

Case Study: Van Rensselaer Elementary School

Rensselaer City School District

We like to have every student succeed, regardless of their demographic. -superintendent



School Context

The Rensselaer City School District consists of two schools housed on the same campus. The district serves 1,027 students, with 71% of students classified as economically disadvantaged.¹ The city of Rensselaer is located directly across the Hudson River from the state capital of Albany.

Educators in Van Rensselaer Elementary School described the small urban community as close-knit and well connected. Many said that families have lived in the city of Rensselaer for generations and feel pride in their community.

Since 2007, Albany and its surrounding cities, including the city of Rensselaer, have welcomed refugees from Myanmar, formerly known as Burma. In the Rensselaer City School District, most English-language learners (ELLs) are Burmese, and most are refugees from the minority language groups of Chin or Karen settled by the Albany office of the U.S. Committee of Refugees and Immigrants (UCRI). Prior to this refugee resettlement, there were few ELLs in the district.

It happened to be in 2008, where we got our big numbers and boosted our population. You know it caused a lot of changes, good changes, but definite changes in our school.
- teacher

Educators expressed that the growing numbers of ELLs in their school, many of whom are also identified as ‘Students with Interrupted Formal Education’ (SIFE), as well as high levels of transience among this population of children pose challenges. Working with refugee populations also tests support staff, as they strive to help students and their families recover from sometimes traumatic experiences. A school psychologist explained, “Some of them come in and they’re all right and there is no need. They’re leading the class. Then there’s the ones that come that are

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

traumatized and have just had experiences that nobody who’s grown up like we have can even fathom what it would be like to live like that.”

Teachers described communicating with parents who don’t speak English, trying to arrange for translated documents and interpreters for meetings, and teaching cultural norms as part of their daily work. Despite these challenges, most teachers described their experience of working with English learners/refugees/SIFE students as very positive, and they demonstrated great respect and empathy for these students and their families. One said, “They’re just wonderful. They come a long way. They’re hard workers. They’re bright.” Another teacher commented, “They are so sweet. The biggest challenge I think is they come into our classroom and they’re just so helpless, like they don’t know what you’re saying, they don’t know where they are. They’re in a whole foreign environment, and you just want to wrap them up and say, ‘It’s going to be okay. You’re safe here. You’re going to be okay.’”

Educators in Van Rensselaer Elementary characterized the school climate as warm, welcoming, and unified. One teacher described how students of different ethnicities and cultures get along: “Students at Rensselaer are really wonderful. They’ve grown up together. . . . There may have been one time when a student may have said a name, but overall I wouldn’t say that. I mean they’re a part of the classrooms. The kids get along. They’re the sweetest children. They have great friends.”

The demographic table below highlights the diversity of the school and district in comparison to state averages with “multiracial” and “other” categories greater than average and the percentage of ELLs served typical for the state.

Student Demographics 2014- 2015: Van Rensselaer Elementary School, Rensselaer City School District

	Van Rensselaer ES	Rensselaer CSD	New York State
Grades Served	K- 6	K-12	K-12
Total Enrollment	622	1,027	2,649,039
Economically Disadvantaged	73%	71%	54%
English Language Learners	8%	6%	8%
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution			
African-American	9%	9%	18%
Hispanic/Latino	7%	7%	25%
White	63%	64%	45%
Multiracial	6%	6%	2%
Other	14%	13%	10%

Demographic data are from the state report cards for 2014-15 (<https://data.nysed.gov/>).

Van Rensselaer met the criteria of “odds beating” in this study because the difference between ELLs’ expected and actual average performance based on the 2012-13 and 2013-14 English language arts (ELA) and mathematics state assessments was 0.74 standard deviations higher than that of other schools around the state with similar demographics and statistically significantly higher in several comparisons by grade and content area (ELA and math).

This case study¹ describes how district and school leaders and educators have approached serving ELLs, with the next section highlighting those processes and practices that were identified as being most salient to their relatively better ELL performance outcomes.

