

Promising Practices for Supporting Achievement of English Language Learners

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Case Study: Guilderland Elementary School

Guilderland Central School District

I say at every meeting it's a blessing to work in this building because people are incredibly collaborative and care about each other.

– teacher



School Context

The residential suburb of Guilderland is known for its parks and libraries as well as busy shopping plazas that line each side of the main route through town. Like many other suburbs around the state, Guilderland, has become increasingly diverse in recent years. Along with highly educated Chinese and Korean families, Guilderland has also become the home of working-class immigrant and refugee families from the Middle East, South Asia, and Micronesia.

Serving approximately 5,000 students from a population of approximately 35,000, Guilderland Central School District's mission is "To inspire all students to be active life-long learners, able to achieve their highest potential in a demanding and ever-changing global community."

Recognized as an exemplary district in New York State¹, teachers describe the district climate as "a great community, very kids centered, and definitely all about success with kids".

With 548 students enrolled, Guilderland Elementary School (GES) has seen its English language learner (ELL) population increase by 300% in the last decade. Although white students whose home language is English still comprise the majority, GES houses a larger number of the district's ELL population compared to other elementary schools in the district. As the population of students classified as ELLs surpassed 11%, GES increased its staff to include four English as a new language (ENL²) teachers, a reading specialist who works primarily with ELLs, as well as a Director of ENL Services. Though the fraction of economically disadvantaged students at GES is around one-third that of New York State overall, district leaders and teaching staff recognize that many of the ELL families in their district fall into this category.

¹ According to the school district website (<http://www.guilderlandschools.org/district/aboutus/aboutus.cfm>); Guilderland Central School District finished sixth on the *Albany Business Journal*'s list of best school districts in the region (<http://www.bizjournals.com/albany/news/2016/06/24/top-area-school-districts-in-albany-for-2016.html>).

² English as a New Language (ENL) has replaced the term English as a Second Language (ESL) in NYS.

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

	Guilderland Elementary School	Guilderland Central School District	New York State
Grades Served	K- 5	K-12	K-12
Total Enrollment	548	4,909	2,649,039
Economically Disadvantaged	18%	16%	54%
English Language Learners	11%*	4%	8%
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution			
African-American	5%	4%	18%
Hispanic/Latino	4%	3%	25%
White	67%	79%	45%
Multiracial	4%	3%	2%
Other	21%	11%	10%

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

*59 ELL K-2 and 21 ELL gr.3-5 in 2/2016 (principal email 2/5/16).

Guilderland Elementary School met the criteria of “odds-beating” because the difference between expected and actual average performance based on the 2012-13 and 2013-14 state ELA and mathematics assessments was over 1.3 standard deviations higher than that of other schools around the state and statistically significantly higher in seven out of the sixteen comparisons. Thus, the school is distinctive for exceeding expected performance in multiple subjects and grade levels.

This case studyⁱ describes how Guilderland 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

Supporting Literacy Learning with Multiple Resources

We have a lot of reading support. – district leader

The literacy program is a highlight at Guilderland Elementary School. With a number of elementary reading teachers, including a Reading Recovery and ENL teacher devoted solely to reading instruction, students at GES enjoy what educators reported as sufficient resources to support literacy development. In particular, the implementation of a Reading/Writing Workshop model and a Summer Book Exchange were touted by staff as two aspects of their programming and services that have positive effects on their ELL student population. As one teacher expressed it, GES is especially prepared to support the literacy learning of ELLs since the school’s “two primary concerns” are “reading comprehension and writing.”

Reaching Out to Families

I think one of the biggest assets that our ENL teachers bring to the table is their commitment. They get to know these families inside and out and they develop a trust with them.
– support staff

Outreach efforts to the families of ELLs are a high priority for ENL teachers. They take it upon themselves to “establish a strong connection with the child and their family,” as a teacher reported. Described by a district leader as “amazing advocates for their students,” teachers at GES reported routinely making phone calls and home visits and developing extracurricular programs to engage parents and make them and their children “feel comfortable learning and growing together.”

