

Best Practices Case Study

Kristen Wilcox, June 2005

Just for the Kids-
New York

George M. Davis Jr. Elementary School *New Rochelle (NY) City School District*

School Context

The New Rochelle City School District is located in a suburb of New York City. In the 2003-04 school year, it served 10,176 students K-12. The district's student population is more diverse than the state overall, with higher percentages of African-American and Hispanic/Latino. The district also serves more English Language Learners. It serves a slightly lower percentage of students qualifying for Free Lunch, but a higher percentage of students qualifying for Reduced Lunch. George M. Davis Jr. Elementary School serves a student population similar to the New Rochelle CSD, both in its student racial/ethnic makeup and the percentage qualifying for Free Lunch.

Student Demographics 2003-04, George M Davis Elementary School^o

	George M. Davis	New Rochelle CSD	New York State
% Eligible for Free Lunch	35.5%	31.9%	37.0%
% Eligible for Reduced Lunch	6.8%	12.1%	7.2%
% Limited English Proficient	10.0%	13.1%	6.8%
<u>Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution</u>			
% African-American	26.0%	25.7%	19.9%
% Hispanic/Latino	18.9%	29.9%	19.4%
% White	49.9%	40.6%	53.7%
% Other	5.2%	3.9%	7.0%
% Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards on Grade 4 ELA Assessment	96%	84%	63%
% Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards on Grade 4 Math Assessment	96%	86%	79%

Davis is one of six elementary schools in the district. Its magnet overlay is performing arts, and the principal attributes some of the creative ways teachers differentiate their instruction and encourage all students to succeed to this focus. Davis also is diverse in many ways, and to many at Davis, this diversity is viewed as a strength. With diversity come different needs; however, the principal and teachers maintain high expectations of all students regardless of

background or previous academic achievements. This combination of diversity and high expectations guides curriculum, staff selection, instructional programs and practices and ways of monitoring performance.

Best Practices Highlights

- In the New Rochelle CSD culture, diversity is seen as strength and giving 150% is expected. Going beyond meeting standards but exceeding them is the tradition.
- At Davis Elementary School taking students from where they are to where they can go is the challenge: A challenge met through an administration that recognizes teachers' hard work, a culture of passionate caring for each child, and an attitude that "finish never is."

A Closer Look

Curriculum and Academic Goals

The Davis Elementary School Curriculum is guided by clear outcomes that focus on the "basics" while at the same time integrating content in creative ways across grade levels.

Providing Clear Outcomes

The New Rochelle CSD sets clear "Learning Outcomes" for its students that provide the "scaffold" for the work teachers do. These "Learning Outcomes" indicate what students are expected to know and be able to do in each grade level in each content area. They are aligned to the state standards and are explicitly stated in documents for parents and teachers. Based on teachers' feedback, these outcomes are continually modified to "go beyond the state standards." According to one teacher, teachers work as a "well-oiled machine" in reviewing and modifying curricula throughout the year and during summer curriculum meetings. The process includes teachers collaborating with their grade-level colleagues, articulating what outcomes currently exist, and modifying as they see necessary while still meeting and exceeding state expectations.

Focusing on the Basics

At Davis Elementary, outcomes are clear, but so too is a focus on the basics. As one teacher states, "We are a school that believes in the basics -- reading, writing, arithmetic." Another explains that Davis teachers start early with key concepts in reading, writing, and math and build on these in each grade level: "We start with some of our concepts very early; by the time we get to fourth grade, we're beyond. We are not dealing with capitalization, punctuation. By fourth I'm working on abstract comprehension skills; those basic skills are intact – I have to remind them but it doesn't take up a lot of instructional time."

Encouraging Curricular Creativity

Administrators make clear that there is a basic common core curriculum but also encourage teachers to use their skills and knowledge in creative ways. An administrator explains that if, for example, "We have a teacher whose major in college was Shakespeare – that child's teacher may have them read Shakespeare. We don't dictate these things." Encouraging curricular creativity is fostered through what one administrator characterizes as "... honest, free, and frank discussions about curriculum." It is also encouraged through magnet overlays such as Davis' Performing Arts program, which provides each Davis child with opportunities to be part of a performance.

