

Case Study: Schuylerville Elementary School

Schuylerville Central School District

Once those children walk through those doors, it's our obligation to instruct them and meet their needs and we're going to do anything we can and exhaust all measures to do it.

- principal



School Context

Schuylerville Elementary is one of three schools in the Schuylerville Central School district. It serves grades K-5, and in 2016 was designated by the U.S. Department of education as New York's only "Green Ribbon School"¹ for its outdoor education program and its environmental sustainability efforts. Students leaving Schuylerville Elementary move on to the middle school (grades 6-8) and then the high school. All three schools are situated on the same campus.

Schuylerville, the site of the Revolutionary War Battle of Saratoga, is a rural and historic community. It is home to several horse, apple, and dairy farms, and many in the community commute to the nearby cities of Saratoga or Albany for work. With the abundance of farms, migrant workers have been attracted to Schuylerville for employment. Most come from Central or South America and speak Spanish.

The district has a total enrollment of 1685 students in grades K-12. One percent of those students are ELLs, with the majority Spanish speaking. Thirty percent of students are economically disadvantaged². Despite the challenges of meeting the needs of children who come to school with a wide array of socio-economic, cultural, and educational backgrounds, Schuylerville educators express committing themselves to providing an individualized and caring education for all. A district leader remarked, "I feel like the community believes that they have a district that provides not only the education but the heart and soul of every child's education and that we embrace every bit of that student."

¹ See more about US Department of Education Green Ribbon Schools at <http://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-department-education-green-ribbon-schools-honorees-announced> and Schuylerville's award at <http://www.schuylervilleschools.org/schuylerville-elementary-school-receives-green-ribbon-school-sustainability-award-in-washington-d-c/>.

² One measure of poverty, and the one used here, is economic disadvantage (see definition at <https://data.nysed.gov/glossary.php?report=reportcards>).

The elementary school serves 718 students; ELLs make up 2% and economically disadvantaged students make up 31%. One teacher described the school saying,

This is a large school, but it's perceived as a small school, and it is a small community but it's a lot of farming and not a lot of city. We have a lot of children that are on free and reduced lunch and a lot of children that may not necessarily go to preschool, so in kindergarten, we have a very wide range and array of academic needs. But I think overall we somehow are able to hold on to that small school feel because we really work together.

Many educators described the school climate as open, warm, close knit, and happy. Teachers emphasized the importance of creating a school that students enjoy and want to attend. One teacher, for example, described the family-like atmosphere of the school in the following way: “I think it’s probably one of the most kind and compassionate elementary schools that I’ve ever seen and been involved in. I think the staff here goes above and beyond to help students not just with academics but [also with] skills and even things that they may need, like supplies [and] food for group snacks. We take care of our students here and our families.”

The English as a New Language (ENL)³ program is provided by one ENL teacher who is an employee of a regional educational service agency. In the past, she worked part time in Schuylerville and part time in other area schools. Due to the increase in the ELL population, she now works full time in Schuylerville. She reported that most ELL students in Schuylerville Elementary were born in the United States but speak Spanish at home. As a result of living in the U.S. for several years before beginning school, ELLs often enter kindergarten with some proficiency in English.

The demographics of the district and the school are provided in the table that follows:

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

	Schuylerville Elementary School	Schuylerville Central School District	New York State
Grades Served	K-5	K-12	K-12
Total Enrollment	718	1,685	2,649,039
Economically Disadvantaged	31%	30%	54%
English Language Learners	2%	1%	8%
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution			
African-American	1%	1%	18%
Hispanic/Latino	3%	3%	25%
White	96%	95%	45%
Multiracial	0%	0%	2%
Other	1%	1%	10%

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

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

Schuylerville 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 state English language arts (ELA) and mathematics assessments was 1.5 standard deviations higher than that of other schools around the state with similar demographics.

This case study¹ describes how Schuylerville 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.