Nurturing Embedded and Extensive Professional Learning Opportunities

The work ethic here and professionalism was beyond anything that I’d experienced [elsewhere].
– school leader

District and school leaders praised their teaching staff as serious professionals who seek out opportunities to stay on the cutting edge of their field. Teachers not only reported attending conferences and working with university academics to develop new skills and gain new knowledge, but also freely and regularly sharing their knowledge with each other. As one teacher put it, “Every day you learn something new from a colleague.” Skills and knowledge derived from such embedded and extensive professional learning opportunities are expected of staff and are attributed to aiding in the implementation of new instructional programs as well as problem solving. In the words of one teacher, “We have a lot of expertise in this building.”

A Closer Look

These practices – supporting young readers with multiple literacy resources, reaching out to families, and nurturing embedded and extensive professional learning opportunities – 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

We have such wonderful diversity in this school and in our student population that it’s something that we strive to embrace.
– district leader

As the ELL population of GES spiked and the Common Core Standards were adopted statewide, the school benefitted from a tradition of collaborative goal setting and systematic processes for curriculum revision. District leaders explained in detail how they go about organizing the continual and collaborative goal-setting process with a keen and clear vision to stay ahead of the curve of changes in their district student population as well as state standards.

Setting Goals Collaboratively

A district leader described the importance of unifying staff through the yearly tradition of assembling nearly 150 people to a “district priorities meeting.” Each year, this process involves reviewing the mission statement and reflecting on whether school goals and practices reflect its intent. In the words of one district leader, “All of our school leaders and I would say a large chunk of our teaching staff participate in the actual drafting of those [goals].”

Even though Guilderland’s staff are proud of their relative success, they believe it is important to continually revisit their priorities and goals to avoid becoming complacent. A district leader reported, “We get recognized all the time, . . . but I think there’s a real danger to get comfortable. . . . The world is changing at a ridiculous rate and so what kinds of things do we do with kids that make them ready for that?” District leaders noted that while goals are set collaboratively, they rely upon educators’ teamwork in the schools to set them in motion.

Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS) Alignment with Diverse Learners in Mind

According to a teacher, staff members started “looking at” the CCLS “right away before [they were] really implemented.” Through monthly meetings, staff at the school began to work on ways to align their curriculum to the Common Core. The process was described by one teacher in the following way: “The first thing we did was decide how it [the state’s CCLS module curriculum] was aligned with ours and with what we were already doing, then looking for places where it wasn’t aligned, and thinking about what we might need to do.” Throughout the process, “constant revision and reflection and redesign” was needed to make sure the alignment went smoothly, reported a school leader.

The workshop model discussed in more detail below proved useful as the CCLS rolled out, according to teachers. One teacher explained that the workshops “aligned so well with Common Core,” and another mentioned that only small tweaks were needed to adapt the workshop to align the curriculum to the Common Core. According to a district leader, Guilderland’s ELA curriculum had already been strongly aligned to the CCLS to begin with, so no “sweeping changes” were needed or required when the workshop model was implemented. Although the ELA program was not significantly revised, one district leader reported that alignment to the Common Core facilitated a “pretty significant change” to the math program.

The net impact of the need to align to the CCLS was closer attention to integrating ELLs. One teacher explained, for example, that teachers started paying more attention to how to ensure that ELLs “got exposed to the same curriculum as the general ed[ucation] kid in the classroom.” English instruction, according to another teacher, shifted from “learning English separately to . . . learning English as you’re learning what’s in your classroom.” Other teachers noted the challenges that the CCLS pose for ELLs. The difficult vocabulary, in particular, was mentioned by several teachers as a challenge for ELLs, as well as the “higher-level thinking” required of students. “They need time to work on it,” reported one teacher.

The hard work that went into aligning the curriculum to the CCLS, was perceived by teachers as resulting in a “strong curriculum” that is “common” across all grade levels. According to one, the “consistency across the building . . . in terms of the curriculum, and the type of instruction,” meant that she could “count on the fact that in the first grade, it’s not the first time our kids have seen some of the things that we teach.”

