

Case Study: Fostertown ETC Magnet School

Newburgh Enlarged City School District



Every student needs access to everything. Every student should have breakfast and lunch. Every student should be able to participate in whatever club or activity or learning opportunity you have.

- district leader

School Context

Fostertown Excellence through Creativity (ETC) Magnet School is one of nine elementary schools in the Newburgh Enlarged City School District. As a magnet school, students come from all areas of the city and town of Newburgh, making for a very diverse student population. Families submit their school preferences and then a lottery determines where students are placed. The district serves almost 11,000 students and 639 of them attend Fostertown. About 90% of the English Language Learners (ELLs) in the district come from Central America and speak Spanish.

Fostertown is well-known within the district for its dual language program, which was moved to Fostertown when the school that had originally housed it closed. Many teachers from that school were transferred to Fostertown so that the dual language program could maintain some consistency. At Fostertown, some ELLs are selected for the dual language program; the rest are in the general education program, where they are served by the English as a New Language¹ (ENL) program, comprised of both integrated classes, in which ENL teachers “push in” and co-teach the mainstream class and stand-alone ENL instruction, in which ENL teachers “pull out” students to the ENL classroom for instruction². Dual language classes are taught by teachers who are certified as bilingual teachers and ENL classes are taught by ENL certified teachers.

Fostertown also distinguishes itself among the other schools in the district for its history of relatively high achievement. District leaders reported that Fostertown has always had high student achievement and that many effective practices are evident in their instructional staff. Educators reported that the school had once served mostly a wealthy area of the district but that the population had changed over the last decade. As the principal explained,

I've seen the change. We've gotten it by having a bilingual class and then getting the equity established throughout the district. Then we got our dual language group and that

¹ English as a New Language (ENL) has replaced the term English as a Second Language (ESL) in NYS.

² “Integrated” and “stand-alone” are the two models of instruction in NYS.

set of classes, which brought more of the ELL population in. It was a change. It was a cultural shift. It was a work in progress, but I think we've gotten to a point now that it is natural, that it's not a different school in a sense that we don't serve the same population anymore.

Fostertown's student demographics demonstrate the diversity of the district, as shown in the table below. The district has almost double the state average of ELLs and a higher than average percentage of economically disadvantaged students³. The ethnic/ racial distribution also shows the majority of students in the district and at Fostertown are Hispanic/ Latino.

Student Demographics 2014-15: Fostertown ETC Magnet School, Newburgh Enlarged City School District

	Fostertown ETC Magnet School	Newburgh City School District	New York State
Grades Served	K- 5	K-12	K-12
Total Enrollment	637	10,981	2,649,039
Economically Disadvantaged	61%	75%	54%
English Language Learners	11%	14%	8%
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution			
African-American	20%	26%	18%
Hispanic/Latino	45%	48%	25%
White	28%	22%	45%
Multiracial	4%	2%	2%
Other	3%	2%	10%

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

Despite the challenges of teaching in a city school with relatively high levels of poverty, educators tend to stay put, and many stated their desire to really make a difference in the lives of needy students. One school leader mentioned the high retention rate of the Fostertown faculty, saying, "Once they come here they don't really leave." A district leader and former teacher in the district suggested a potential reason: "I think that's huge, knowing that you're needed and that what you're doing is helping."

Many of Fostertown's teachers and administrators come from bilingual backgrounds and were once classified as ELLs themselves. One school leader stated, for example, "It's my passion to work with ELLs, diverse populations. It's pretty similar to where I grew up." Many others mentioned that they grew up in Newburgh and had a strong desire to stay in the community. For example, the 2015 New York State teacher of the Year 2015⁴ teaches at Fostertown and explained, "I just really wanted to teach back where I went to school, especially the district. I was hoping to come back to Fostertown as a teacher but I really just wanted to get back to Newburgh."

³ One measure of poverty, and the one used here, is economic disadvantage (see definition at <https://data.nysed.gov/glossary.php?report=reportcards>).

⁴ Dana McDonough, a second grade teacher at Fostertown. See <https://www.engageny.org/resource/newburgh-educator-named-2016-new-york-state-teacher-year>.

Fostertown 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 ELA and mathematics state assessments was .093 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 (e.g. English language arts [ELA] and math).