Promising Practice Highlights

High Expectations and Rigor for All Students

I'm pushing them. I'm not bringing it down at all. . . . We're setting the bar high.
- ENL teacher

Teachers at Van Rensselaer emphasized their dedication to getting all students to meet rigorous standards of achievement. They focus on differentiating for all students and employ various instructional strategies to enable high levels of differentiation, such as using small groups, manipulatives, and technology. They expect that through differentiation all students will meet the same standards and be held to the same level of rigor. English as a New Language² (ENL) teachers both push in to classes for integrated instruction and also pull students out for stand-alone instruction³. Whether they are co-teaching in an integrated class or bringing students back to their own classrooms, ENL teachers reported focusing on the grade-level curriculum and assign modified versions of classroom assignments to ELLs.

Focus on Literacy Instruction for All

They need to be comfortable in reading and writing and they need to be meeting the expectations for their grade level so that they can succeed and move forward beyond grade level with their peers.
- teacher

Teaching all students to read and write at grade level is a priority at Van Rensselaer Elementary. To accomplish this, the staff includes literacy coaches and several literacy specialists. In addition, several classroom and ENL teachers have literacy certifications, which allow them to support not just ELLs but all students in the school to develop their literacy skills.

A Culture of Collaboration

We have a great community. Our teachers work really well together. We talk a lot. We collaborate a lot. We don't have that issue of ENL being a separate entity I guess or pushed by the wayside. It's incorporated. We communicate.
- ENL teacher

Throughout the school and the district, educators described Van Rensselaer as having a collaborative culture. Teachers described working together to plan lessons as well as develop curriculum for horizontal and vertical alignment. Grades 3, 4, and 5 are taught collaboratively, with one teacher focusing on math and science and the other focusing on ELA and social studies with a shared group of students. ENL teachers work with classroom teachers to ensure that instruction is aligned and that ELLs are working on the same standards and curriculum as their peers. Three teachers are assigned to work with ELLs in Van Rensselaer: the main elementary

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.

ENL teacher is assigned to grades K-4, another ENL teacher splits her time among schools, working with students in grades 4- 12, and a third teacher works with ELLs in grades preK-K and also provides reading intervention services for grades 2-4.

A Closer Look

These practices – universally high standards and rigor for students, a focus on literacy instruction for all students, and a culture of collaboration – 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

I mean we’re really aligning with the Common Core. We’re really trying to be very diligent about giving those kids the lessons that they’re going to be needing and lead them on to get them where they need to be. – ENL teacher

Aligning Curriculum to Help ELLs Meet the Standards

Teachers reiterated that they all follow the curriculum, which has been carefully aligned to the state standards. This is the case even for beginning English learners. For example, when ENL teachers teach beginning ELLs in stand-alone classes, they find out what the classroom teacher is doing and then mirror that, but with scaffolds appropriate to their language level. One ENL teacher attributed the success of their students to the fact that the ENL teachers hold students to very high standards. They work on the same standards as the classroom teachers and expect students to rise to their high expectation.

This practice requires ENL teachers to collaborate closely with classroom teachers so that they know which standard(s) and supporting skills are the focus of a lesson. An ENL teacher said, “We follow their curriculum, what the teachers have developed based on the Common Core curriculum. We’re communicating with the teachers, following their curriculum, looking at the standards. . . . Whatever the content may be at the time . . . , we’re doing that in our classroom.”

Reiterating this emphasis on aligning ENL and mainstream classroom instruction closely, another ENL teacher explained,

It’s something that not a lot of ENL teachers [in other districts] do, and I think it’s important for me to mention, and I do this because I think that it’s effective and I see results with this. A lot of ENL teachers . . . do not give students the opportunity to work on materials in the classroom that they’re doing in other classes. . . . But we find opportunities to teach what [the mainstream classroom teacher] is doing in a classroom by pulling. Okay, so [Mrs. X] is teaching narrative writing. Okay, I’m going to do a mini-lesson on narrative writing this week. . . . And I think that that’s important and that brings success, and it’s a lot of work for an ENL teacher.

