

### **Gotham Avenue Elementary School** **Elmont Union Free School District, Elmont, NY**

#### **School Context**

The Elmont Union Free School District is characterized by high mobility, high diversity, and low income. Elmont is on the western Long Island, not too far from Kennedy International Airport. Approximately 1/3 of the students in the district are new every year and come from a variety of non-English speaking countries. The community is also “low income”; therefore, the school budget is “bare bones” according to district administrators.

*The students from other countries do not speak English – some have not been to school or sporadically. There are 72 different dialects spoken in our district.*

*Poverty presents a challenge: Sometimes students are more intent on survival – how to get through the day.*

*Funding is a challenge: We do not have extra funds. Our per-pupil expenditure is quite low – one of the lowest in the county.*

With these challenges in mind, the district administration sets a vision of what success is and how to ensure all students reach high expectations, while promoting Elmont schools as “the hubs of the community.” The superintendent explains her vision for the district,

*We needed to change the mindset – we have children without resources and we have very good-natured people who felt sorry for these kids – and we said we are their only hope. For some children if we don't do it, nobody will. We are here to teach them: Let's do what we need to, to make them successful. What do they need to know? How can we make better teachers? How can we monitor the children's performance?*

This vision of the school district as a source of community “hope” carries over to Gotham Avenue Elementary School. The K-6 school, which opened in 1949, sits tucked on a street away from the hustle and bustle of surrounding parkways. Surrounded by beautifully maintained grounds and boasting a white, towering cupola, the school served 742 Elmont students in the 2004-05 school year. The school recently made a *Newsday* list of top schools as well as The Business Council of New York State's “Honor Roll of Outstanding Educational Improvement” for showing at least a 20% improvement in the percentage of students passing the state English Language Arts assessment. According to the long-term principal at Gotham Avenue, such accolades are a recent phenomenon.

**Student Demographics 2003-04<sup>2</sup>:** *Gotham Avenue Elementary School serves a population with higher percentages of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch than the state and district. It is also a diverse population with more than double the percentages of African-American students and higher percentages of Hispanic/Latino students than the state overall.*

	Gotham Avenue	Elmont UFSD	New York State
% Eligible for Free Lunch	42.1%	27.9%	37.0%
% Eligible for Reduced Lunch	17.8%	14.1%	7.2%
% Limited English Proficient	9.3%	5.6%	6.8%
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution			
% African-American	56.5%	52.2%	19.9%
% Hispanic/Latino	25.2%	17.4%	19.4%
% White	2.8%	16.8%	53.7%
% Other	15.5%	13.7%	7.0%
% Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards on Grade 4 ELA Assessment	82%	87%	63%
% Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards on Grade 4 Math Assessment	93%	98%	79%

## Best Practices Highlights

- **Clear Articulation of a Coherent and Consistent Curriculum across the District.**

A curriculum map along with a pacing guide and required lesson plans equals the curriculum in Elmont schools. Due to high mobility in the district and a high number of students with “gaps” in their education, a curriculum map was implemented in 2001. According to district administrators, in this highly mobile environment, teachers choosing from a wide curriculum did not serve children well.

- **Rigorous Processes for Selection, Monitoring, and Development of Staff.**

Along with high expectations, as articulated in the district curriculum map, come high expectations for teachers. The district administration has set out to 1) select “highly trained teachers” who are “willing to learn”; 2) implement monitoring processes such as detailed daily lesson plans with reflective items and student performance data analysis; 3) keep schools balanced and teachers motivated by moving a small group of teachers to different schools every year.

- **Before School Tutoring and After-School Programs Meeting All Children’s Needs.**

In this diverse and high-needs district, making opportunities available to all students is a priority. The Elmont UFSD does this through heterogeneous groupings, differentiation of instruction, before school tutoring that targets “at risk” students’ needs, and enrichment classes during and after school that all children regardless of academic ability can participate in.