Best Practice Highlights

Adapting to Meet the Needs of Individual Students

These kids come in at all these different levels, but they all have to leave kindergarten around the same level to be successful. So that’s really what’s worked on, daily.
- AIS teacher

Numerous Schuylerville educators described efforts to adapt and modify the curriculum and learning materials to meet the individual needs of students. For their ELLs, this can mean choosing different texts, using native language texts, incorporating visuals, and using concrete examples. Teachers reported that they collaborate to modify the curriculum so that it is relevant and engaging for students, yet still rigorous and grounded in the state’s Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS).

ENL Teacher Dedication and Leadership

What I think contributes to our success is our ENL teacher’s dedication. . . . She is really good.
- principal

I have a relationship with them and I know what their needs are and I can keep tabs on them. I’m like a mother hen and I really advocate for them.
- ENL teacher

The ENL teacher was characterized as especially dedicated to her work and her students. Many described her work as essential to the success of the ELLs in the building. In addition to her instructional duties, she also collaborates with building and district leaders in planning the ENL program and integrating changes as required by the state.

Fostering Strong Connections between School, Home, and Community Agencies

It’s kind of like the typical immigrant story where the parents came so that the kids can have a better life.
- ENL teacher

Educators described Schuylerville Elementary as small and close knit, and they described working hard to welcome all families and connect families to the school. Information is sent home in a student’s home language, personal phone calls and home visits are made, and events are well publicized so that all families can attend. The ENL teacher introduces and orients families to the school and coordinates services with outside agencies, ensuring that students and their families are ready to thrive in their new school community.

A Closer Look

These practices – adapting to meet the needs of individual students, the dedication and leadership of the ENL teacher, and fostering strong connections between home, school, and community agencies – 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

When we make curriculum decisions . . . it’s by committee....If you don’t get the teachers’ input, you’re not going to have high morale. - principal

The district mission statement is focused on “Schooling, Caring, Succeeding” and states, “At Schuylerville Central School District, the academic achievement and development of the whole child will be the driving force in enriching opportunities for all students through academics and extracurricular activities.” To fulfill this mission, teachers use a Common Core aligned curriculum, yet with adaptations based on local needs. For example, teachers use textbook series as well as adapted versions of the EngageNY curriculum modules available online, but are encouraged to modify materials to meet the needs of their students.

Adapting Curriculum to Schuylerville Students

Schuylerville educators reported adapting curricular materials so that they will be accessible to all and also be appropriate in terms of the values and interests of the local community. The principal described developing a curriculum that is rigorous and addresses all learning standards, but one that is also flexible enough to be modified and adapted when needed.

One district leader described the use of a standardized but flexible curriculum as a “mind shift.” She said, “Okay, you *can* have a child in fifth grade who needs a first-grade delivery. You can do that.” She described ways that teachers work to make adaptations by modifying the lesson delivery or the presentation, or the learning activities that support the curriculum.

So for instance, we have an ELL child who might be in third grade [but] who might be on a first-grade level. . . . How do we provide the curriculum at that grade level but [at] his instructional level? [Other grade level teachers and special education teachers] . . . are planning with the first-grade teacher or meeting with our ENL instructor, and saying, “We have this little guy. He has these issues. He’s got language issues. How are you doing it? How can we pull that into the classroom? How can we go outside of that specific ENL piece and pull it into the day in addition to that first-grade classroom? How are you providing delivery at the first-grade level?” – district leader

The principal and superintendent both expressed the belief that curriculum needs to be standardized in terms of what teachers are expected to teach at each grade level, but that curriculum also needs to be adapted based on teachers’ professional knowledge. As the superintendent put it,

We met the intent of the law [the implementation of CCLS in NYS], we met the intent of the curriculum, the [state] modules, but we also made sure that . . . teachers and

principals had control to tailor and alter and augment that curriculum [so] that it keeps the value of Schuylerville within it. For example, we had a laundry list of books that [the state] wanted to be used with the modules. We used it as an opportunity and as a guide but not a necessity. We used books that we felt were in the best interests of students, and we had to alter some of our lesson plans and some of the modules to do that. But we did what we felt was important for our students, and they had that opportunity at each grade level to fully acclimate ourselves to the modules and the [Common] Core.