Integrating Skills within the Curriculum

With ENL teachers and mainstream teachers collaborating so that all students are focused on the same curriculum and the same standards, language instruction is fully integrated into the work of the lessons. ENL faculty reported that the language functions of reading, writing, speaking, listening and the complementary building blocks of grammar and vocabulary are all taught through the classroom curriculum at an appropriate level for students. One ENL teacher explained what this looks like in stand-alone and integrated small-group instruction:

I'm modifying the content of the weekly theme. We're reading. We're writing. We're doing post-reading. We're getting the grammar in there as well. I'm not just pushing grammar, speaking or listening by itself. We're doing that through the content and pushing that through the reading, the writing, and we get to something in the writing where it's related to grammar. That happens every day.

Integrating language skills into the classroom content depends on appropriate scaffolding and differentiation, according to the ENL teachers. Each group may be different and may need a different type of support to access the curriculum. According to one teacher, integrating the skills leads to important discussions and interactions with students, enabling teachers to tap into students' higher-order thinking skills. One ENL teacher explained,

So if we're reading as a small group, I'm asking questions about things they're seeing. . . I'm asking questions about the types of words we're seeing, what kinds of words are these. . . . So I'm not just strictly teaching a grammar lesson. I may, depending on the need of that group, but I'm really more talking through discussion as we're writing and talking about things as we're looking at actual writing. Through mentor texts, we're talking about words that authors use and why we speak this way and what it means. We're doing a lot of that more than me sitting and saying, "This is what this means."

Student Achievement as the Ultimate Goal

Educators at Van Rensselaer uniformly identified students' academic achievement as the ultimate goal. With this goal in mind, however, teachers, district and school leaders, and support staff identified several crucial components underlying achievement. District leaders pointed to the importance of health and wellness in meeting their goal. To attend to this need, the district provides breakfast and lunch, dental, medical, and vision care, as well as clothing drives and food drives. The superintendent described her view of the multiple factors related to student achievement as she discussed her vision for the district:

We nurture [the students] here. We take care of them, but we also hope to instill independence in them and a sense of responsibility so that when they do leave, and they then venture out wherever they choose, they go with a sense of accomplishment for themselves, a sense of confidence in the sense of responsibility to know that whatever course they take in life, they're the ones making those decisions now. So we hope we instill that in them.

Several educators mentioned a student who began at Van Rensselaer as an ELL and who graduated as valedictorian of her high school class. To many, this student demonstrates what is possible for ELLs with the right mix of nurture and rigor.

Nevertheless, along with such success stories, stories of struggle were also among those that district leaders shared. For instance, as one district leader explained, despite a variety of supports in place, discussed above, when an ELL arrives in the district, the unexpected can be expected.

And it's like, what do they have? Don't know. Can they speak any English? Don't know. Have they had any education? Don't know. How long have they been here? Don't know. Where are they coming from? Don't really know. Ok, so here's this fourteen-year-old student that chronologically should be in ninth grade, and we have no idea if they've had education. They don't speak a word of English. I've got to put them into a classroom because the law says so. And they get off the school bus in the morning wearing flip flops, shorts and a tank shirt and it's fourteen below zero.

Despite the myriad challenges of meeting ELLs' needs, curriculum alignment, teacher collaboration, and a sharp focus on meeting students' academic, health, and wellness needs were identified as key to their relative success.

Staff Selection, Leadership and Capacity Building

We're here for students. Adults can take care of themselves, but we're here for our students. So my philosophy is when you come into our building in the morning, you're main purpose here, everybody who's here over the course of the day, is our students. That's what you're here for.

- superintendent

District Commitment to Staffing for ELL Achievement

The district was described by many who participated in interviews and focus groups as committed to caring for ELLs. The district supports integrated coteaching, and district leaders described the recent changes to the NYS education law regarding instructional programming for ELLs (CR-Part 154) as positive. Yet they struggle to be in compliance with new mandates due to staffing and budgetary constraints.

So I think it's put a tremendous strain on the districts to meet those compliance measures because we could always use more help, and our numbers keep growing. . . . To have a teacher for virtually every grade level or for every classroom... we don't have it. We don't have the money to do so. The funding's not there. You can't put all the ENL students in one classroom because then you're really restricting their environment. So it has been a strain. We've done the best we can. But it's always more bodies would be better. It's just that the money's not there to do so.