This case studyⁱ describes how the Newburgh Enlarged City School District and Fostertown ETC Magnet School educators have approached serving ELLs. The next section highlights those processes and practices that were identified as being most salient to the relatively better ELL performance outcomes at Fostertown.

Promising Practice Highlights

Dual Language Program

It’s a proven success and not just at Fostertown. The dual language program research shows the benefits of it. We believe in it and we invest ourselves in it, and I think that that’s huge.
- district leader

At Fostertown, dual language program students learn ELA, math, social studies, and science in Spanish and English. For the ELLs in the program, this creates the opportunity to learn content in their native language, express ideas in their native language, and become literate and capable in both Spanish and English. Educators believe that much of the success of ELLs at Fostertown can be attributed to this program.

Leadership to Support ELLs

For me, leadership is being able to show that individuals can become leaders, and if you empower adults as well as children to become leaders, you can sit back and kind of just look at the fruits of your labor.
- principal

District leadership structures support ELLs by ensuring that district programs provide these students with equitable, accessible, and engaging instruction. For example, the position of Supervisor of Language Acquisition was created to oversee all ENL, bilingual, dual language, and foreign language programs, with the intent of creating accountability, stability, and consistency across schools. At Fostertown, leadership is distributed, and leadership traits are purposely nurtured in both the teaching faculty and the student body.

A Commitment to Equity

We want to be able to provide all our ELLs with the same learning opportunities as our English native speakers. So that is my main goal, to be sure that they have the same learning opportunities, the same resources.
– district leader

At both the district and the school levels, educators expressed a strong commitment to providing equity for all students. Through Fostertown’s dual language program and integrated ENL program, ELLs have access to the same curriculum content and learning experiences as their native English speaking peers.

A Closer Look

These practices – support of a dual language instructional program, ELL-focused leadership at all levels, and a commitment to equity for all students – 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.

Curriculum and Academic Goals

It’s not all about the teachers. It’s not all about the administrators. It’s about the students that we serve.
- district leader

Educators at Fostertown described working hard to align curriculum to the state’s Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS). At first, teachers were directed to closely follow the state’s recommended curriculum modules. Over time, teachers have been encouraged to adapt the curriculum to their students’ needs and interests. Educators in the school agreed that the shift to more rigorous standards and the integration of new curriculum materials has encouraged greater integration of ELLs schoolwide.

Integration through the Common Core Curriculum

Teachers described the move to the CCLS as challenging, and many expressed concern that some creativity has been lost as a result, but school leaders praised the faculty for their ability to adapt the curriculum despite the challenges. The faculty came together, school leaders said, and collaboratively figured it out; ENL and dual language teachers were a part of this collaboration. Once the curriculum changed, all students began to do the same work. A dual language teacher explained how the curriculum has become more integrated:

We had a separate curriculum... I think the Common Core, especially now that we’re using [the NYS curriculum modules] gives us a common language so that our own students feel like they’re part of the mainstream. Because before we had different books and we had different stories, and our literature was very limited. Now we have the same thing, the only problem I have is that it’s not translated in Spanish. I do what I can, but in terms of kids, we’re on the same plane.

As a result of the curriculum reforms, ENL teachers became more integrated along with their students. The principal explained, “So with the Core, an ENL teacher was immersed into it. She was part of our group. She had the information in her room. She used it and used her expertise with ENL strategies that she learned as her specialty, but she incorporated that in there, especially with the writing, because the difficulty is the writing for them and the reading.”

Educators described as positive aspects of the new curriculum that instruction for ELLs had become more mainstreamed, integrated, and seamless. The principal said, “It’s inclusive. They don’t feel different. They work harder and they work together.” Teachers unanimously agreed that the curriculum is challenging, especially with vocabulary, but many felt that this challenge has been beneficial. In interviews and focus groups, a variety of teachers talked about the ways in which the curriculum is helping all students to learn:

I'll be honest, I think it's a little bit hard, but in spite of it, they're getting it. I hear the vocabulary that they're using, so I think it's helping them. – ENL teacher

I like our ELA modules, they use a lot of context clues to help them figure out words they don't know. And I see them carrying over to other subjects, so they're like, "Wait if I read this, I now know what it is because I read the context clues!" So I think that part of the module – having them use context clues – is really helping them. – classroom teacher

There's a lot of vocabulary work in the modules, which a lot of times the students can benefit from. – special education teacher

Creating Strong Foundations for Future Success

A district goal is that all students will be reading by third grade. District leaders expressed the importance of providing students with a strong foundation in literacy to support future learning, and district and school educators share a conviction that the dual language program works well for ELLs because it develops native language fluency and literacy skills, which leads to deeper learning.