## A Closer Look

### **Curriculum and Academic Goals**

A districtwide curriculum reform project swept over the district in 2000-2001. Recognizing the high mobility of their students and the consequence of students arriving at school with “gaps in their backgrounds,” the district administration set about creating and implementing a curriculum map. The superintendent explained the process of developing the curriculum:

*We brought in the best teachers in the district and asked them to outline a sequence. We had them explain how they make curriculum selections, K-6, and principals also. We took discrete guides (individual subject guides in each content area), and teachers picked and chose what skills to teach at each grade level. We found well-qualified teachers made good choices and other ones didn't. It wasn't consistent. Some teachers did curriculum mapping, but we needed to make sure this happened for all children.*

### **A “Living” Curriculum Map**

The result of this curriculum reform effort was a “living” map, and no classrooms or schools are “out of step” with this map in the Elmont UFSD. The philosophy behind the map was for it to be fluid enough to make changes daily in each classroom based on student needs, but structured enough to ensure all children would obtain the skills and strategies they need for success at each grade level in every school in the district. The spiraling curriculum is based on state standards, revised according to changes in the standards when needed, and designed to be the same for all children, including special needs and ESL students. Instruction, however, is to be differentiated based on individual needs. While some teachers tout the “precision” of the map and how it helps them “keep on target,” others felt constrained by it, especially in the first year of implementation:

*The first year we had the curriculum map they wanted everybody to be on the same page the same day. I know what I need to do for the kids.*

### **Keeping Pace**

A pacing guide accompanies the curriculum map. The pace is set in “5 phases” at each grade level, and teachers are supposed to complete each phase in two months. Although teachers are not required to be on the same page every day as in the first year of the map’s implementation, they are expected to keep pace according to the guide. One teacher explains the challenges of meeting this expectation:

*I don't keep pace – I think it is more important for the child to have internalized a concept. But we as teachers have to document that we have covered certain content areas – so right now I am doing double math to cover two months worth of math in one month. There was always something that came up - a concert – or some concept might be paced for one day but maybe I need to do it in two.*

### **Lesson Planning**

The pace by which teachers teach the curriculum and what components they teach are documented in their lesson plans. Every day teachers at all Elmont schools, including Gotham Avenue Elementary School, are required to have created a lesson plan; these plans are collected weekly by the school administration. An administrator says,

*It's time consuming, but forces teachers to think about children's needs and how you go about them. New teachers love it and the best teachers have been doing it all along. Resistance has come from marginal teachers and those who have always done it a certain way.*

An administrator explains that the lesson plans are “different than typical teachers’ plan books: Very little is left to the imagination.” Teachers say the lesson planning process is “rigorous,” including requiring them to “define the objective of the lesson, how to reach the objective and how the objective will be assessed.” In addition, each lesson plan must include a “daily reflection” on the effectiveness of the lesson. One teacher says,

*For veteran teachers it (the lesson plan requirement) was a pain in the neck – do I need to do it? No. I know what I'm doing – but it keeps everything in sight. It doesn't help me in terms of creativity though.*

### **Staff Selection and Capacity Building**

Week in and week out teachers are expected to plan their lessons with the end in mind, to think about objectives, how to know when objectives are being reached, and to use a variety of methods to ensure children with different needs are learning. In order to hold teachers accountable for reaching objectives, the district takes responsibility for selecting new teachers based on their capacities to meet these expectations. They build capacities for new and veteran teachers to further develop their skills through a mixture of mentoring, opportunities for professional development and collaboration, and moving teachers to where they can be most effective.

### **High Expectations for New and Veteran Staff**

Capacity building in the Elmont UFSD begins with high expectations for new and veteran staff. Accompanying a more structured and “rigorous” curriculum is a process for selecting new staff that is characterized as much more “stringent” than it was in the past. Administrators “attend recruitment sessions at local universities” and receive hundreds of unsolicited resumes a year as they always have, but once administrators decide to interview a candidate, the candidate is required to do “demo lessons,” which all principals and central office staff observe. If they are recommended for further consideration, they complete a writing sample and meet with the superintendent. Administrators say they “look for candidates who are bright, show some genuine interest in students, articulate ideas well, and are open to learning.” They demand “high caliber teachers.” An administrator says,

*We don't want mediocrity. We want teachers who appropriately challenge children, connect with the students, and have high quality training behind them.*

In this district, the success of students is dependent not only on a well-articulated and coherent curriculum, but on new and veteran teacher expertise. An administrator explains the importance of not just hiring expert new teachers, but making sure all teachers meet high expectations.