- superintendent

Developing Strong Literacy Skills at All Levels

In terms of curriculum and academic goals, educators at the elementary school are focusing heavily on improving students' literacy skills. As part of a multi-year initiative, the faculty began by analyzing the instructional curriculum for ELA and developing a curriculum, which first focused on reading instruction and has more recently shifted to writing instruction. A consultant from a nearby university has been working on this literacy initiative with teachers and administrators and a literacy specialist was hired to support and maintain the work. The superintendent related how they had started with a university-based literacy consultant,

who came in and worked with our teachers and analyzed the state assessments with them, but more importantly, analyzed the instructional curriculum . . . [and asked] what could we teach that we didn't have to teach, what was important to teach, what was our strength, what were we lacking? From that we spent a year focusing on reading instruction. Year two and year three were spent on writing. . . . Now we'll revert back to the reading piece of it, the instructional piece, with the literacy specialist in house.

According to the superintendent, this focus on literacy guides curricular decision making, instruction, and hiring practices as well. He said district leaders look for literacy certification or experience in teaching reading when hiring new teachers.

Staff Selection, Leadership and Capacity Building

You need to get everyone involved for the benefit of the child.

- principal

The school has a stable teacher workforce; people tend to stay in the district for many years. This stability was said to have helped develop a cohesive district culture and climate. Many educators expressed the belief that leaders who understand the culture and the community context are more effective. A mutual respect permeates the district, with teachers expressing that they appreciate the support of the administration and administrators appreciate the hard work and dedication of the teachers. District leaders said they trust that teachers can make their own decisions regarding professional development, and teachers uphold this trust by making professional development selections that are tied to school and district goals. This kind of mutual trust and respect lies at the heart of leadership and capacity-building efforts within the district.

Leadership Based on Shared Decision Making

District and school administrators described a philosophy of leadership that includes shared decision making. Working in committees encourages buy-in from all stake holders and also boosts morale in the district, they stated. They described work that includes the school board, the

administration, and the instructional faculty all working together to develop and reach district goals. As the principal portrayed it,

It's a positive, motivated and very dedicated staff. There's support from top down, from our board of education, my superintendent. As long as we have a clear plan and we explain to him some of the initiatives we're planning to do, there's a lot of support. The morale's high. It's a very inclusive setting, a lot of shared decision making with my staff. . . . The morale districtwide is very high.

The principal said he encourages teachers to be involved and to share their opinions with him. He described a work culture in which administrators and teachers can share their professional opinions or voice disagreement or concern:

At grade level meetings, my staff, they collaborate with me. They argue with me, and that's positive. Sometimes it's stressful, but it's positive because they have the confidence and the ability to say what they want to say in a meaningful way that you know is deeply rooted [in the desire] to benefit a child.

Capacity Building through Professional Development

Schuylerville teachers are encouraged to seek the professional development that they feel they need and district and building leaders encourage teachers to choose opportunities that support district goals. The superintendent explained, "All of our PD is geared to the goals that we provide at the beginning of the year. So people aren't just signing up for any conference. They're signing up for conferences that really [target the goals]." As such, teachers described attending professional development sessions on the Common Core Learning Standards, literacy strategies, and other instructional practices, but did not mention PD specific to teaching ELLs.

Embedded professional development is offered by a full-time literacy specialist and by teachers who have particular areas of expertise. As examples, the principal said teachers have provided training on Google apps and iPad integration. The ENL teacher reported that she provides less formalized professional development for her colleagues. She often attends conferences or trainings and then brings new information back to the teachers as they collaboratively teach.

District and building leaders recognize that the ENL teacher is a source of professional development for the school's teachers. As such, they hope to obtain a larger space for the ENL program through a facilities project. The superintendent explained:

But having a defined space for the ELLs in terms of not only just supplies but materials for teachers to come in to get that assistance and see what might be out there I think is important moving forward. . . . So I see a new classroom as not only a teaching opportunity but a resource PD opportunity for our classroom teachers as well.

Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements

We like to tailor a lot of what we do around what's important to Schuylerville, and what's important to us is what's important to our students, and our teachers and administrators. . . . We give a lot of autonomy to our teachers to be successful. So I think that relates to a very healthy culture and climate within the district. - superintendent

The instructional programs and practices for ELLs at the elementary school focus on integrating students into the mainstream classroom and the whole school culture. To do this, teachers collaborate and use several programs to differentiate and individualize instruction for ELLs.