One of the five pillars of the superintendent's five-year strategic plan called "Vision 2020⁵" is "Educational Equity & Excellence," which includes a strong focus on early education. A district leader elaborated on this:

We want to be sure that students have a solid early education K - 2. For example, this year . . . we made sure that we had a strong foundations program in Spanish to ensure that our students whose home language is Spanish, and even for our dual programs, that they had that foundation.

She went on to describe a Spanish language foundational reading program that the district purchased to support students in their native language at the youngest levels (K-1).

Additionally, district and school leaders discussed the goal of inclusion, full integration, and equity. One district leader put it this way: "It's a shared vision, to provide equity, and equity does not mean equal. It's to provide every family exactly what it needs, whatever that may be." Another district leader added, "We want to be able to provide all our ELLs with the same learning opportunities as our English native speakers."

The principal at Fostertown echoed these goals, describing how a school theme of performing arts helps to create opportunities for success and equity:

It also gives them another modality and another outlet to be able to express themselves, and it brings them a lot of self-esteem, and I think students who have high self-esteem and who find ways to express themselves are successful in whatever they want to do.

⁵ https://www.newburghschools.org/news/Vision%202020%20The%20Way%20Forward%20ver_15.pdf

Staff Selection, Leadership and Capacity Building

It's not about me, it's about we. – district leader

Fostertown has a warm and welcoming atmosphere. Secretaries, security staff, parents, teachers, and students all greet visitors and each other with friendly smiles. This positive atmosphere is not accidental, but instead is related to the principal's purposeful attention to staffing and capacity building.

Staffing to Meet the Needs of the Neediest

Both district and school leaders described efforts to hire faculty members who are skilled teachers but also compassionate to the needs of ELLs and students living in poverty. The district has a detailed hiring procedure that begins with candidates being pre-screened by the human resources department. Principals choose from pools of candidates who then teach a mini-lesson as part of their application process. The principal at Fostertown spoke about what she looks for when hiring new teachers:

We can always build skill, but we can't build nurturing. We can't build that love for teaching. We can't build that caring for the students. I take that route. I have many teachers who can be leaders, teacher leaders that can take anybody under their wing. But you can't teach something that's innate and that's what I look for: that opportunity, somebody who'd embrace the program, be a good instructor but still have that compassion and the want to help the ELLs, because that's what the program is about.

The principal attributes the low rate of teacher turn-over in Fostertown to the collegial atmosphere and teachers' dedication to students.

ELL-Focused Leadership

Within the past few years, the district has recognized the need for a district-level leader to take charge of curriculum and instruction for ELLs so that programs from school to school could maintain some consistency and so that English learners would not fall between the cracks. A district leader explained that prior to having the position of Supervisor of Language Acquisition, "We had a 'light touch' with the supervision of the ENL program." She went on to explain that ENL instructional programming had been part of each principal's responsibility, so programs differed from school to school. The new supervisor has brought more uniformity to the programs across the district and also helps the principals with little experience with ELLs to develop their skills.

Another district leader explained that this position is very important "because there's somebody for accountability with what the programs are. She supervises programs in the buildings. She monitors them. She's responsible for the PD [professional development]. . . . She makes sure that those kids are getting the kind of care that they need to have so that they are able to learn, and she's very well respected. She does a very good job." Leaders at the school and district levels agreed that this position is an important part of ELL student success at Fostertown. As one said, "Now we ensure that we include [discussion of] our ELLs in all our conversations, frequently with committees."

The Supervisor of Language Acquisition put together a team of district educators to form the District Language Acquisition Team (DLAT). The team developed an ELL Framework aligned to the five pillars of the district strategic plan. According to a district leader, DLAT created the “connective tissue” between district priorities, state standards, and bilingual progressions. In addition to creating the Framework, the team meets periodically to monitor their progress toward district goals.

At the school level, building leaders expressed their dedication to the education of English learners; both principal and assistant principal have extensive experience with diverse student populations. A district leader said, “The leadership in that building is phenomenal. . . . She [the principal] always creates a very strong leadership team.” The principal stated her belief that leadership needs to take place at every level, among the building leaders, the teaching faculty, and students, as well. She explained, “I’ve taken on that philosophy that I need to be able to delegate and *empower* and enable people to take on those leadership roles and run with it.”