*It's the demand that we only keep teachers who have the potential to do extremely well. Every teacher has to meet the same goals – the veteran teachers are required to do it too.*

### **Supporting Reflective Teachers through Mentoring**

All teachers are held to high standards and monitored through constant review of lesson plans and student performance data. For new teachers, a mentoring program offering guidance in “diagnostic prescriptive teaching” support them in meeting these high expectations. For the past three years the mentor program has been based on “cognitive coaching,” which is described as a “reflective practice.” Teachers “reflect on lessons, strengths and weaknesses” in guided discussion with a mentor. A districtwide mentor spends time in the classrooms and in discussion with first-year teachers, “helping them get resources, materials, and meeting needs of students.” Individual schools also have mentors not formally designated by the district. At Gotham Avenue Elementary School, one of the assistant principals works closely with untenured teachers. In the 2004-05 school year she focused on a “reflective approach toward mentoring,” modeling “needs based activities,” reviewing questioning techniques based on Bloom’s Taxonomy, and assisting staff members preparing their “Professional Portfolios” for tenure consideration, among many other initiatives.

### **Supporting Reflective Teachers through Professional Development**

Both new and veteran teachers are surveyed yearly to assess their professional development needs. The district has focused recently on methods for differentiating instruction, working with literacy centers, reading the curriculum map, reading standards and integrating them in the content areas, and bringing math into the classroom. In some cases, teachers from the district present workshops, while outside agencies conduct others. All teachers are required to take at least one course per year. This year the district focused on implementation and integration of technology in the curriculum. The Nassau BOCES worked on-site with teachers and ran Saturday professional development workshops. The goal of these workshops was to make students better versed with technology: “To prepare PowerPoint presentations on a country” and learn keyboarding, for example. These professional development opportunities align with the district belief that “teachers can’t be held responsible for things they don’t know how to do.”

### **Planning for Collaboration**

In a high-needs, low-income district with traditionally below average teacher salaries, Elmont suffered from higher than average teacher turnover rates. The relatively poor Elmont UFSD was challenged by flight of their teachers to “more affluent” and “easier” districts. An administrator explains,

*Sometimes teachers are not prepared for the realities of the classroom and move on to where they think it would be easier.*

Recently, however, administrators report the turnover rate is “probably about average. Last year it was 8% or so.” The administration has poured energy into developing more collaboration with the idea that, “If we have people develop a sense of belonging – they will stay.” Collaboration means teachers participate in two to three curriculum meetings a month. In addition, at Gotham Avenue Elementary School each grade level has specials scheduled at the same time two times a week in order to meet for grade-level planning or with school administrators.

### **Moving Teachers**

Moving small groups of teachers to different schools is another focus for capacity building in the Elmont UFSD. An administrator explains the impetus for moving teachers,

*We had a school that had all tenured long-term teachers, and we brought in a new principal and he couldn’t make change, so we started moving people. We have a good*

*relationship with the union. We had to improve the quality of teaching in this district. These changes don't break contract agreements: They are right for children.*

The superintendent explains that the movement of teachers accomplishes several objectives:

- 1. Creates balance in every building in terms of staff. We want experienced people and people who are new. We can't have a disparity. Each school should be equal.*
- 2. There may be teachers who are excellent teaching certain grades. We try to assign them to those grades.*
- 3. Marginal teachers could use a rethinking of their mission.*

The superintendent tells teachers a year in advance of their reassignment and says that only “a small number couldn't take the change.”

### **Instructional Programs, Practices and Arrangements**

Instructional programs and practices in the Elmont UFSD complement the curriculum map, pacing guide, and lesson plan format. The superintendent explains the importance of “skillful” instruction in implementing the curriculum,

*One can have the best curriculum and materials, but if they are not used skillfully by teachers nothing happens. The focus is on how teachers plan for instruction. The assumption is that a teacher would have a clear idea in mind. I observed wonderful lessons that taught nothing -- children already knew the content.*

### **Districtwide and Schoolwide Consistency in Instructional Programs and Materials**

Many programs are mandated at the district level, but decisions to adopt these programs are based on teacher input and the state standards. The district is on an “eight year rotating cycle” of evaluating instructional programs. In this process, the Director of Curriculum and Instruction meets with committees made up of teachers from all schools to see how the curriculum matches up with state standards, looks at what changes are needed, and invites publishers to present program options to teachers and administrators, who then discuss the options and make recommendations.

In addition to the textbooks, according to a teacher “We are also allowed to order supplemental materials. I use my Scholastic points to order books.”

