

No More 1's: High Expectations CAN Lead to High Achievement

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"I see a real difference here. Four years ago, when I started high school, there was confusion and people looked down on me. Today I am looking forward to graduation and college. My teachers really support me now." – Middletown New York High School senior Manuel Rivera¹, who most recently scored at the advanced level on New York State's test of English proficiency.

The Middletown City School District, located in New York State's Orange County, today serves close to 7,000 students with four elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school. The district is classified by the state in the highest of three N/RC ("Need to Resource Capacity") groups, an urban or suburban school district with high student needs in relation to district resource capacity. Middletown schools also serve approximately 800 students identified as English language learners – a number that has grown rapidly over the past five years.

By anyone's measure the schools were not meeting the needs of the second language population. Four years ago, the Enlarged City District of Middletown, NY was identified under the federal "No Child Left Behind" accountability standards for its failure to support the academic achievement of English language learners. According to the District Report Card², in 2006 26% of Middletown's 6th grade English Language Learners scored at the lowest level, 1, on the statewide test of proficiency in English language arts. A mere 40% of third-grade English language learners tested proficient or better in mathematics during that same year, contrasted with the 71% proficiency rate of their English speaking peers.

Today, English language learners in Middletown met all academic requirements set by the state under the No Child Left Behind Act for the 2007-08 school year. More than 60 percent of students also made significant advancement in their development of English, and 12 percent became English proficient under state standards. These students also met Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) goals in math and English Language Arts (ELA) in 2007-08. Early results from the 2008-09 state assessments show startling growth: Not a single child in either district middle school scored "1" (*Not meeting learning standards*).

Everything started to turn around early in 2007, led by a simple conversation about the town's commitment to high expectations, and high standards, for all students. A new superintendent and leadership team were brought in, determined to reform the culture. Dr. Kenneth Eastwood, Superintendent, described an early meeting with his core staff where he introduced the new mantra – "no 1's" (referring to the lowest possible score on NYS's achievement exams). Several team members laughed and scoffed at the concept that English language learners could ever hope to achieve that level academically. But under the new administration in Middletown you bought

¹ Student name has been altered.

² <https://www.nystart.gov>

in to the concept, or you found another place to work. Administrators across the board, though skeptical, agreed to give it a try.

The superintendent and leadership team brought in outside experts to help define the problem and help map out solutions – partnering with UCLA’s School Management Program (SMP) to conduct a program audit. Site visits and data collection occurred between January and March of 2007. Each of the seven schools was visited by a pair of SMP staff, who conducted interviews and focus groups with a sampling of students, staff, and families. Brief classroom observations were scheduled across all rooms with ELL students. Student records and data were examined on site. As the result of this program audit, root causes for low performance were slowly identified and brought to light.

Some of the roots were systemic and reflected a lack of common understanding across the district. The audit report described a mish-mash of programs with unclear intents, staffed and led by well-meaning adults who expected ELL students to remain under their supervision for their full educational careers.

- The district offered a variety of program structures (bilingual, immersion) without any clear purpose or definition for each. Teachers were left on their own to create curricula.
- Students were haphazardly placed in and out of programs without any consideration of their language development needs. It was not uncommon to find students moving in and out of bilingual programs from one year to the next, based on the availability of classroom space.
- Administrators took a ‘hands off’ attitude, reflecting a lack of knowledge and understanding about the educational progress and standards for English language learners.
- There was no common expectation that ELL students would learn English while being held to the same academic standards as all other Middletown students.

An administrative work group was formed comprised of each principal, the directors of elementary, secondary, bilingual/ESL and literacy education; facilitated by SMP faculty. As each finding and cause was discussed and debated, an action plan was developed to address it. The impetus for this work was addressing the documented gap in achievement between English proficient and limited English proficient students in Middletown schools, driven by the very real urgency to raise test scores. This “No More 1’s” philosophy left no room for anything other than the highest possible expectations, and led to a number of broad, structural recommendations:

- Program offerings need to be clearly defined and tied to state standards, with measurable and observable purposes and instructional strategies explicitly stated.
- Mainstream classroom teachers need to employ instructional strategies that make academic content accessible for ELL students.
- Teachers and students in all programs must be accountable to the building administrators, and the administrators must have a more active role in guiding their instruction.
- Placement of students must be data-driven and thoughtful with clearly defined entrance and exit criteria.

This is certainly not an atypical process for schools and districts, but what has set Middletown apart is the way they went about implementing and sustaining these recommendations, remaining focused on the ultimate goal of increasing student achievement. Administrators gathered every month as a group to share and reflect on steps and actions taken at their schools. Central office staff members and consultants from UCLA were always present – allowing immediate access to information and decisions. Progress has been deliberate, and not always uni-directional, but the pressure to move forward has been consistent. In the words of Mechanicstown Elementary School Principal Sue Short, “It’s not rocket science! We have just gotten much better at consistently paying attention to all the important pieces.”

Defining a vision ... and sticking to it

The superintendent in Middletown gave voice to a simple, easy to understand goal – *no 1’s*. This goal was for *all* the students, including the English language learners. As importantly, he has maintained a sharp focus on that goal since 2007, and insisted every action be aligned to support achievement.

Eastwood is a knowledgeable, well informed, quiet leader who *insists* his administrators use data, and come to him with a solution in mind whenever they identify a problem. His staff no longer talk about evaluations or goal setting, instead they refer to annual ‘data reviews’. Administrators have had full access to consultants (like UCLA SMP) to help them understand and meet student needs, but they are held completely responsible for identifying and explaining the achievement data and trends in their programs. The goal of proficiency for all students is common and non-negotiable.