Staff Selection, Leadership and Capacity Building

We're lucky to be here. - teacher

Supportive Leaders

The most frequent descriptor used by teachers and support staff when discussing Guilderland's district leadership was the word "supportive." For example, a support staff member commented that she found "the district leadership ... to be very supportive, wanting to look at their practices and move the district forward and improve achievement for all of our students." Another teacher commented that none of the success of the ENL program at Guilderland "would be possible if it wasn't for [district leaders] being supportive of us and the ENL program."

Guilderland staff also expressed that, in addition to being supportive, leaders were always available to help them. One support staff member commented, "[School leader] is very approachable. . . . He would be someone I could talk to." Another teacher went on to say of the same school leader that his leadership style is "not a very demanding one.... It's just very laid back. There's always opportunity for communication."

Several district leaders echoed the imperative of supporting Guilderland staff. One district leader elaborated on this leadership priority: "If [teachers] feel supported, what I've found so far, is that people are willing to do it. If they have an administrator who's going to stand behind or beside them and say, 'Alright I'm here with you. This is hard. I get it. I've been there. Let's problem solve. Let's figure this out.' They're fine." Another district leader reported that a supportive leadership style also "gives the teacher some freedom to work and some ability to bend a little bit and it's not always a hard line of 'I expect this and I expect that.' There has to be that level of flexibility in there too."

Professional Development

District leaders sought to provide staff with numerous professional development opportunities. Described as "highly valued" by a district leader, the desire for high quality relevant professional development was also seen as an important characteristic for any potential hires. In speaking to the significance of professional development at Guilderland, another district leader reported that his first impression of the teaching staff was a "dedicated group of teachers who take their own personal learning very, very seriously."

ENL teachers, specifically, engaged in several forms of professional development. They pointed to recent in-house training and workshops dedicated to providing reading support. In addition, they attended conferences and training events at a regional support center for teachers. District leaders were able to support many of these opportunities by using grant moneys. In addition to workshops and conferences, ENL teachers described visiting an elementary school in New York City that serves one of the largest ENL populations in the state. "It was an incredible environment to see. They truly had co-teaching. They had bilingual classrooms. They had it all," reported one.

Mainstream classroom teachers also reported engaging in ongoing professional development, especially in regards to the implementation of the Reading and Writing Workshop model. By collaborating with university-based academics, teachers felt that they were really able to stay "on

the cutting edge” of their profession. Aside from small in-house workshops led by ENL teachers, however, no professional development specific to teaching ELLs was mentioned by mainstream teachers.

Hiring Learners

According to district and school leaders, new staff at GES are selected on a number of criteria, with one characteristic mentioned by leader after leader: The teacher’s desire to be a learner. For example, one school leader said they wanted their teachers to be willing to be “professional learner[s].” Another school leader reiterated this priority when asked what she looked for in a potential hire: “Those lifelong learners, those people that are really -- just they want it and you know they feel it.” According to these leaders, teachers must be not only willing to learn from their peers and mentors, but also be eager to keep on the cutting edge of their discipline. One leader said he looked for teachers who are “always trying to better themselves. . . . They want to go to conferences. They want to learn something new. They want to take classes at the university.” They must, he continued “understand that every single day you will probably learn something that you didn’t know the day before, and be comfortable with that and hungry for that.”

Schoolwide Collaboration

The climate of the school was described numerous times as collaborative. Said one district leader,

I’ve been in this district 21 years now. This has always been a district where collaboration is really at the heart of [it]. It’s not like I have to actively encourage it anymore. I think it’s almost like an expectation of everyone that we are going to work together as a team to figure something out. . . . I think it’s in the fabric of the district.

In the words of a teacher, “the common goal” of caring for students and encouraging their academic well-being ensured a team effort among staff at the school. “I don’t think anybody feels as if you’re in it alone,” she said.