- superintendent

Creating unique staffing arrangements has both helped to alleviate the challenge of the new mandate and also provide early intervention. The district hired a teacher to provide academic intervention at the elementary level (Tier Three, Response to Intervention), whose assignment also includes ENL instruction to Pre-K and kindergarten students. The district has a longstanding universal Pre-K program, and demonstrates its commitment to educating this population by

intervening early with language services so that ELL students will be better prepared to succeed in kindergarten.

An ENL teacher described how the district and school leadership supports the work of the ENL department:

Administrators are on board. Our principal, specifically, is pushing for us, which I think is great. They're not forgetting us. . . . We do have three [ENL teachers] in Kindergarten, which is amazing and a huge support, and we're now providing -- under the State mandate -- we are providing ELL support in the Pre-K level, funding another position. So we're trying to get it right away; from the get go we're giving them support. So that, to me, shows the district is making a good attempt administratively to support them and help the families. We are providing a lot of money for interpretation, which wasn't the case before. They're putting that into the budgets. They're looking closer at them and what the [CR] Part 154 is saying to them to make sure we're meeting that.

ENL Teacher Leadership

At Van Rensselaer, ENL teachers work as leaders in the school as they advocate for ELLs and help district and school leaders to meet their needs. When asked about the academic achievement of their ELL students, most educators attributed the success of the students to the hard work and dedication of the ENL teachers.

In interviews and focus groups, faculty said that ENL teachers work to obtain resources for students and then help classroom teachers to integrate new materials into their curricula. This requires a commitment to collaboration and a coordinated effort to ensure that teachers are aware of ELLs' needs and the resources available to meet those needs. One teacher said of her coteaching ENL colleague, "She brings in a lot of resources. She spends a lot of time researching different programs. She actually had the school purchase a program just for the ELLs, and then she actually coordinates with the teachers and although she doesn't really have to and with all the different planning times, she does try to contact them by phone or email, and she'll try to see what everybody's doing and try to work on vocabulary, writing, whatever it is that we're doing. She wants to try to make sure she's building their skills in *all* the areas."

Another teacher corroborated this sentiment, saying, "And I feel like if the teachers don't know what to do with a particular child, especially the beginners that come in; she has a lot of great resources that she can give the teachers. . . . So she is always researching and always has been... a huge part of [our success]."

Classroom teachers expressed appreciation for the collaborative spirit of the ENL teachers. As discussed above, ENL teachers support the curriculum of the mainstream classroom, which means they need to be aware of what is being taught each day. The collaboration also goes beyond curriculum. Faculty reported that ENL teachers will often help them to communicate with parents and also help them bridge any cultural gaps. A teacher who attributed some of the success of the ELL students to her ENL coteaching colleague said,

She always knows what I'm doing. I don't know how. She follows the curriculum map, and if her kids are in my room -- and I shouldn't say 'my' room, in 'our' room -- and we're in the thick of something, she lets them stay. . . . She's always willing to pitch in. She doesn't say like, "Oh, that's my lunch," or "That's my prep." She's always willing, and with parents too. If I can't understand them and I'm willing to call, but sometimes I really can't understand them and I don't want to insult anybody, she'll get the interpreter in and she'll call the parent for me.

School leaders expressed a similar level of respect for the role that teachers play in the success of the ELL students. The principal discussed the leadership demonstrated by the lead elementary ENL teacher:

[She] has really been the one who has worked closely with the teachers and I think the biggest thing in working with [her] is she stays on top of things. She does communicate with teachers what's going on and probably the number one thing for her is that when you observe her, there are very high expectations for the students . . . , meaning not that I would presume other schools would maybe have lower expectations, but it's a very curricular-based level, with literacy-strong instruction that I could observe . . . So when she pulls them out, I really feel they're getting high-level, very intense instruction, and you can kind of see it. Do the kids struggle a bit? Yes, but they achieve. They'll get there. It's a journey. It's a process. But she gets them there.

