manipulatives.

When teachers sense that ELLs are in need of extra help, they said they scaffold carefully. One teacher described the process of "chunking" reading assignments to make it easier for ELLs to comprehend complex texts. She breaks down readings into more simple parts, asks students questions about each chunk, and then moves on while also "leav[ing] out things that are not particularly essential or are detracting to the theme of the book or the activity that we're doing." This process involves a "lot of pre-reading to decide what they need to do as opposed to something that we could pass on, just to cut down on the amount of work that they have to do in a specific period." Breaking these readings down and asking questions about each part gives this teacher "an opportunity to use that as a summary" for ELLs rather than asking these students to tackle the entire reading by themselves. Other teachers mentioned that they use computer programs to modify lessons and materials for ELLs who are having trouble keeping pace with the class.

Immersing and Integrating
Several administrators commented on the benefits of the integrated instruction model, saying that having the ENL teacher "push-in" allows for them to create "an individualized plan for each student" and that it "personalizes" the instruction. One teacher described the utility of having the ENL teacher in her classroom: "I've got 23 other children yelling my name, whereas she can really hone in, and then I can do the broad, overarching [instruction] and then report back to her. And then she can tackle all of the little problems." In the words of the ENL teacher, "immersion is the fastest way for them to learn, and I think that they step up very nicely to it…. I think these programs work."

One of the strategies teachers use to integrate ELLs is to group students by their performance, not necessarily by their classification as ELLs. Several teachers reported that grouping students this way supports ELLs' learning, since ELLs are not always the lowest performers. For example, one teacher explained that "two of my English Learners are in my top math group and one is in my on-grade level math group." Another teacher mentioned that she had a student who wasn't an ELL but "fits well" with the ELLs and is usually served by the ENL teacher. In this

way, both non-ELLs and ELLs work together in small groups, completing work that is on, below, or above grade level depending on their performance.

Furthermore, as one teacher noted, the strategies that work for ELLs are often beneficial to all students. "I like to integrate my groups," she explained. "I don't want to just put the ELLs on their own, because there are plenty of kids who might need this kind of support." Another teacher agreed, saying "I don't want to say I'm teaching [ELLs] any differently because they do sometimes do need the visual – but what child doesn't benefit from a visual? . . . If I have to sometimes slow things down and explain things more, it's not hurting anyone else – it can only be a benefit."

Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis and Use of Data

Once we take a look at our data, we try to set our goals according to what we need.
–principal

Using Data to Find Achievement Gaps
At Catskill Elementary, achievement data are used to both monitor student progress and to reveal areas that need improvement. In 2015-16, Catskill implemented school goals that included seeking a 70% proficiency rating for all students on common local assessments in the four core subjects. Monitoring progress on common assessments, one administrator said, would "tell us where we are falling short in our instruction."

Computer programs are also used to collect data and monitor student and school progress. The program was mentioned by several teachers and administrators as a tool that provides data on the assessments given to students throughout the year and links state standards to each question on the assessments. These data, the principal reported, allows him to monitor the progress of students as well as the areas in which instruction could be improved to better meet state standards. PLC meetings were mentioned as a place where teachers and administrators could sit down and review data together, focusing on areas that need improvement. At the PLC, the principal said, "We can look at where did this kid fall short, what standard is not getting through, and we can attack it that way."

Monitoring ELL Achievement
ELLs are identified through a home language questionnaire and then follow-up with English language assessments as is typical practice. Once identified, the progress of ELLs is measured in several ways. The growth in ELLs' English proficiency is assessed through the NYSESLAT (a state assessment for ELLs) as well as through commercial literacy benchmark assessments given to ELLs four times a year. Other exams are given regularly in math and ELA. These assessments provide teachers the ability to keep track of their ELLs' progress in different subjects throughout the year. Teachers described grading ELLs the same way as all other students: module tests and common assessments. Other teachers use less formal ways of monitoring student progress such as a check system or small-group assessments. Because ELLs are integrated in the class in every other way, one teacher explained, it does not make sense to separate them out in terms of grading and assessment. "Performance-wise," she said, "I don't differentiate."

> *If there's a need, then we'll find some way to support them . . . if they're ELL or not.*
> – support staff

Facing Challenges Head On
Catskill educators articulated facing the challenges to meet progress targets and leadership changes head on. Despite these challenges, they enthusiastically continue to improve and work together. For example, although the ENL teacher shouldered the primary responsibility of contacting parents, several other teachers – especially those who speak Spanish – described their willingness to communicate with parents as well. Other teachers mentioned, however, that communicating with parents often posed a great challenge for them. In reference, especially, to families who don't speak English or Spanish, one teacher said that "it's very, very hard to get information back from families, and it's hard to communicate by phone." Yet, even those who voiced concerns about overcoming language barriers with the families of ELLs are pleased with the efforts. As one support staff member commented, "We've come a long way."

Interventions for Students Living in Poverty
Catskill educators also recognized the economic disadvantages that some of their students face. As the county seat, the town of Catskill houses many of the social service agencies for needy families across Greene County. One teacher mentioned, for example, that he has some students in his class who are "from very wealthy families" and others who are "homeless." Programs such as Every Person Influences Children (EPIC), a workshop for educating and connecting with parents, and a McKinney-Vento Grant which provided financial assistance to homeless students, were both mentioned as useful interventions to handle child poverty.

RTI for All Students
In order to improve literacy among elementary students, school administrators recently adopted a program that provides Response to Intervention (RTI) services to all students. Students from each grade level are broken into groups based on their reading levels and then given 40 minutes of instruction each day. One teacher described this program as "vigorous," while another saw it as a "work in progress." Nonetheless, many teachers seemed satisfied with the new program, since "all of the kids are getting some sort of extra support." One teacher mentioned that the universal RTI program was useful to ELL students who tested high but still required some extra help with their English skills.

A Spectrum of Supports for Students with Disabilities
Different types of interventions are made for struggling students, including services from the Instructional Services Team (IST). Support staff mentioned that they do both "formal and informal" support. For example, when teachers are concerned about a student, they can ask support staff to "take a look" without the issue rising to the level of the IST. This "spectrum" of support was described to be effective in handling all kinds of situations. However, teachers and support staff also raised concerns about the difficulties identifying ELLs with learning disabilities. One teacher commented that it is sometimes a challenge to see that "just because [a student] is a foreign language speaker doesn't mean [he or she] can't have a learning disability."

In a Nutshell

The staff at Catskill Elementary School seeks to create a comfortable and inclusive environment for their English language learners. Following the lead of the ENL teacher, mainstream teachers of ELLs welcome the cultural diversity brought into their classrooms by ELLs and foster connections with their parents as much as possible. Since the goal of inclusion and integration is paramount to staff, they focus on individualization and differentiation facilitated through small-group instruction, RTI, and data-monitoring programs. While recognizing the impacts of poverty in their community, the staff has high expectations for all of their students and promotes the idea that all students are capable of success.

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[i] This case study is one of a series of studies conducted by Know Your Schools~for NY Kids since 2005. 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 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.