Monthly staff reports, curriculum meetings, and team meetings were mentioned as formalized mechanisms where leaders, teachers, and support staff can collaborate. However, many of those interviewed also described the importance of constant, ongoing informal meetings and conversations among colleagues. One teacher said of her colleagues, “We talk all the time. We email each other.” She explained that the staff at Guilderland had a sense of “sharing that I’ve never seen in another district . . . sharing of materials. If someone makes something, they slip something in your box or they send you an email with whatever they’ve made.”

This collaborative approach extends to children as well. Teachers described several “team building efforts” in place at the school such as “Kiddie Time,” which brings together different kindergarten classes so children get a chance to know each other. One teacher told us that a big priority of hers was to build “classroom communities” by having her students “see beyond their small circle, to try to include everyone.” Another staff member described her efforts to create bonds between her students by pairing up ELLs and non-ELL students in a “buddy” system. ELL students interviewed also commented positively on the collaborative atmosphere. One explained that “students also help other students to understand. It’s pretty cool.” Another ELL said, “It’s

really great being a student here because kids always treat me nicely, and I always treat them nicely.”

Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements

This is a building that works together. - teacher

High-quality literacy education was highlighted by staff at the school as a major focus of their instructional program. With Reading and Writing Workshop at the center, ongoing professional development, and Reading Recovery specialists, students are provided with a “cutting-edge” literacy education. Another salient feature of the instructional program is the move towards inclusion with ENL services increasingly being provided in an integrated “push-in” rather than stand-alone “pull-out” model.

Pushing into Mainstream Classrooms

Teachers and school leaders described the transition to a more inclusive integrated model of instruction in generally positive terms, although many mentioned the difficulties they encounter as they do this. On the one hand, several staff members maintained that pulling out some ELLs is beneficial, especially for beginners, at least, as one put it, “until they get some language”. Another teacher reiterated the benefits of stand-alone ENL instruction. As one explained, when pulling out ELLs, they “can really benefit from working in a small group to practice making more English, and the curriculum is quite modified. . . . It’s more difficult for them to participate in their [mainstream] classroom.” A school leader voiced some concerns over ELLs in mainstream classrooms explaining that at times, “They’re lost. . . . They’re not really focused.” However, in an ENL classroom, he continued “[ELLs] are in a smaller group. There are fewer of them. . . . They’re trying to speak.”

Despite these concerns, many of those interviewed said they believed that integrated instruction had many merits, and that the transition to a more inclusive model was worth bumps in the road. Linguistic and cultural immersion was reported as one of the primary benefits of keeping ELLs in mainstream classrooms. One teacher felt that “the presence of language all around them” contributed to their English development, while another said that immersing ELLs in mainstream classrooms allowed them to “[pick] up language, and even behaviors, social skills, from the students in the class.” A school leader also asserted that the “best supports are not always the supports that are outside the classroom. . . . [They] are provided to the students in the midst of the learning experience with full access to the curriculum.”

Staff members did not hesitate to mention what a district leader characterized as initial “tension” between mainstream and ENL teachers during the transition to a more integrated model of instruction. A school leader reported that some ENL teachers, at first, felt like “glorified TAs [teaching assistants],” and not like true co-teachers. To manage these difficulties, staff members at Guilderland Elementary have worked towards developing a more genuine form of co-teaching between ENL and mainstream teachers. These changes have included more collaboration in terms of lesson planning, with a focus on vocabulary that may be challenging for ELLs. Additionally, ENL teachers are able to modify lessons, “target [his or her] students in small reading groups, or check in with them during writing time,” reported a teacher. The goal,

according to one teacher, is to “learn new ways to provide that same service [to ELLs] in the classroom” without making them feel “separated.”

With this transition to more integration still a “work in progress,” in the words of a district leader, both leaders and teachers sounded confident in their progress. As one teacher put it, “I have this extra person who also is sharing that weight and responsibility for [ELLs] and can give me tips and we talk about it.” Another mainstream teacher referred to ENL teachers as “experts” with ELLs, adding that “they really know their students holistically, what their family life is like.”