In interviews, the ENL teachers confirmed that they expect a lot from students and that they work closely with teachers to make sure the ELL students progress and grow academically. These teachers talked about referring to the online curriculum maps weekly and also meeting with teachers whenever possible so that they are aware of the classroom teachers' plans. They also described several administrative duties that they take on, including arranging for interpreters and document translation, attending meetings regarding instructional programming, and scheduling instructional time (for pushing into classes and pulling students out for stand-alone instruction).

Professional Development to Build Capacity

Educators in Van Rensselaer Elementary described being well prepared to teach the Common Core curriculum due to both embedded and outside professional development. ENL teachers reported that they have participated in several professional development activities to expand their knowledge base regarding state policy, instructional strategies, and resources related to ELLs. For classroom teachers, most of their professional development regarding the instruction of ELLs is done by the ENL teachers in the district, but with assistance from math and literacy coaches as well.

An ENL teacher reported, "We really get a ton of PD. We're really trying our best to find out all of what New York State is requiring of us." She elaborated on some of the ways she and others have developed their capacities to meet ELLs' needs:

We've really just tried to improve ourselves—follow more closely what's required of us and make sure we're doing as much as we can to follow what New York State

recommends and work as a whole group. We have extended faculty meeting times where we try to bring in some training. We're getting a person in May to come in and do some whole-school training for ELLS with us... kind of working with the ELA shifts [in the Common Core Standards] and how it's affecting the ELLS and what we can do in the classrooms to help them succeed. That's going to be our focus.

ENL teachers also described bringing best practices back to the school and sharing ideas with classroom teachers; and their classroom teaching colleagues expressed confidence in and appreciation for this kind of turnkey training. For example, ENL teachers' efforts to better understand the state's policy mandates are brought "back to the district to share."

Included in the efforts of ENL teachers to remain up to date with policy changes and other topics regarding teaching English language learners, they participate in a regional Professional Learning Community (PLC) that provides the opportunity to collaborate with ENL teachers from other schools. A Van Rensselaer ENL teacher described the PD work of the regional PLC:

This is my third year doing it and it's really awesome. So we get grants... We've written curriculum that's aligned to Common Core. We've written ENL recommendations, like what you can do to support your ENL students as you're going through the [state recommended curriculum] modules. That was the first grant we had. The second grant we had was to take this book called Common Core for the Uncommon Student, and we read some lesson ideas and then we tried them in our classroom and then wrote lesson plans and reported back to the group how they went over. And this year we have a grant to work with somebody . . . who is showing us all this cool stuff you can do with iPads. So now we're trying to link in the technology piece. It's really beneficial. Any opportunity I get just to be involved with other ENL teachers and collaborate with them or like just chew their ear off, "What are you doing? What's working? What's not working? What's your population like?" I'll do it.

With this combination of professional development activities—workshops, PLCs, turnkey training, conferences—Van Rensselaer Elementary builds capacity within the faculty. One challenge, however, is finding enough certified ENL teachers to meet staffing needs. Administrators and ENL teachers discussed how the lack of qualified teachers makes it difficult to remain in compliance with NYS mandates. One district leader said, "We do the best we can with what we have. It's just that first of all, we don't have that many ENL teachers. That's a big factor. Another thing again is resources. We don't have the means, the funds, or the resources to get extra people."

Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements

It's the hard work and dedication of the teachers. It really truly is. We have three ENL people, who really have gone over and beyond. They have spent countless hours. They are in constant contact with the parents. They stay at meetings. They help with the registration pieces. They go into the classrooms. They provide a lot of great opportunities for kids to [obtain] testing accommodations and to learn. I think we have kids that speak NO English and all of a sudden they're blossoming and doing well in tests. - district leader

I just really believe that ALL children can learn. They just need a very nurturing, supportive environment with a teacher that's just never going to give up on them and always, always expects them to do their best at all times. - ENL teacher

In interviews and focus groups, multiple faculty members and administrators acknowledged the dedication and hard work of Van Rensselaer teachers as a component of ELLs' success. Teachers described using several strategies to engage students, make curriculum accessible to all, and differentiate instruction. In the words of one ELL student when asked to describe what her teachers do to help her learn: "Well the first one is the activities, and the second one is that they're really helpful – like giving us strategies, how to do it, and giving us easy and go-with-the-flow instructions." High expectations and rigor, ENL instruction that mirrors classroom curriculum, and consistent small-group instruction stand out among the practices supporting ELL achievement at Van Rensselaer Elementary.