Fostering Cohesiveness and Consistency across Grade Levels

Free discussions, the support of administration to think creatively to meet students' needs, and magnet overlays complement a cohesive and consistent curriculum. A teacher explains that "strands that build the student from K-5" are well articulated and followed. Developing habits such as using "echo back" (restating the question in the answer) are purposely integrated from kindergarten on. Teachers attribute this cohesion to being afforded the opportunity to collaborate. An environment of constant and continual revision of curriculum is fostered at the district and school levels.

Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building

The New Rochelle CSD gains community support through fiscal responsibility, creative fundraising efforts, and consistently strong leadership. The Davis school administration mentors experienced, energetic teachers who are treated as professionals.

Securing Funding for Special Programs

Where proposed property tax increases reach 8.49% and under "unrelenting, unfunded or underfunded" mandates of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), the district administration turns to several strategies for securing the funding they need to succeed. While putting before the community a \$285,000 budget and \$11.7 million capital improvements proposal, they focus on the district's ranking in the bottom quartile of 46 districts in their county for expenditure, and ranking in the top for performance. New Rochelle CSD also gets support from its Congressional representatives in securing additional funding (e.g., grants for after school programs).

Selecting and Mentoring New Staff

When selecting new staff, the New Rochelle CSD values a strong academic background and experience. Due to its proximity to New York City and its good reputation, it rarely has difficulty attracting a sizable candidate pool. The district advertises in the *New York Times*, with BOCES (Boards of Cooperative Educational Services), national publications (e.g. *USA Today*), and district recruiters participate in job fairs. Applicants are evaluated by committees of parents, teachers, and, for high school staff, students. These committees give feedback sheets and the superintendent interviews the top candidates emerging from the site committees. Three candidates then go before the Board of Education. Input from the superintendent, rating sheets from the 25-person committee, and feedback from the Board lead to a final choice. Once candidates are chosen, they are "supported, coached, and authentically supervised." A teacher recounts her experience as a new teacher at Davis, "Everyone embraces you -- helps you get going; everyone's receptive to what you bring to the table." New teachers are assigned to one person at the grade level and the other teachers at that grade level will also help advise them. In addition, the Assistant Superintendent conducts monthly meetings for new staff members.

Professionalizing Teachers

The recruitment and selection of what one administrator characterizes as a "wonderful, solid, interesting, fabulous faculty" is supported through formal and informal professional development activities and a seasoned administration that focuses on making their schools places teachers want to stay. At Davis teachers attest to the easygoing yet supportive environment, where informal conversations in hallways and meeting times happen constantly, facilitated by the principal covering classes so teachers can collaborate in this way. Teachers say they receive unconditional support from fellow teachers, and the principal values their opinions, spurring them to devise innovative ways of reaching students' needs. This environment of professional validation and mutual respect is complemented with formal professional development opportunities. The district offers a staff resource center that conducts training and meetings after

school. For example, teacher leaders (at least two from each school in a content area) and consultants from a nearby college give districtwide after-school and lunch-time workshops for teachers who want credit or who are interested in a particular topic.

“Open Door” Leadership

A teacher explains that the principal’s and assistant principal’s “doors are always open if there is a question.” This kind of leadership emerges from valuing principal’s work as well as continual leadership development, including reading extensively, going to conferences, and participating in monthly meetings to discuss issues at school and district levels. From the district to the school, administrators set high expectations for teachers, and teachers set high expectations for students. Teachers attest to making their continual improvement in meeting students’ needs a personal mission, and the principal encourages them to do so. A teacher says, “Getting praise for what I do well makes me feel like giving it to my students.”

Instructional Programs, Practices and Arrangements

In the New Rochelle CSD the “what” (curriculum) is made clear through “Learning Outcomes,” but programs, materials, instructional practices, and school-based assessments are devised at the school level.

Research-Based Instructional Programs

From the district to the school, administrators and teachers alike take into account the latest research when designing their instructional programs. They focus on project-based programs that spark each child’s interests while focusing on developing “habits of the mind.” For example, the district provides teachers with training in “Dimensions of Learning” (DOL) – a model focusing on “how well students are learning” instead of what teachers do. In addition, teachers have benefited from training in differentiated instructional techniques from a nearby university.