With continuing planning and collaboration, teachers expressed feeling that the integrated model could be successful. One teacher noted that students already “see us as co-teachers.” She continued,

I see that myself and the ENL teacher are like equals in the life of this one student. We're equally important and I feel that under that legislation [Part 154³] I cannot just brush this student off on this ENL teacher. I really feel like we have a team responsibility here.

Scaffolding for Test Preparation

Scaffolding was mentioned by teachers and district leaders as a useful instructional practice for ELLs, especially in preparation for tests. ENL and mainstream teachers worked together to adopt the practices of modifying vocabulary and scaffolding off of previous lessons. This process, according to an ENL teacher, involves “teaching the same material but in a modified way of giving them scaffolds that they could use to break it down.” These modifications were seen as necessary, said a teacher, to “having a quality program” and promoting the success of ELLs.

The following classroom transcript demonstrates the use of scaffolding by an ENL teacher (T) with two fifth-grade students (S1 and S2) in a stand-alone writing lesson designed to prepare ELLs for upcoming state exams:

T: So you can always plan your writing – there’s space in the book to make a plan before you start writing – *we just did this with your persuasive essay* – why kids should go outside to play – you made a plan to write sentences – we are going to make boxes.

T: Can you tell me what it means when a teacher says use details?

S1: You can write more.

S2: Write something from the passage.

T: In the passage we can tell things we think and we can use words from the passage -- *just like in the persuasive passage...*

[later in the lesson]

³ 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>

T: Remember when we did our persuasive essay we used those transition words – if you still have that paper in your folder – you can use those words.

During this lesson, the ENL teacher continually built off the prior knowledge of her students by frequently making reference to an older assignment: the persuasive essay and provided graphic organizers (e.g. “the boxes”) to help the students organize their ideas.

Focusing on Literacy

One key priority mentioned by Guilderland staff was literacy development for all students. Under the leadership of the Language Arts Coordinator and through the establishment of monthly Literacy Staff Development meetings, Guilderland adopted a Reading and Writing Workshop model developed by Lucy Calkins at Teachers College. The workshop model was praised by many of the teachers interviewed. “The beauty of the Reading and Writing Workshop is that all kids can participate,” said one teacher. Another reported that it is “beneficial in so many ways, because for one it allows the kids to work at their own level of ability, so if you have for writing, for example, a fifth grader who’s . . . just learning the alphabet, that person could draw pictures in their book to show their story and then we could write the words for them.”

One teacher said that the model also allows for collaboration among students. She said, “Students are collaborating with each other in mixed groups; [mixed groups] benefit all students.” Another teacher praised the workshop model for facilitating alignment across grade levels, saying that there is now “continuity across the school that that’s how we’re teaching reading, writing – the same basic structure.” ENL teachers spoke in overwhelmingly positive terms about the workshop model, with one teacher saying that it has helped create a “strong literacy foundation” at Guilderland and that it is “extremely beneficial for ELLs.” The workshop model, said one teacher, “is really immersion in true reading, true writing experiences.”

While the workshop model has been hugely successful according to teachers and school leaders, ongoing professional development was a crucial factor to ensure its smooth implementation and continued development. According to one teacher, “We have literacy staff development once a month for all of the teachers, and on top of that teachers meet together on grade level once a month. So there’s constant outreach for professional development within the school as well as reaching out to Teachers College for continuous PD.”

Using Technology

The use of technology was mentioned by several teachers and school leaders as a tool to help ELLs succeed. Through a grant, school leaders have helped “put a lot of technology in the hands of the teachers.” Now ENL teachers have “all sorts of different things that they can use with kids” such as “iPads, Chrome Books, and iPad shuffle,” said a school leader.

Working with a technology expert, school leaders refined their applications of technology to include “apps to help with spelling, to help with phonetics, to help with learning sounds of letters.” Google Docs was also mentioned as a tool that is used in classrooms for students to work in real time on a writing assignment. One teacher described using presentation software to create “picture-heavy” presentations to help an ELL student engage in expressing his understanding of a topic.