Rigor and High Expectations

Both classroom teachers and ENL teachers discussed their commitment to holding high expectations for all students in terms of their academic achievement as well as classroom behavior. A schoolwide behavior management program rewards students for following directions, being respectful, and making good decisions. In discussing his vision for the school, the principal said, "For us, it's that we're going to be polite. We're going to show pride. We're going to work hard and we're going to have fun." This vision is enacted by teachers who expect a lot from their students and employ classroom practices to support their learning.

In a stand-alone ENL class that was observed, the teacher assigned fourth-grade ELL students a four-paragraph essay in which they were to compare and contrast two baseball teams, based on what they read in a text. The teacher explained that on the NYSESLAT exam⁴, students only need to write two paragraphs, but the fourth-grade standard requires students to write a four-paragraph essay, so that is the standard she aims for with her students. To support students' writing, the teacher required students to create a T-chart with information from the text.

In a second grade stand-alone ENL class, students were observed working on writing assignments. One student said, "It's a lot!" The teacher responded, "Yes, it is a lot. Don't you feel good that you can do all this?" Multiple teachers expressed the importance of accentuating the positive to help students stretch their abilities. For example, a classroom teacher said,

And I just think...to believe in them, just know that humans are capable of great things, and every day when you go in you want them to know that you know that there's so much they can do. Find something that they did well. Just talk about it all the time. "You did your best writing yesterday at lunch, remember that?" And you'll see the kids sit right up and start writing....if you can find something good, you can go a long way with it.

Stand-Alone Classes "Mirror" Classroom ELA Content

As described above, ENL teachers explained that they work hard to create lessons for their stand-alone classes that support the ELA curriculum taught in the mainstream classrooms. They embed

⁴ The NYSESLAT exam is a NYS language proficiency exam given to ELLs each spring.

language skills into the grade-level ELA curriculum and modify texts to make them accessible to students of entering or emerging English proficiency levels. One ENL teacher described this as one of their most important instructional practices:

In the ENL classroom it's really a question of the content support that the classroom is doing. I feel that we need to be supporting them in what they're doing in the classroom, because that is where the success is going to take hold and to be able to function throughout the entire day, not just during ENL time, but the ability to function and move through the content.

She explained that this is made possible through the communication, collaboration, and professionalism of the entire faculty.

Small-Group Instruction

Classroom teachers, AIS (Academic Intervention Services) teachers, special education specialists, and ENL specialists all agreed that small-group instruction is essential for ELL achievement at the elementary level. In observations, more small-group instruction was evident in ELA than in math lessons, but teachers reported that in all areas, grouping students helps to differentiate instruction. In some classes, there may be three adults in the room, each leading a different group, or one leading the lesson and others supporting students in the class simultaneously. Teachers reported that the groups are based on students' performance, measured by benchmark tests and frequent formative assessments. As such, groups are flexible and may change from lesson to lesson, depending on the objective of the lesson. A classroom teacher explained how coteaching works to support a whole-group lesson and then small-group instruction for all students:

With whole group we also have AIS remedial staff coming in on alternate days. When we do whole group, everybody's together and I'm supporting and [my coteacher is] teaching, or I'm teaching and they're supporting or when that third person's in the room, [my coteacher] is taking the two high-ability groups and then I'm taking the lowest, and then the support staff is taking the other group. That's their whole-group instruction. They'll then work in smaller groups, so we can really, really hone in on the skills that they're getting and be on the same topic, but really at their level. And all of the groups are based on the [benchmark and formative] assessments that we take. So they're changing all the time, which is nice.