Professional Development for Capacity Building

Teachers in the district are given options regarding professional development and can sign up for courses and PD offerings via an online teacher portal. Few teachers in interviews and focus groups reported having much professional development or training in language acquisition or teaching ELLs, and most reported learning new strategies from the ENL and dual language teachers in their building, and through their own research on best practices. A teacher said, “So it’s really just a lot of realizing that *I* don’t know it all and I just keep need to be teaching myself so I can meet their needs.” According to a district leader, this is changing as teachers are now required to have 15% of their professional development related to instruction of ELLs under recently reformed NYS laws for the education of English learners (the reformed CR-Part 154). With this change, she said, “Now *everyone* is a teacher of ELLs. So that has been the crucial shift, in terms of the entire instructional staff.”

The principal and assistant principal at Fostertown have developed a program of “School Based Instructional Conversations” to build capacity within the faculty. This practice arose from the principal’s school plan, which was aligned to district priorities. In this plan, she chose collaborative learning as the schoolwide focus and expanded the focus to be inclusive of both students and adults. She described her rationale, saying, “Students will mirror what they observe happening among the adults in the school.” As such, both students and educators engage in collaborative learning practices.

One practice that was described is peer visitations, in which grade-level teaching teams observe one another’s lessons and then meet to discuss them. One district leader called the principal “a pioneer” for starting this practice in her building, as it has spread to other buildings as well. The assistant principal described the peer visitation process as such:

We [the principal, assistant principal, and participating teachers] do one cycle of peer visits and then after the peer visit, we do a peer reflection cycle. And what we do for that cycle is we come back and we do our reflection protocol. So they [the observers] get to speak with the teacher and give warm and cool feedback. We talk about celebrations, areas of strong instruction aligned to [the] Danielson [Framework] and content, because

we don't want to forget, we try to go both ways with giving feedback aligned to Danielson and also instruction in the content, and then we give the teacher a chance to reflect, because what I do is I go in with the team and I videotape the teacher. So the teacher gets a chance to watch herself teaching.

The Fostertown administrators reported that this practice has been especially useful in providing teachers embedded professional development in teaching ELLs. When classroom teachers observe ENL teachers or dual language classes, they learn new strategies to engage and instruct ELLs. According to the assistant principal, this practice has been “eye-opening” for teachers, and that they have requested to do vertical (across grade) peer observation as well. She explained:

[T]he dual language teachers came to me and said, “How about we add on a cycle and we're willing to do this during our personal prep time, if you can find us some way that we can do a vertical dual language peer visitation cycle.” And I was like “Absolutely. This is coming from you guys. This is what I want. We want it to come from you guys. We want you guys to own your PD.” So that's what we've been doing once per cycle.

At the district level, a similar commitment to embedded, or teacher-centered professional development was evident. A district leader described work being done to build capacity around co-teaching, as mandated by recently reformed state education policy. Teachers had expressed concerns that all of the examples of co-teaching that they had seen didn't seem relevant to the context of Newburgh schools. With this in mind, the Supervisor for Language Acquisition asked teachers if she could videotape their co-teaching practices and share the videos to help other teachers in the district. She explained how she encouraged teachers to share videos of their co-taught classes:

I said, “It's just to share with your colleagues, so that they know, and I want them to see what you're going through with the lesson. I'm not showing a model lesson. I'm showing how you're making it work. And, yeah, sometimes it looks great, and sometimes it does not, but it's a work in progress, and we're learning together.” So I had about two volunteers and we showed it at department meetings and at PDs, and then more people volunteered, and we have a few now that we are able to show.

Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements

I think that we are all here for the same reasons. We want to do the very best that we can. We want our students to succeed, and therefore we work in collaboration around best practices.
—district leader

At Fostertown, students apply to be in the Spanish-English dual language program, which is considered “enrichment,” since students are learning the curriculum in two languages at the same pace as mono-lingual grade-level peers. The principal explained, “It's not good for the children who are struggling, because now they're expected to learn two languages in the same amount of time that somebody's just doing English. And if the child doesn't really have a good base for their [original] language, they can't acquire the other language as quickly.”