### **Feeding the Need through Differentiated Instruction**

Although the curriculum, pacing guide, programs, and materials are typically adopted across the district, a teacher says that at Gotham, “We feed the need.” One of the ways teachers feed the diverse needs of their students is by differentiating their instruction. A teacher explains how she differentiates instruction in her classroom:

*In writing we are teaching them strategies. Right now, we are doing “fresh new ways” – it starts with a poem. You look at a pencil sharpener and see it through different eyes. I give them a teacher model – guided practice – then I give them a poem about a safety pin without the name and they work with a partner and talk about what the poem is about. Some use a graphic organizer and brainstorm characteristics of this thing. I differentiate – by giving some students a T-chart that says old way/new way. It's an easier version of a*

*graphic organizer. I discuss this with ESL students or even in conference with students who didn't get it. All that's done in 10-15 minutes and then they have 20 minutes to write.*

Although some teachers feel pressured to cover the rigorous curriculum on pace, they also recognize that offering opportunities for students to work together and do projects and hands-on activities are supported by their administration and meet students' needs. The "classroom teacher daily instructional plan" includes a "special help for students" section that asks: "How are you helping low performing and high performing students in your class?" The directive that accompanies the "instructional plan" also includes "differentiation of instruction" as one of the ways to actively engage students. Differentiation of instruction is further defined in this document as "activities that address ALL learning styles; modification based on individual student needs."

### **Heterogeneous Groupings: Opportunities for All**

Differentiation in instructional practices allows for students of differing academic performance to be grouped together and aligns with the district vision of encouraging high performance in all students. Gotham Avenue's principal shares with district administrators a vision of high expectations for all students regardless of prior experience and, therefore, groups children heterogeneously. The school has also phased out a formal gifted program, and in its place offers enrichment classes open to all children. For example, enrichment classes in cartooning, film-making, and law are provided within the school day one day per week and focus on more than just traditional academic skills.

### **Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data**

The Elmont UFSD system of monitoring student and teacher performance includes a strong reflective element in the form of the daily lesson plan, curriculum assessments at the end of each phase in each grade level, standardized test item analysis, and innovative student performance monitoring following the Computerized Statistics (COMPSTAT) model. In this district, every player is held accountable for students' performance on assessments.

*Assessments are a driving force in what we do. What we teach is determined by what we test.*  
-teacher

*The superintendent holds principals accountable and the principals hold teachers accountable for the success of each child.*-teacher

### **Authentic Assessments, Lesson Plans, Observations, Curriculum Assessments**

Teachers use a variety of methods to monitor student performance, including authentic assessments, portfolios, and Early Literacy Profiles in early grades. Principals monitor individual student progress through observations and review of teachers' lesson plans. Since the lesson plans require teachers to articulate their goals for a lesson and how they assess whether students' have learned, they also facilitate monitoring both students' and teachers' success at achieving these goals. An administrator explains,

*The lesson plan format allows the administrator to monitor instruction: You know what should be taught in November, for example, and so you know whether the curriculum map is being presented regularly or not.*

Curriculum assessments are also given at the end of each phase of the pacing guide. They are aligned to the state assessments and consistent across the district. Some assessments come

directly from the textbook publishers, while others are developed by teachers to align with the curriculum completed in a particular phase.

### **Standardized Test Item Analysis**

The Terra Nova is given in 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 6<sup>th</sup> grades, and teachers are provided with “breakdowns” of student strengths and weaknesses. This information is also shared with resource teachers and used to help monitor intervention services. In addition to the Terra Novas, like all New York State 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders, Gotham Avenue students take the state assessments. According to some teachers there exists “...a lot of pressure – a lot of focus on the (state) assessments – parents ask about the testing. They put a lot of emphasis on how well their children do on them.” The state assessment score reports are seen as an important indicator of the school’s success and as one administrator points out, “No student here is expected to be negatively compared. We are not a Scarsdale, but we want these students to do well on the assessments.” The Elmont UFSD utilizes the local BOCES (Board of Cooperative Educational Services) for item analysis of their students’ state assessment scores to target weaknesses across the district and in specific schools. They also tap into BOCES’ data warehousing resources whereby administrators can look at state assessment results teacher by teacher, or by how the school compared with other schools in the county and district.

### **COMPSTAT (Computerized Statistics) Analysis**

In 2001-02, administrators began using the New York Police Department COMPSTAT model of reviewing individual student performance with principals. COMPSTAT is a method of monitoring performance and sharing successes through discussions around statistical data. For the NYPD it is intended to “evaluate the effectiveness of middle managers and to properly allocate the resources necessary to... improve performance.” According to Elmont administrators, it is used in district in the following way,

*We invited principals to meet with the Superintendent and Curriculum and Instruction Director. We asked principals to review lists of 4<sup>th</sup> graders and we would take one child at a time. We have Pedro: When did he come to the district? What services were provided...?*

It is one way the district holds principals accountable for student performance and “brings to the table different ideas.” In addition, the district is developing a student data management system with the goal of monitoring students according to the progress they are making on performance tasks. They hope to obtain subgroup reports and reports by student name through this system.