Small-group instruction allows teachers to focus on learning strategies, which children mentioned in their interviews as being helpful for accessing content. For example, one fourth grade student talked about "sailboat spelling" as a useful strategy:

Well we had spelling tests every time, and this helps me like – T-E-A-M-M-A-T-E – do like diagonally and then like . . . and then cross out these other ones. And then it helps me.
-ELL student

Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis and Use of Data

The expectation is really just for the child to make positive growth throughout the school year. I look for the same things with our ELLs. Where were you in September? Where are you in June? Are you progressing? . . . So when I review the assessments and the benchmarks, it's like any other subgroup, any student: If you're not growing, why? What's going on? What can we tweak? What can we change? Fortunately, it seems like good quality instruction leads most of our students and our ELLs to good positive growth.
-principal

Educators in Van Rensselaer use benchmark testing to monitor student progress, to determine which students qualify for RTI (Response to Intervention) or AIS services, and to group students by ability for classroom instruction. For ELL students, scores on the NYSESLAT are also used to determine student growth. Data are used by the school to set goals and monitor progress toward meeting goals. Educators agreed that student progress and growth on classroom and benchmark assessments are most important and are prioritized over students' scores on state assessments.

A Unified Focus on Monitoring Student Growth through Formative Assessment

The focus on monitoring student progress and growth through formative assessment was reiterated by many. A classroom teacher explained, "Of course it's about getting our students where they should be, but we feel like, and I know my principal will say this too, we're teaching and we're doing what we're supposed to do, and we're seeing progress in our students, then that's where it is." The way educators accomplish this is through consistent formative assessment with immediate and clear feedback.

An ENL teacher described using frequent checks for understanding during instruction as well as data from classroom test scores and other assignments to guide her instruction. She said,

I'm assessing them through their weekly tests that the teachers will touch base with me about. You know, "Where was the struggle on that?" With the [ELA series] specifically, it kind of has different components, whether it's comprehension or there's a language piece in there or there's a writing piece, so it will kind of say this is your score. I do a lot of their assessment through their work. We're doing a lot of writing. There's a weekly writing piece that I do with them that takes a couple of days, so I'm working through that with them. We're using rubrics for the writing for grade levels, so I use those.

In observations of stand-alone ENL instruction, the ENL teacher was observed working one-on-one with students on their writing and giving immediate feedback for improvement. Classroom teachers as well reported using daily homework assignments, classwork assignments, weekly quizzes, and chapter tests to gauge students' progress. In addition, classroom instruction is arranged for frequent comprehension checks and immediate feedback. A special education teacher in a focus group reported:

When we're working in a whole group, if there are students that I'm noticing or [the classroom teacher] is noticing, that don't get something or just caught my eye, they will raise their hand and say, "I'm really not getting this." So if one of us is doing the whole

group, the other one is taking one to the back with their notebook and whatever and we're working on it. It's usually five minutes and they're back to their seat, "Oh, I get it." Like a lightbulb went off. So a lot of it is just very quick intervention. That way they're not getting to the end and not knowing what to do. . . . I do that a lot with the kids in the room.

Educators did not express concern or stress about teacher evaluations being tied to student assessment scores. Instead, they expressed confidence that they could demonstrate student growth and that their work was well respected by school and district leaders.

Benchmark Testing for Data-Driven Instruction

As indicated above, small-group instruction is used consistently, with groupings determined through quarterly benchmark testing and frequent formative assessments. Using the data from these assessments, teachers are able to determine skill deficiencies and arrange students in like-ability groups. A teacher explained how benchmark testing supports data-driven instruction:

We do use a computer-based program called STAR for the elementary. So I use that as a tool. What it does is it will give me the lexile level for each student. So I use that for my reading groups. It gives you information about, based on testing, what specific things the students need to work on, so I use it as a tool. It will also allow me to group the students by who I have and it will print out for a class what those students had together similarly struggled with. So I'll be able to plan my lessons from that as well.

All students take the benchmark ELA and math tests, but ELLs also take the NYSESLAT language proficiency exam annually. This exam determines students' growth and helps teachers to gauge levels of instruction as well as instructional programming for ELLs. Teachers reported that it is a challenge to prepare ELLs for the NYSESLAT exam in addition to the state assessments, since they are quite different in format and structure. Teachers reported that ELLs are often "tested-out" by June when they take the NYSESLAT, since they've already sat for so many other exams. Regardless, the data from the NYSESLAT, along with benchmark testing and formative classroom assessments, help teachers develop a complete picture of students' strengths and weaknesses.