Technology was mentioned most frequently as a tool to aid in translation, especially for new ELL students. One school leader described the utility of using Google Translate with newcomers, especially “those first few days, so they can get more comfortable asking to go to the bathroom, trying to figure out how to buy lunch.” A teacher reported the empowering potential that technology can have on students, saying that her ELL students “can always feel like they can contribute because they can pull up a thesaurus or use something [to participate].” “If you’re working with a student, and they’re not understanding the English,” explained one teacher, “you can show them if you use technology.”

During observations several instances were recorded of technology being used in classrooms with ENL and mainstream students. Out of eight classrooms observed, three classrooms had students working on computers for a quiz or using Google Docs or the program Study Jams. One teacher reported that the range of materials on the computer programs gave students some freedom to choose what they wanted to do. The usefulness of technology was apparent to ELLs as well, as one said that he didn’t use his home-language dictionary anymore since he began using the translator on his computer.

Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis and Use of Data

We use spreadsheets on every kid, so we can look and name every student who is two levels below benchmark and understand who they are and then begin to ask questions like ‘Why is that?’ and in answering the why, have some insight into what we need to do differently.

– district leader

Student progress is monitored in various ways, with staff focusing on the advancement of both student subgroups and individuals. Through the use of data monitoring programs, teachers and parents are kept informed of their childrens’ success or struggles. The monitoring efforts of school staff allow them to take note of strengths and gaps in their instructional program as well as when interventions are needed.

Disseminating Information to Parents

The school has bolstered its outreach to parents through the use of programs like School Tool to disseminate information about their child’s academic progress. Through an “information night,” parents are invited to the school to learn how to use features of the School Tool like accessing their children’s grades and state test scores, as well as other important school information. According to a teacher, the school district has worked hard at “communicating with parents to [use the program], especially when not everybody has the means to access it.” The ability to disseminate student data to families of ELLs was described as a boon in the relationship between families and the school. Because “many families [of ELLs] believe very highly in education and they’re very strong on their students,” one school leader explained, School Tool provided an effective avenue to learn about their children’s progress without having to come to school or schedule a meeting with teachers.

Monitoring Progress from Many Angles

A district leader described a combination of “ongoing conversations” about particular students as well as a formal “monitoring effort” occurring annually that “really focused on how students are responding and performing.” With the assistance of a full-time statistician on staff, the school

also tracks individual students using a program called Performance Plus. According to a district leader, “Every student in our district has a profile page, essentially, and underneath the profile page is the academic history on the performance on the state tests, going back to the start of their experience here in Guilderland.” Although district leaders mentioned efforts to disaggregate data and monitor the progress of subgroups, there was nothing in place for exclusively monitoring the progress of ELLs aside from the state test that is used to classify them.

Not disregarding the state assessment, one district leader commented on the significance of monitoring performance such as through graduation rates. “Are they going to college? Are they successful there?” She continued, “The answer to those questions is yes. . . . Ninety plus [percent] go on to four year colleges.”

Recognition, Interventions and Adjustments

We are very fortunate to have the resources we do have. – support staff

Consistent with the climate of collaboration on other matters, teachers and support staff members reported working together in a “team approach” to provide appropriate interventions for struggling students. Additionally, staff members were quick to recognize that academic interventions for ELLs were most effective when working with families. Even with the budgetary concerns raised by district leaders, teachers and support staff felt adequately-resourced to provide the interventions children need and sought to utilize those resources effectively.

Working with Families to Make Intervention Decisions

Teachers, school and district leaders, and support staff reported working with the parents of their ELL students to make interventions when needed. A support staff member explained the importance of connecting with parents: “[We] try to get an interview with the parent because that’s important in terms of developmental milestones that occur in typical child development: walking, making sounds, time that they’re making their first words, and are they meeting those milestones?”

A Team Approach to Interventions

To best understand whether an ELL student has a disability or is just struggling with the English language, staff at Guilderland use different forms of assessment with the assistance of numerous practitioners.