Dual language programs are grounded in research on second language acquisition that shows how learning new concepts in one's home language leads to better understanding and deeper learning. Educators in Newburgh stated their belief that the dual language program was one factor in ELLs' achievement at Fostertown. In addition, a deep respect and value for students' home cultures permeates the instructional programming at Fostertown, as well as a desire to develop students as leaders who take responsibility for their own learning.

ENL Programming to Develop Strong Foundations

District educators expressed their dedication to developing strong foundations in reading and math for all students, and both the dual language and ENL programs at Fostertown are designed to do that. The dual language program enables students to learn the Common Core curriculum in their home language, whether English or Spanish. ENL teachers in the general education program at Fostertown push into classes to provide support in small group instruction and also pull students out to develop their literacy skills.

Teachers enthusiastically endorsed the dual language program and expressed the belief that it helps students learn in a deeper way. One teacher said, for example, "One of the best things that I think this school has provided for [the ELL students] is the Dual Language Program, because they are immersed for a day in one language. And I think it's less interruption in the school day. They're in the classroom speaking English all day with whatever units of ENL that they need in that day, instructed by the same teacher. I think that also helps." The principal explained how they work to create an evenly divided class: 50% of students with English as a home language and 50% of students with Spanish as their home language, and why that is the ideal arrangement:

The ideal would have fifty percent Spanish speakers and fifty percent English speakers in one room, the same with the other team. They're all mixed in, because they're going to get the instruction in their language, the dominant language, every other day. Each team will get taught in the opposite language every other day.

In classroom observations, dual language students were completing complex math and ELA lessons in Spanish and in English, depending on the classroom. In the general education mainstream classrooms, we observed ENL teachers who pushed in and offered phonics and reading lessons to develop ELL students' literacy skills. With the reforms to NYS policy on educating ELLs (CR-Part 154), ENL teachers are pushing into classes more than in the past. Some teachers expressed dissatisfaction with this change, preferring to pull students out for stand-alone instruction. Other teachers believe that this is a positive change for students. In Fostertown's general ed program, ELLs from various classes come into one grade level-class for their mandated ENL instruction. An ENL teacher described the challenge of integrated instruction for ELLs, explaining that ELLs who get moved from ENL into mainstream classes may not feel comfortable enough outside the ENL setting to participate.

Another ENL teacher explained that when they push into classes, they help all students, and not just the ELLs. This, too, can be a challenge:

What I find is that those kids, the ELLs, don't get as much of your attention. That has been one thing that has been unexpected. I thought I would have a lot more time to really discuss with them, but I end up having to help the others out more than I anticipated.

Classroom teachers expressed appreciation for the work of the ENL teachers and enjoy having teachers come into the classroom to work with ELLs. One said, “I love push-in so much more than pull-out. Pull-out is another time when I don’t have my whole class, and it’s hard to do whole class instruction for my math and my language arts. So when she pushes in, it’s great because we can continue on.”

In interviews and focus groups, all Fostertown teachers spoke of their coordinated efforts to get students to meet grade-level standards in math and ELA. By providing instruction in students’ home languages and providing supports during classroom instruction, Fostertown educators are striving to develop strong foundations for all students.

Culturally Responsive Instructional Practices

With a diverse student population, educators in Fostertown described instructional practices intended to integrate students and value the various home cultures of students. Culturally responsive practices were described by building administrators, classroom teachers, dual language teachers and ENL teachers. Some described this as a challenge, but one that they prioritize:

I think the biggest challenge I face as a bilingual teacher with ELLs is making sure that they value their own culture and their own language before I can actually help them learn the new one. . . . And also that they can also help us understand it, so that we can help them understand ours.

–dual language teacher

As part of their culturally responsive instructional practices, teachers reported creating classroom libraries with multicultural themes and diverse main characters. A classroom teacher talked about how she respects and values students’ diverse backgrounds:

They’re different kids from different cultures. So that as soon as you get your class you try to figure out where everybody’s backgrounds are so that I can highlight those, so that they just become an inclusive, accepting environment, and I just love their faces when I read something in Italian or with Spanish in it. They just brighten up and then they’ll come to me to tell me if I’m saying it correctly or incorrectly, and they’re very proud of that.

A dual language teacher discussed her effort to help students’ value their own cultural background:

In the beginning of the year . . . we had a “Me Box” where they had to bring attributes of their culture and themselves so that we can get to know them and who they are. And then we had a museum exhibit where throughout the year one of them would bring out the box and talk about themselves. Some of them brought pictures from home and how they celebrate birthdays, some of them brought foods and things like that.