Recognition, Interventions and Adjustments

They're [the teachers] very, very dedicated, and the kids are very dedicated to learning. It's just wonderful to be able to see that.

- district leader

Educators repeatedly said that when it comes to ELLs, they benefit, like all other students who need them, from on-time intervention and RTI systems. These are facilitated through staffing arrangements in which specialists are assigned multiple roles to maximize their impact as they work with AIS, special education, and ELL students.

Flexible Staffing for On-Time Interventions

Several teachers at Van Rensselaer have dual certifications (elementary education-special education, elementary education-literacy, ENL-literacy, ENL-special education, elementary education-ENL) so that teachers are capable of performing multiple instructional roles. As one

teacher explained, “We have a lot of teachers who are literacy certified, just to give [students] the best support they can get in all areas because it seems a huge, huge concern is the literacy piece.”

As mentioned earlier, one teacher has a joint position as an RTI Tier 3-ENL specialist. She pulls out small groups of Tier 3 students and provides remediation and reteaching. This teacher also teaches ENL at the pre-K and Kindergarten levels. ENL services are provided to Pre-K students as an early intervention, with the hope that students will become proficient in English sooner in their academic careers.

An ENL teacher who is also certified in literacy explained that she was able to create an extra class for ELLs who need extra reading support aside from their ENL programming. She uses an intervention text series to support these students. With this flexibility, teachers are able to multitask, and in doing so, meet the needs of all students.

Flexible Grouping of Students Allows for Inclusive RTI Processes

Throughout the school, small-group instruction (especially in ELA) is an instructional norm. With small-group instruction and several teachers who push in to provide ENL services or RTI/AIS services, there are often two or three teachers in the room. Classroom teachers take advantage of this by grouping students by ability so that students are working with peers at a higher level, on grade level, or in remediation. Depending on the topic and the specific circumstances of their need, students flexibly move in and out of groups. An AIS teacher explained, “It could be a child was absent for three days and would just join a lower group because they need to catch up and then they can go back.”

With ELLs, this flexible grouping is no different. An AIS teacher explained:

So we have to kind of coordinate where they belong essentially. We’re going to come up with four groups. They’re getting that remediation with me usually, unless obviously they’ve been here for a few years and depending upon where they’re at. Maybe the following year they’ll move up or whatever the case is. But it’s all on an individual basis and then from year-to year we see the growth that they’ve made.

In classroom observations, ELLs were seen working in grade-level groups and also AIS groups and participating with their mainstream classmates in both situations. An ELL described working in small groups: “Sometimes when another teacher went in my room and we go into reading groups. I went with [classroom teacher] and then every time I read and I don’t know a word, I try to sound it out and my teacher helps me.” Another ELL expressed her understanding of ability grouping for remediation or re-teaching, saying, “Um, I don’t think I need more help because if we do, she would send us to [the AIS teacher] at the back table, and for the other group who almost knows it, it goes with [the classroom teacher] at the horseshoe table.”

Reiterating that they do for the ELLs what they do for all students, one classroom teacher talked about how the ENL teacher works in her room like this:

On some occasions she’ll pull a small group, but we’ll also include other students that are not ENL students with that group, just basically students who need a little bit of extra

help. So the ENL students are not treated as different from the rest of the group, just maybe they need a little extra help. But there are other kids who need extra help, too. So they're involved with that, as well. So it kind of, I don't know, makes them feel a little more comfortable, makes everybody feel a little bit more comfortable that they're not singled out for their language.

In a Nutshell

Educators in Van Rensselaer Elementary School pride themselves on being a hard-working and dedicated faculty who collaborate and communicate to provide differentiated and individualized instruction for ELLs. With a unified focus on literacy instruction, students are given a strong foundation to meet grade-level standards. Educators are committed to creating a warm and welcoming environment for all students and believe that creating a nurturing culture helps English learners to feel comfortable and confident at school. ENL teachers work in close collaboration with school and district leaders to obtain interpreters and translators, create workable schedules, manage compliance with state regulations, and build capacity to support ELLs through embedded professional development. These practices and processes support English language learner achievement schoolwide and enable them and their families to become integrated members of the school community.

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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.