Differentiated Instruction and Flexible Grouping

As a city district New Rochelle has tremendous diversity -- a challenge being met through ongoing staff development on differentiation of instruction and on how to group students “flexibly.” Such programs as TERC’s *Investigations in Numbers, Data, and Space* encourage student investigation. Its focus is on hands-on math activities in which students discuss concepts and come up with inventive strategies for solving problems together. Other inquiry-based programs in science (e.g. Lawrence Hall of Science’s FOSS – Full Option Science System) are also encouraged at the district level, but ultimately decisions about which programs to adopt are left up to the school to choose and assess. Decisions about how to group students is also a school decision, and at Davis that means “flexible grouping” where students are not tracked, but rather are continually assessed and moved to the level of math and language arts instruction most appropriate for them throughout the year. In flexible grouping the top group may have 32-33 children, and the lower group may only have 10-12 so the teacher can give a lot of individualized instruction. Teachers keep track of student achievement every day and try to challenge students at their instructional level and move them to the grouping most appropriate for their needs.

Collaborative Arrangements

Grade-level and resource teacher collaboration stand out as two priorities at Davis ELEMENTARY SCHOOL. The principal makes sure that grade-level teachers have the same prep times throughout the year, at which time they can meet and collaborate. In addition, teachers in special programs such as the half-day gifted “Kaleidoscope” program attest to feeling “very much a part of the other classes.” They also use an inclusion model for at-risk and first and second grade Limited English Proficient (LEP) students whereby resource and ESL specialists

push in to classrooms; this provides all students with a common setting and common materials. Third- and fourth-grade LEPs are often pulled out.

“Whatever Works” Materials and Strategies

Davis employs a traditional approach toward language arts instruction, with many teachers employing basal readers; but individual teachers decide what materials and instructional strategies they will use and vary from basals to trade books depending on students’ needs and interests. Overall, teachers do a lot of vocabulary building and assign a lot of writing; when they read a story, to check for comprehension they might ask students to share their understandings using story wheels. Writing is a focus across all content areas. Overall the principal says, the focus is on doing “whatever works” to help children learn.

Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data

An administrator states that the district is “data driven.” For example, in response to the state assessments for ELA and Math in fourth grade, the district adopted the TONYSS (Tests of New York State Standards) in grades 2, 3, and 5, since they are better aligned to the state assessments than other tests. The data from these assessments are analyzed at the school, classroom, and child levels and then fed back to teachers. The teachers have study groups in which they meet to discuss how each child is progressing based on the types of things required on the TONYSS and state assessments. Since teachers often share students, they share observations about student progress at their grade-level meetings. In addition, teachers give unit assessments in science, social studies, and math, and in language arts use reading and writing folders for each child from the beginning of each year. There is no formal benchmarking due to the flexible grouping schedule; rather ongoing, weekly assessment includes teachers looking closely at student work and valuing how they come to their answers.

Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustments

Teachers tell stories of children coming from impoverished backgrounds and say they are there to meet “each individual child’s needs.” This dedication to meet children where they are is supported by recognizing achievement in many forms and in some cases going beyond the school day to get children the instruction they need to succeed.

Recognizing Achievement in Many Forms

The New Rochelle CSD recognizes outstanding achievement not only in academics, but also for the successes of its chess club or packed house performances or for outstanding work with special education students. These achievements are recognized in bulletins and in award ceremonies.

Going Beyond the School Day

The Davis School provides a Summer Jumpstart program for kindergarten and first-grade ESL students, after-school programs for third graders to familiarize them with the skills needed for the state’s fourth-grade ELA and Math assessments, and a Tutoring program for fourth graders organized and taught primarily by fourth-grade teachers. These programs are not mandatory, but are strongly encouraged for students who can benefit from them.

In a Nutshell

Making High Achievement for All Contagious

The New Rochelle CSD maintains a culture in which diversity is seen as strength and where exceeding state expectations is a given. At Davis Elementary School taking students from where they are to where they can go is the challenge met through passionate caring for children and recognition of the expertise each administrator and teacher brings with them.

^o Demographic Data are from the 2003-04 New York State Report Card (<http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/reprcd2004/home.shtml>). This case study was conducted in spring 2005.

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