Teachers in the general education program also reported using Spanish to support instruction and allowing students to use Spanish to explain their understanding or questions as well. An ENL teacher said,

In the past, you weren't really supposed to use Spanish as a vehicle for instruction, but now it's opening up, accessible and permissible. So I'm able to do it for . . . instructions, not for direct translation because that's not the way to learn a language. But for instructional purposes, like "This is what you have to do," I'm able to relay in Spanish to the students and that, that to me is the ideal thing -- that the kid knows that he can resort to Spanish if he needs to, but he's not going to lose anything in the classroom.

Building principals and teachers reported great efforts to include and involve the parents of ELL students. The principal said they will sometimes send and pay for a taxi to pick up a parent for a conference, if necessary, and they send everything out in both Spanish and English so that more parents are aware of school events and important information. Teachers, also, talked about the importance of communicating with parents and making an extra effort to involve them. One teacher explained that she calls all of the parents over the summer before school begins to introduce herself. Several teachers said they had visited students' homes, sometimes with interpreters if necessary, to communicate with parents. One explained that it was all part of respecting the child and doing everything you can to meet the child's needs: "If you meet children where they are and they know they have a supportive family . . . they know the communication's there between the teacher and home, they just seem to perform academically I think higher overall."

Developing Student Leaders

Educators in Fostertown expressed a commitment to student-centered instruction. They try to develop leadership skills in students so that they take responsibility for their own learning and also take responsibility for the culture and climate of the school.

Small-group instruction was evident in all observed classroom lessons, and teachers also discussed designing lessons around small groups to enable students to take a more active role in the learning process. This reflects an instructional shift throughout the district, moving away from teacher-directed instruction toward student-centered instruction. A district leader said, "Teachers are using a lot of small group, allowing students to be leaders in their own small groups and allowing students to own it. I think that's a huge shift. That's helping a kid grow. It's a long way to go, but we're making strides."

The principal explained how she is encouraging teachers to allow students take leadership over their own education:

So we really elaborate a lot and insist a lot on differentiated instruction and making sure children are having conversations in which children come up with the rubric so that they understand what the goal of the instruction is so that they can get to that goal. It's so outdated where the teacher says, "This is my goal." No, it's not your goal. It's the student's goal and if they don't take that on and you don't empower them to have their goal, they're not going to be successful in achieving the goal. . . . Good instruction is when children can take what the teacher has given to them and make it their own, and lead the discussion, lead the rubric to the assessment, lead the examples and the activities, and let the teacher be the facilitator.

In interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations, teachers demonstrated their efforts to move toward more self-regulated and student-led instruction. They described the benefits of having students lead discussions and work together in small groups:

They also learn from each other. When you can have one of them teach, it's a great thing to see. After you teach something and they're getting it, you can have . . . one of the students teach another student. That works well.

When they're in their groups . . . [I] assign different roles and responsibilities within each group, so they have their own responsibilities and accountability within their own groups.

There's a lot of group work built into our models, which is nice, because we can group kids heterogeneously or homogeneously based on what the objective is or the target and their need. So it helps us also kind of target a group of students who are having difficulty with a certain concept – we can form our groups around that and work closely with the small group.

- teachers

Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis and Use of Data

You can't get somewhere if you don't know where you're going to. If you already set the [mark] where you're going, then you're going to get there and you're going to make sure you get there.

-principal

Fostertown educators regularly participate in conversations about data to monitor students' progress. Building leaders have created a school schedule that includes time for structured collaboration around data analysis. At the district level, data are central to decision making. Professional development around data use is offered to support the expectation that teachers are using data to guide instruction. A commercial data management system is used within the district, so that all building leaders and central office administrators have access to state and local assessment data. Educators at Fostertown described using multiple data points to guide their instruction and determine appropriate interventions.