Support staff acknowledged the difficulties in identifying special education needs among ELL students, since the assessments and standardized measurements used to diagnose disabilities are not “normed for ELL populations,” as a school leader put it. To cope with this challenge, the Instructional Support Team (IST) has brought together a wide range of specialists to best understand the situation from a holistic viewpoint. This team includes speech pathologists, school psychologists, ENL teachers, reading teachers, special education teachers, and social workers. Careful not to jump to conclusions, members of the IST described their problem-solving techniques as a “team approach” that focuses on issues as wide-ranging as new language development, poverty, and interrupted schooling.

One example that was described at length by a leader of the support staff was the interventions made for two ELL boys who came to the school with severe hearing impairments. Without the support of hearing aids, these students “missed so much of the developmental phase and acquisition of language,” in the words of one teacher: Even though they “came up with their own way of communicating with each other,” the two boys were struggling in their classes because they could not understand their teacher, “no matter what language it was.” After being referred to the IST, they were fitted with hearing aids and given special language services. Audiologists, speech pathologists, and special education teachers assisted in the intervention and were trained on how to use the hardware provided to the boys. The children have “made tremendous progress in just a year” according to a support staff member. One of them, for example, is “actually speaking in sentences, where last year he didn’t even have words!”

Allocating Resources Effectively

The allocation of resources was described by a teacher as the “key difference in creating a quality program.” Although teachers were generally satisfied with the “sufficient” resources available to them, a district leader reported that Guilderland had “challenges just like any other district.” In particular, “multiple years of budget reductions” have created a “complicated” situation. According to one district leader, recent economic downturns have harmed the “resources available to us, and the programs have been terribly curtailed in the last few years.” These changes included 227 layoffs. In the midst of these challenges, the same district leader told us that she tried to “maximize every single dollar” and base district goals on “student needs.”

Despite the budgetary concerns of district leaders, teachers were pleased with the allocation of resources at Guilderland Elementary. In particular, several teachers mentioned their approval of the one-and-a-half-hour planning time allocated to them at the end of each day. ENL teachers also mentioned the significance of having four teachers in the department and one teacher solely devoted to reading support. The general satisfaction with resources was summed up by one support staff member who said, “We have multiple reading providers. We have multiple ENL providers. We have multiple speech providers.” She continued, “Even compared to another large suburban district I formerly worked in, we have a lot.” Federal grants and donations from the PTA were also mentioned by staff members as sources of financial support.

Recovery for Struggling Readers

In keeping with the focus on literacy development for students at Guilderland Elementary School, a Reading Recovery program serves as an intervention for struggling first-grade readers. The program is supported through a grant applied for by the district. Recovery teachers are specialists chosen by district leaders for the program who then undergo extensive weekly training for a year and continue to receive ongoing monthly professional development.

Students who are selected for the Reading Recovery program are often from the lower percentiles in literacy performance. Each Reading Recovery teacher then selects four students to work with individually. Although teachers reported that some of the selected students are ELLs, they are “careful” in their selections. “We work with the ENL department and try to figure out how long has this child been here, is this child really emergent and ready to go, or do we need to give this child more time?” The Reading Recovery teacher also reported a “very, very similar” program called “Literacy Lessons,” which is designed for ELLs and students receiving special

education services. She told us excitedly, “It’s a great program and ... it’s being piloted here [at Guilderland Elementary School].”

In a Nutshell

Guilderland Elementary School is characterized by its intensive focus on literacy instruction and support, its attention to community outreach, and embedded and extensive professional learning opportunities that are encouraged by district leaders and embraced by teaching staff. Educators attest to a high level of “professionalism” and “expertise” as well as a caring “child-focused” attitude possessed by staff members who “are always looking to do what’s best for students.” The high quality instruction offered is complemented by extracurricular activities and outreach efforts aimed at creating bridges between the school and community.

Guilderland Elementary School

Mr. Allan Lockwood, Principal

2225 Western Avenue

Guilderland, NY 12084

<http://guilderlandschools.org/guilderland/index.cfm>

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.