Integrating Instruction to Support ELLs' Social and Academic Growth

Educators at Schuylerville described the value of integrating students into the mainstream. The ENL teacher reported that she had already been pushing in to classes and co-teaching before doing so became required by state mandates. With the increased rigor and pace of the Common Core Learning Standards, integrating ELLs became even more important. The superintendent explained how the established practice of pushing in and integrating instruction for ELLs helped to acclimate students to the new curriculum of the CCLS:

That's when we began really more of a push-in process with the ENL teacher before the new regs came out because it was important for the ENL teacher to understand the curriculum, understanding the pace, understand the diversity within the curriculum, the centers, because it is a much more accelerated curriculum than we ever had before. So imagine an ELL student who's not from this country, who doesn't speak English, having to keep this pace. I think that was important, having the push in and having the collaboration between the ENL and the classroom teacher, and the planning process, too. If you're a classroom teacher, you generally plan for two types of learners, regular ed and special ed. ELL is now a new entity. OK, now that's the third, and without having a whole lot of a background or expertise in instructing ELLs, that's where our ENL teacher came in and really aided the classroom teacher.

The ENL teacher described how she has worked with classroom teachers to serve ELLs, explaining that she has always pushed into classes, but due to the new regulations [CR-Part 154]⁴, she does it more than ever:

I've always worked with the teacher to see what the teacher thinks is best. And for more advanced kids, I think it's better for them to be in with the regular class because they're getting the benefit of student interactions and the group work that in a small ENL program they're not getting... Whatever group work or interactions that I might design for ENL are not as beneficial as what they may be getting in the regular classroom with my support. So I've always done a bit of co-teaching and always collaborated with the classroom teachers, but now for kids I might have pulled in the past, I am pushing in more. So that it's a learning process for everybody.

Since there is only one ENL teacher in the school, she needs to push into several different teachers' classes each day. For this reason, she said, "I have to be the flexible one," bending to the teachers planned lesson and learning activities. Co-planning is not feasible, the ENL teacher reported, because she teaches with so many different teachers and pushes into many classrooms. This same flexibility allows the ENL teacher and classroom teacher to sometimes modify a student's program. They gave an example: A student may have "advancing" language

⁴ NYS CR- Part 154 articulates that ELL students must be provided with equal access to all school programs and services offered to non-ELL students. See <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/biling/bilinged/CRPart154.html>.

proficiency based on the student's NYSELSAT scores⁵, in which case all ENL services are integrated (with the ENL teacher pushing into the mainstream class), yet the student may have other behavioral or socio-emotional needs requiring the ENL teacher to provide stand-alone instruction as well⁶. She explained:

I'm going to take her and we'll work on the same stuff, but she needs more reinforcement and re-teaching than other kids in the classroom, no matter what her state test scores say. So, yeah, depending on what the kid needs and through collaborations, [we do] what we think is best for the kids.

Classroom teachers and the ENL teacher agreed that having the integrated instructional model helps all students, as the ENL teacher can often work with mixed groups of students who need some re-teaching or more practice. The ENL teacher reported, "I'm finding that my kids are not... alone and they're not always the bottom one, which is good because if I'm pushing into a class I can take a group of them. Especially as they get older, they don't want to be singled out, so they come with a group of kids who are also need a bit more reinforcement, and it's been working out."

Encouraging English Language Development through Socialization

The principal strongly believes in the benefits of fully integrating ELLs. He discussed two different strategies for scheduling them: same grade-level students can be grouped together in one [mainstream] class, or students can be separated into several classes. The principal believes it is in the students' best interest to be separated into different classes. With all students in one class, the ENL teacher has fewer teachers to work with, but when students are spread among several classes, each grade-level class may only have one ELL, which requires the student to socialize with peers and fully integrate into the class. He explained his decision to have ELLs spread among several classes:

I think it has an impact, a positive impact. One, social is huge, and . . . once you're striving socially in school you want to do well academically in school. You get more well-rounded if you're with a more diverse bunch of students as opposed [to being] with similar peers.