Collaborating around “Real-Time Data”

Educators at the school reported on several practices to support collaborations around data between teachers and administrators. Scheduled grade-level meetings are used to analyze students' performance data. Instead of focusing on state assessment data, a school leader explained, “real-time data” are more meaningful for driving instruction; as such, that becomes the focus of grade-level meetings. She explained how this is done:

We went into using data protocols during meetings to really guide the meetings. We only have thirty-five minutes, so we need to be laser focused. So we started using data protocols and we're doing student work. A lot of the discussion I had with teachers when I first came in is, “How do you use data? How do you use data in your classroom, as a grade level or per building? And we have the overall arching New York State data assessments and those achievements, but what is ‘real-time data?’ [State data] just tell us

at the end of the year if you have mastered the state-level standards. But what is going on in your classroom in real time?” So we put protocols in place as far as reviewing student work. So the teachers bring in either exit tickets that they’ve done with their kids or any kind of work or problem sets they want to go over.

After analyzing formative assessments and other classwork, teachers develop an “action plan” for students, targeting the areas identified for improvement.

Collaboration and communication about progress monitoring also occur at the district level. The superintendent initiated the practice of “DataCon” or “Data Conversations” in which all building and district leaders meet to discuss the results and analysis of local and state assessment data for each school. At this meeting, each principal is called to the table to discuss a variety of data points. All of the cabinet members and central office administrators as well as all building principals are present and encouraged to ask questions of each principal in “the hot seat.” A district leader described it as “a fishbowl conversation” that is “both evaluative and supportive in nature,” as it often inspires new ideas for principals to try in their own buildings.

Data PD

To support teachers’ use of data and progress monitoring, Fostertown offers embedded professional development in data use and data analysis. First, through the grade-level meetings, building leaders have developed a protocol to guide the discussion and help teachers analyze the data effectively. Also, during Superintendent’s Conference Days, time is dedicated to analysis of student work and creation of action plans for students. A building leader reported:

So for superintendent conference days . . . it’s not us sitting and doing an hour or two hours of a power point, but them using the time to really sit down and [ask], “What does this data mean?” You know, we have these reports. Everyone has access to them. What do [the results] mean? What does it mean for a child who is red? Why are they red? Let’s go back and see the individual measures and let’s plan interventions accordingly and progress monitoring for all of that. So I did that the last PD day and they all found it beneficial to sit down and work together as a grade level and do those action plans.

At the district level, training on data use and analysis was reported as well. There are two district directors of assessment who collaboratively manage the collection, distribution, analysis, and reporting of state and local assessment data, as well as data related to graduation rates, attendance, homelessness, etc. They also provide training to district staff that is responsive to identified needs. For example, we were told that when it became obvious that many school leaders needed more expertise with spreadsheet programs to “work their data” in multiple ways, the assessment directors offered training to support that need.

Multiple Measures to Guide Interventions

Instead of relying mainly on annual state assessment data, educators at Fostertown use multiple measures to identify children in need of academic intervention. Benchmark assessments, running records, a reading inventory, and math assessments are collected and analyzed, in addition to a writing portfolio that is reviewed quarterly.

AIS (Academic Intervention Services) teachers color-code the data reports so that the analysis can be clearly seen. A teacher explained, “I put all the multiple measures in a spreadsheet by classroom teacher and color coded it, so they could see red, yellow, green and blue. So blue is over achieving, above the state standard. Green was on grade level. Yellow was, I don’t want to say ‘underperforming,’ but I don’t remember that classification [term]. Red is at risk. When you do it that way you can see right away what’s going on.” With this color-coding system, educators said they are able to track students’ progress over time.

Students use data to monitor their own progress, as well. In interviews, several students proudly shared their reading scores to demonstrate how they’ve improved over the year. One ELL said, “Yeah, because before I had 60. I had read 69 words, and now I’m up to 104,” referring to his score on an assessment.

Regarding the progress monitoring of English learners, incoming students take the New York State Identification Test for English Language Learners (NYSITELL) to determine their proficiency levels. Once enrolled, they take the same benchmark assessments as their mainstream peers or Spanish speakers may take the Spanish version. They also take the NYS language proficiency exam, the NYSESLAT, at the end of the year in addition to all other local and classroom assessments. The Supervisor of Language Acquisition collects and analyzes strands of data to compare how students are performing in both English and in Spanish. Using all of these assessments, educators are able to determine which students are not making adequate progress and develop an action plan to help them.

Recognition, Interventions and Adjustments

It’s giving them the structures and supports to develop the language to be able to communicate effectively, because you find them sometimes shrinking back in the classroom in general... [it’s] giving them the confidence that you do believe in them and that they’re willing to take risks, and that is a big thing with that population, giving them the safe ground to take risks.
- teacher

Educators at Fostertown are dedicated to the welfare of their students and demonstrated how they work hard to meet the academic, social, mental, physical, and emotional needs of diverse children. A well-developed Response to Intervention (RTI) program is in place, and community partnerships help obtain needed services for all children in the school. Numerous school and district educators reiterated that caring for the welfare of the *whole* child will support academic achievement as well.