Fred Griffin works with the youngest children in Middletown as principal of a primary school, and has the responsibility for setting them on the path to success. As an educator with a long track record of experience and success, he found himself challenged to continue his own discovery as an administrator when he was cast into the role of leading his school community down the path to ‘No 1’s’. Griffin would tell you that he aligned his actions and behaviors to comply with the superintendent’s suggestions, and was surprised to note such rapid growth among his students. A ‘quality program review’ early in 2008, conducted by Chorley staff with UCLA SMP consultants, identified a general lack of awareness and identification of the language development needs of children. Well meaning teachers did what they thought was appropriate, but lacked the resources and training to meet their needs. The achievement of the students was suddenly highlighted and discussed in a very public way. When students failed, the teachers had to respond by doing something. False starts and failures became stepping stones to success, not reasons to settle for mediocrity as attitudes evolved to match new behaviors and expectations.

Honoring all voices and ideas

Middletown’s Director of Bilingual/ESL Studies Kris Kerr has worked tirelessly since 2007 to build the consensus and ownership forming the foundation for the success of the ELL students under her watch. Kerr’s role has evolved within the district as well – evidenced by the fact that

she now reports directly to the superintendent (and not an assistant superintendent, as in the past). She literally has a seat at the table, representing ELL student needs and interests in every discussion of education.

You no longer hear anyone refer to language learners as someone else's responsibility. ESL teachers have a real voice in the design of programs and schedules. Mainstream classroom teachers are informed and involved in the education of ELLs. Administrators meet monthly to monitor progress and address the programmatic and educational concerns that cross buildings. A broadly based community stakeholders group also meets monthly to facilitate communication in both directions. Concerns and suggestions for improvement are voiced through many venues, and all are considered seriously.

Resources and equity

Being accountable as administrators and as a community has included securing the resources needed to deliver quality educational programs. Middletown today is well staffed and well resourced, with funds being allocated and reallocated to follow student growth and need patterns. In many cases, this did not require *new* funds – simply a more productive use of what already existed. When the population growth demands an additional classroom teacher, the resources to add the position are secured. If a classroom teacher can support the need for supplemental materials in his or her classroom, it is likely the materials will be found.

Using data to drive decision-making

Conversations about the education and future of English language learners were fraught with misperceptions. Before any meaningful change could begin in Middletown, faculty and administrators had to take an honest look at the data and the students in their care.

English language learners in Middletown (and the rest of NYS) complete the NYSESLAT test of English proficiency annually. They are also required to participate in the New York State Assessment program in English language arts, mathematics, and science. District level benchmarks and assessments are routinely administered and scored. There has never been a lack of data, the problem has always been obtaining it, understanding it, and ultimately letting it drive instructional improvements.

Native language arts teacher Beatriz Garzon was particularly appreciative of the *ELL Quality Review Process*, an evidence and data-driven staff self-assessment/audit conducted at each school used to develop action steps for program improvement. She found that her involvement in this process really deepened her knowledge of program and how it affected the students in her care. She found an interesting side effect as well – colleagues in her building were suddenly coming to her for advice and expertise. In her words, “the ESL/Bilingual teachers and staff have become much more assertive and empowered through this process. They now bring themselves to the table in the event someone ‘forgets’ to invite them!”

Learning how to gather and access accurate data on student progress is a technological challenge. But getting together to talk about and use that data to support students is even harder! Tracey

Sorrentino, principal of Monhagen Middle School, said one of her biggest goals was to get teachers talking about students. “We are starting to get together and use assessment data to drive instruction. Communication brought about through the Quality Review Process has enhanced and accelerated that process. It has brought a spotlight onto our ELL students, and made us look at what is happening as well as what is missing.”

Building instructional leadership and capacity

Superintendent Eastwood has been intentional in moving people through that phase and helping them to focus on changing the things they can impact. He believes we have sufficient research, we know what works in classrooms where ELLs succeed, but lack real skill in knowing how to implement research in the classrooms.

District literacy director Linda Hatfield points to identification under NCLB as a low point, but a turning point as well. In her words, “Being identified prompted us to re-examine our expectations for ELLs. Our superintendent has never deviated from his message that all kids can learn and perform, and he constantly drills that message home with us and with the community. How could I give up on the message if he won’t?” Principal Gordon Dean echoes this refrain. “It’s not that we ignored the education of our ELL students in the past, it is just that everything is more intentional now.”

Superintendent Eastwood has built a sense of professionalism among his staff, and ultimately among the students in Middletown. In his role as an instructional leader he often holds up a mirror. Staff are welcome to visit his office with problems, but only if they can bring a solution along as well. In his words, “In low performing or dysfunctional systems, staff will *deflect* problems they see in the mirror. Every problem has an external cause, and is beyond their control. But if you hold that mirror up long enough, eventually they will run out of excuses and begin to take control of events. Only then will professional growth occur.” Data is simply a mirror in these terms, a reflection of reality.

A broad range of actions have contributed to this success, originating from district-wide working groups of administrators and stakeholders who meet regularly to learn together, look at data, propose solutions, and monitor them for effectiveness. The ‘big tent’ approach encourages big ideas, but also the details that move them into practice. As one example, some problems with student placement were identified – and some of these were due to ‘lost’ knowledge when students transitioned from one school to another. Teacher to teacher articulation was proposed as a solution, but finding and scheduling a time and place for this to happen was the biggest obstacle to overcome!

In short, a web of interrelated actions have played a part in creating, and sustaining the growth in achievement for Middletown’s English language learners, a remarkable change brought about by small steps, hard work, and a common expectation that all kids WILL learn.

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