The superintendent agreed with the principal about the importance of integrating ELLs and expressed the shared belief that becoming social helps students to learn:

The social acceptance, I think that's important. You don't have a group of ELL kids in a corner. You have ELL kids entrenched into a setting . . . not having to deal with the social pressures or the anxiety or being excluded for certain things. I think that we do a tremendous job of just immersing the ELL kids into grade level. I think getting over that social stigma . . . allows these kids to be able to flourish in their educational setting.

⁵ New York State English as a Second Language Test. For NYS proficiency levels, see: <https://www.engageny.org/resource/new-york-state-english-a-second-language-achievement-test-nyseslat-performance-level> .

⁶ "Integrated" and "stand-alone" are the two models of instruction in NYS.

The ENL and classroom teachers also discussed how having only a few ELLs in each class helps students to become immersed in English and encourages them to socialize from the very beginning.

Because there's only a handful in the second grade, when they get here, they are integrated right away. They have to be social. They have to make friends, and I think that helps them pick up the language a little bit quicker because they want to fit in.

– second grade teacher

It's a small population. I can really pay attention to them, but then the kids tend to be the only Spanish speaker or whatever speaker in their classes, and kids want to have friends, so they have to learn the language.

- ENL teacher

Collaboration and Communication

To support their commitment to a fully integrated instructional program for ELLs, Schuylerville educators said they collaborate and communicate regularly. The superintendent attributed the success of their ELLs to the fact that “the relationship and the collaboration between the classroom teacher and the ENL teacher is second to none.” In interviews with classroom teachers, special education teachers, AIS specialists, and the ENL teacher, all described the high level of collaboration that supports classroom instruction.

Teachers reported that they are communicating with one another “all the time . . . in the hallways, at meetings, formally, informally, through email.” When teachers pick students up for AIS instruction or stand-alone ENL instruction, they take time to talk. An AIS teacher said, “I pick up my students every day so that I can talk to the teacher every day, even if it's for a couple of minutes. We [the special area teachers] overlap. The reading teacher overlaps with the ENL teacher so that we're talking on a daily basis.” With consistent communication, each teacher is aware of students' needs. A classroom teacher noted, “We have to be on the same page. We have to know what's going on with each other, with the ELLs, what they're thinking, what they're feeling, because if we're not on the same page, it's not going to work. So everybody *has to be* on the same page.”

With this close communication, teachers can share instructional strategies and discuss how to individualize instruction for each student. When working together in the classroom, teachers reported that both the classroom teacher and the ENL teacher work with small groups at times, and lead whole group lessons at other times. A teacher said, “I'm servicing them. She's servicing them. She's servicing everybody, and it really is like collaborative teaching where she's in front of the class, I'm in front of the class. We're able to do different things.”

Both classroom teachers and the ENL teacher reported that this system of collaboration works well and is mutually beneficial. In the words of the ENL teacher: “The thing I love about my job is that I get to work so closely with regular classroom teachers. . . . You watch them teach and they're pretty amazing.”

Parents are an important part of the instructional team, as well. Teachers reported making a strong effort to communicate with parents and involve them in school events. The ENL teacher said, “The moms tend to come to all of the parent teacher conferences, and they're very

interested. They come to the orientations and everything, and they try. And some of them do as much as they can to help their kids with their homework... they want their kids to succeed.”

The ENL teacher said she develops close relationships with ELLs and their families by demonstrating her interest in their cultures and caring for their academic and social well-being. She encourages parents to help their children with school work, and shows respect for their home languages:

I'm very interested in foreign languages and particularly Spanish, and I've been taking Spanish courses outside of school and went to Mexico for an intensive course for a couple of weeks. The kids know that I'm interested. They laugh at my accent and correct me. I think that they know that I'm interested in their language and their culture. I try to help them get bilingual books, usually by the end of K[indergarten] they don't want to hear the Spanish. They're not interested and I get disappointed. . . . National Geographic has a really nice series [of] little books in English and then the same one in Spanish. They've got beautiful pictures, so I'll send those home so the moms can work with the kids, and I try to let the mom's know, "Please don't speak English with your kids at home. You have to be sure they don't lose their native language." I think it makes the parents feel [good] that they can work with their kids on concepts and read to their kids in Spanish and that they're still helping.

Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis and Use of Data

We're monitoring all the time, whether it's regular assessments on tests or things like that. We're always doing informal assessments, just walking around and checking, and then I'm assessing them by collaborating with the service providers, the ENL and the special ed teacher.

- teacher

ELLs' progress is monitored formally through the state language proficiency exam and less formally through various mechanisms such as observations, formative assessments, benchmark tests, and classroom assessments. Because there are not many ELLs in the school and only one ENL teacher, the ENL teacher monitors the progress of ELLs' language development most closely. Classroom teachers are mainly concerned with monitoring ELLs' progress in the ELA, math, science, and social studies content. Through collaboration, classroom teachers and ENL teachers say they keep each other informed of skill deficits and areas in need of more attention.

Flexible Use of Data

Student data are collected and analyzed to guide programming and instruction. District leaders reported using data to determine goals and objectives for each academic year and to report on their progress in meeting goals.

Teachers discussed using the results of benchmark testing to determine whether or not students are making adequate progress and intervening through the Response to Intervention (RTI) process if necessary. Formative assessments are used to guide daily classroom instruction and to determine how students will be grouped for daily lessons and learning activities.

The ENL teacher monitors ELLs' progress through formative testing, such as running records and classroom assessments. She said, "Typically my kids are intermediate to advanced so I coordinate their progress with their mainstream teachers and look at how they're doing on their assessments in class, their essays, their quizzes, their projects, to see where their weaknesses are and where we can work on those skills." However, she also described certain situations in which she looks beyond data to monitor ELLs:

For kids like X who just got here and doesn't speak any English... because it's one-on-one, I can see how she's doing, and language learning is so individualized. It depends on so many factors, and she's going to learn at the pace that she's going to learn, and she's the type of kid who won't sit and be complacent and do the drills or take the test. I have to be creative in how I get her to produce language. I could get a checklist and have her point to objects and see if she knows the vocabulary, but really what I'm interested in is how she goes and insinuates herself with a group of kindergarteners to play. To me, that's more important, and she'll start speaking English when she's ready to start speaking English.

Considering the many factors that come into play with learning a new language, the ENL teacher reported that grading can be problematic. She takes a holistic approach, using the data at hand, as well as information that comes from informal conversations and classroom observations, to create the optimal learning environment for each child. She explained:

I don't even feel comfortable giving them grades in ENL because they want to learn the language. Most of the kids are doing the best they can to learn the language, and there are so many factors that influence it. So for ENL I don't like giving grades. If they're having problems in their other classes and their language is such that we've done all the modifications that we can and they're still not getting it, from observation, because I have such small numbers, I can get that and kind of intervene and see what I can do to help them out.

Recognition, Interventions and Adjustments

One of the things I think is amazing, wonderful, like a blessing, about my current job is that I work for the kids for many years, which is really important, because you learn so much about them. You might think that for this one... there's no hope, ... and five years later, something happens and they blossom and you're like, "Wow, I'm so happy I'm here to see that." Every kid has a talent or a passion. They might not know what it is. You may not be able to find it for five or six years, but it's there and you have to try to expose them and try to find it, so there's at least one thing that they're on fire with and that they can be good at. In every kid there's something.

– ENL teacher

Coordinating Services

In the elementary school, several service providers interact to coordinate interventions and adjustments for children in need. AIS teachers in math and ELA, literacy specialists, special education teachers, the ENL teacher, support staff (social workers and psychologists), as well as school and district administrators, all work together to ensure that each child has the appropriate level of intervention needed for academic and social growth. Parents are also an important part of

the team in coordinating services. The educators reported that bilingual interpreters attend meetings and/ or documents are translated to make sure that parents understand the processes and programs in place to help their children. In addition, outside agencies are sometimes contacted to help families with physical or mental health needs or counseling. One support staff person noted, “Finding out what their needs are and doing everything we can to meet those needs either within the school or using the resources we’re aware of in the community to meet their needs. I would say that’s the key.”