Response to Intervention (RTI) for All Students

School leaders have developed a daily schedule that includes an RTI block at the end of the day for all students. This allows for differentiation according to students’ identified needs. Students who are identified for AIS or RTI receive their services during this block, and students who are not identified are given enrichment work or extra help for certain topics. In a focus group, teachers explained how this works:

Usually children are pulled out at some point during that time for either resource or they go to math AIS or AIS reading.

And those who aren't, we work with. So like in our room, some of my kids . . . we noticed that their fluency dropped a little so we're working on the fluency... we're working on the close reading, so that's what we're working on during that time.

Teachers described ways in which they differentiate instruction for students, and how differentiation is connected to RTI:

I also modify their work so the frustration level is down. You don't need to do five problems to prove you know how to do it. Two is enough. So modifying their work load seems to help, and when all else fails, we "RTI," which [means] basically you're writing down everything that's happening with this child and getting to committee after writing everything down and saying, "This is what I've done, now can you help me?"

- dual language teacher

Other interventions, like an intensive English program that is offered in the summer and a "Saturday Academy," help to bolster students' skills. Saturday Academy provides the opportunity to elaborate on classroom instruction. A teacher explained, "We focus a lot on writing because that's one of the things that they're . . . lacking. So we do that writing on Saturdays, and it's from 8 in the morning 'til 12."

AIS teachers work with both ELL and native English speaking children in mixed groups. When working with ELL students, they described using visuals, speaking in Spanish, and trying to make examples more concrete.

Focusing on Whole Child Wellness

District educators work together and reach out to the community to meet student needs. The schools provide all children breakfast and lunch, and children of poverty are sent home with backpacks of food. Children receive dental and vision care, as well as support from social workers and behavioral specialists if needed. A district leader said they work to create partnerships with the county department of mental health and the department of health, "So basically it's everybody and anybody that we can collaborate with to provide for the students' needs." She went on to explain:

We try to have that collegial network with every service, so that we really work to provide services for the whole child, depending on what their needs are. And we find that the needs are similar between the ELLs and the poverty kids and the special education kids. All their needs are similar in [terms of what] . . . they need to be able to learn in school. So we basically take care of anything we can.

Teachers discussed the importance of meeting students' basic needs before academic needs can be met. This includes creating a school environment that feels safe and supportive for students. A second grade teacher explained:

It starts at the beginning of the year by building a safety net where children have a safe place to fall. I value what they have to say. I encourage that they value each other, and that kind of camaraderie is contagious. There's absolutely no tolerance for unkindness...

By establishing those basic character traits that make people good citizens, I think that establishes a classroom . . . where they can all grow socially and emotionally, because that social emotional piece ties so much into academic. If they don't have those basic foundational needs met, they're not going to be thinking about work. So building that internal emotional piece, safety-ness, because you have students who don't have all the same backgrounds and . . . experiences. So by having that kind of diverse classroom you want to recognize each child for where they are with their experiences and also make them feel that they are worthy.

A student talked about how his teacher helps him to learn: “Well, she gives me books so I could read them at home. Thanks to her and one of the nurses, I have glasses but I forgot them, and she helps me with a lot of things now that I’m going up higher than usual.”

Community partnerships make it possible for Newburgh educators to meet the varied needs of students. The Newburgh Armory, a community center, offers classes, athletic programs, and other opportunities for children and families. The district partners with county social service departments to support families in need. These partnerships, as well as partnerships with the local Boys and Girls Club, Orange County Literacy, and others, are funded through a “community grant” that was obtained by the district.

In a Nutshell

Fostertown ETC Magnet School is characterized by its well-developed dual language program, its inclusive and culturally responsive classroom instruction, and its leadership to support ELLs. Instructional programming is grounded in research on language acquisition and best practices, so that many students learn content in both their home language and their new language in a student-centered, discussion-based classroom environment. School leaders work hard to connect with families and create a welcoming, inclusive school atmosphere. Through community partnerships and a strong network of caregivers, district leaders strive to support all students in their academic and social-emotional growth.

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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.