### **Recognitions, Interventions, and Adjustments**

In a district with above average student needs, a variety of interventions are needed. The Elmont UFSD meets this diverse student population’s needs through academic intervention services, morning tutorials with students’ own classroom teachers, after school and summer enrichment programs, and recognizing achievements that go beyond academics.

### **Academic Intervention Services**

At Gotham Avenue Elementary School, teachers recommend students for academic intervention services if a child is not succeeding. They fill out a form and give it to the principal, who then schedules a meeting with, for example, the school psychologist, head of curriculum, resource specialist, speech specialist, present and previous teachers. According to the principal, this “child study team” then makes recommendations to “try to do whatever we can without classifying the child.” The team is guided by a district-developed plan for intervention that includes entrance criteria to Academic Intervention Services (AIS), the intensity of services, and exit criteria for

high, medium, and low intensity levels of support. The Director of Curriculum and Instruction reviews reports on both AIS and ESL children's progress at the end of every school year. When a team meets the next year they review what has been done and carry forward the student's portfolio.

### **Tutorials**

Struggling students are also served through tutorials that are a required part of all Elmont teachers' school day. These district-mandated before-school tutorials were added to teachers' contracts and require teachers to start tutoring at 7:40 a.m. Every teacher does tutorials and has to have at least 2-3 meetings a week. The only reason a teacher would not be tutoring is for team meetings. During tutorial time, teachers work with a small group of students ("about 3"), "who have some basic needs." They may work on a particular reading or math skill and usually work with children "on the cusp of needing AIS." The group of students changes during the year. For example, a teacher may work with a particular group for a month and then invite another small group for tutorial the next month. As one teachers says,

*The main problem (with tutorials) is having them be on time so early in the morning. You have to get on the phone with the parents. If they don't bring them, we don't get the children.*

### **After School and Summer Programs**

In addition to tutorials, students are also provided with after-school and Saturday programs focused on "enrichment in arts, music, sciences." They can participate in marching and jazz bands, string orchestra, drama club, chess, and on Saturdays, can study Italian, French, Spanish, Urdu, or Latin in The World Languages Program. After- and before-school programs are offered to all students with the belief that all students can reach high goals. This philosophy carries over to the summer. Elmont offers two summer school programs – an enrichment program and an academic program. Students are recommended by AIS teachers, and parents are solicited for attendance in a program. Children are bussed to one of the elementary schools in the district for this 16-day, 4-day-a-week, 16-hour-a-week program. According to district administrators, the summer program has "been successful" with the previous year's enrollment at 500 for 2<sup>nd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> graders. A teacher says, the program "keeps students in mindset of school," and "parents say they see the benefit."

### **Recognition**

Gotham Avenue Elementary School does not "do honor rolls" but rather recognizes citizenship and academics in a variety of ways. Citizenship is recognized through the "Brotherhood Award" offered by the American Legion and other veteran groups in the community. They also conduct a "Math Olympiad" competition and recognize academic achievements of their students at board meetings.

### **Other Factors Influencing Practices**

#### **Tapping into Funding Sources**

The District receives Title 1, 2a, 2d, 3, 4, 5, and emergency immigrant funding. In addition, they have received grants to support professional development in technology and materials for teachers to implement Balanced Literacy from the grant funded inter-county Teacher Center. Legislative Grants have funded enrichment activities like the cartooning, filmmaking, and law classes, in addition to the Saturday foreign language academy and trips to "Cradle of Aviation" and an aquarium.

## In a Nutshell

### **Reaching Out to a Diverse and High Needs Community**

Teachers say they feel an obligation to help the children growing up in Elmont's high need, low-income, and diverse community. The idea that without a good education, these students will fall through the cracks pervades their work and the climate of the district overall. The district leadership tempers compassion with a tightly organized curriculum and rigorous systems for monitoring and supporting high performance in teachers and students. The schools in the Elmont Union Free School District, as many say, are "the hubs of the community." Within the walls of Gotham Avenue Elementary School, teachers implement a tightly structured curriculum that is monitored both through teacher evaluation and review of student performance data while promoting theirs as a community school.

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<sup>o</sup> Demographic Data are from the 2003-04 New York State Report Card (<http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/repcrd2004/home.shtml>). This case study was conducted in spring 2005.

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**Elmont Union Free School District**  
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**<http://www.elmontschools.org/schools/gotham/>**