Discerning the specific needs of ELL students can be very challenging, educators reported. It requires a coordinated effort among various specialists to figure out if a child is struggling because of a learning disability or a language deficit. An AIS teacher described this challenge:

For kindergarten we try... to pin point [if] there is a reading deficiency as opposed to a language deficiency. But in kindergarten sometimes that blends because it’s very hard to know exactly what a kindergartener knows. So we try. Sometimes we’ll take in a kindergartener who needs the language and we’ll find they don’t need the reading. They’re picking up the letters and the sounds very quickly and they’re putting the English together, but they really need work in conversation.

The special education screening and identification process poses another challenge in servicing ELLs who are struggling. When educators believe that language is not the problem, but that there is instead a cognitive issue, the district tries to have them evaluated in their home language to obtain an accurate sense of the students’ abilities and deficits. A special education administrator reported, “The difficulty for those kids who are referred to the special education committee is having the opportunity to have them thoroughly evaluated in their language, because that right now is a *huge* hurdle. Those bilingual evaluation folks are very few and far between.”

ELLs who are at advanced proficiency in English yet score low on ELA and/or math benchmark or state assessments are referred for AIS services. The ENL teacher described the process: “At elementary it’s a half hour a day and it’s small group. They’re pulled out with our reading or math specialist, and the AIS teachers are really good.” She went on to describe how ENL and AIS services work in tandem depending on each individual child’s background and needs.

AIS teachers also coordinate their services with one another as well as mainstream teachers to make sure each child receives the appropriate intervention. An AIS teacher described how they work together:

Sometimes a child comes to me because the classroom teacher says, “I have A, B and C [lexiled reading levels] and I’m not seeing this growth. Do you have room in your group and would they be a good fit?” That’s another big question, would they be a good fit, because if I have five that are on a level C and I need to take in a level F, I don’t want to hold back that person either. So we really work together to make sure they’re placed in the appropriate reading group. We have three reading teachers. So if they don’t fit in my group, maybe they fit in somebody else’s group.

The goal of AIS, teachers reported, is to provide extra support so that the students can do grade-level work with success. Referring to this, one teacher said, “We try to make AIS a revolving door.” Determining when students are done with AIS is also a coordinated effort that involves assessment data in addition to conversation among the students’ teachers. An AIS teacher described the process:

And then the same way they graduate out is their test scores improve or their leveling comes up to the average in that grade. And sometimes the testing doesn’t always match what we do because you could have a really good test taker who needs extra support and you could have a really poor test taker that doesn’t need extra support.

Early Intervention Programs

Co-Kindergarten, or “Co-K,” is an innovative intervention program for incoming kindergartners. Due to the lack of pre-school programs in the area, many students enter kindergarten without having attended pre-school. Co-K works to bridge the gaps students may have in gross and fine motor skills, phonemic awareness, and number sense. The principal reported that for incoming kindergarten students, unless they have been classified to receive special education services or their parents have traveled to preschool settings, local opportunities “are nil. A big percentage of our kids aren’t going to preschool.”

The school recently implemented a summer kindergarten readiness program as another proactive response to students’ lack of preschool preparation. The program meets for four weeks in July prior to students’ kindergarten year. The principal described the program, saying, “We give them a routine and some examples of what we’re going to be doing through the school year, your letters and that stuff. . . . And we get the parents in August to continue with that.” The principal reported that, as a result of the program, he believes students are entering kindergarten more confident and capable.

In a Nutshell

Schuylerville Elementary School has several important practices and processes in place that educators contribute to the relatively better performance of their ELLs. Curriculum materials are adapted and instructional approaches are modified to meet the individual needs of all students. The ENL teacher is a well-respected faculty member who advocates strongly for the ELLs, and collaborates with classroom teachers to ensure that ELLs have an individualized, equal, inclusive, and accessible educational experience. Family connections are prioritized and sustained through constant communication and efforts to welcome and include all.

Schuylerville Elementary School
Mr. Gregg Barthelmas, Principal
14 Spring Street
Schuylerville, NY 12871
www.schuylervilleschools.org/elementary-school/

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.