UAlbany identifies factors explaining higher performance among ‘critical needs’ elementary students

By Janet I. Angelis and Kristen C. Wilcox

The mission of every school district is to foster the academic success of all students, including those in critical needs subgroups—special needs students and English language learners, as well as students from low income families and students from traditionally disadvantaged racial backgrounds. Generally, schools that serve large numbers of critical needs students have lower student performance than schools with fewer students identified for special education services or serving primarily white, economically advantaged, native English speakers. But there are exceptions. A research team at the University at Albany School of Education recently conducted a study on why critical needs students in some schools consistently outperform peers in similar schools.

Using state assessment results for ELA and mathematics for Grades 3–6 for 2007, 2008, and 2009, the team identified schools in which these critical needs groups consistently performed better than predicted (higher performers) as well as schools in which these groups performed as expected (average performers). The researchers investigated a sample of 10 higher-performing and five demographically similar but average-performing schools to learn what practices are in place in the first group but absent or under-developed in the latter.

Results of the study suggest that higher performance among critical needs students at the elementary level is related to four elements:

- Close engagement with and understanding of the population.
- Literacy- and technology-enriched instruction.
- An evidence-based approach to curriculum and performance.
- Fluid adaptation and deployment of resources.

In the higher performers, all of these elements are in place, whereas in the average performers, some or all of the elements are missing or underdeveloped, as described below.

Engaging and understanding the population

Educators in the higher-performing schools seek to know, understand, and engage with students with the most critical needs. They speak of their work as an inviting “challenge” and see their roles as nurturing and caring while also taking responsibility for students’ academic achievement. For instance, a teacher at the John F. Kennedy Magnet School in Westchester County’s Port Chester Public Schools advises, “You have to know your population and teach your population, despite the outside factors. You have to know who’s in front of you.” Faculty in higher-performing schools have a positive attitude toward the diversity in linguistic backgrounds, ethnicities, and physical and mental challenges their students bring to school. In order to bridge the home and school divide, they deliberately reach out to parents in a multitude of ways—e.g., school picnics, visits to homes.

In the average-performing schools, efforts to connect with all students to help them thrive as people and as students as well as outreach to parents were found to be weaker and less pervasive.

Literacy- and technology-enriched instruction

Believing that “a student must know how to read before they enter grade 3,” educators in the higher-performing schools “do everything in our power within the classroom and within AIS (academic intervention services) to reach this goal,” reports a teacher at Martin Luther King, Jr. Elementary School in Utica. “Everything” includes “direct instruction, AIS, after school tutoring, as well as computer-aided instruction.” It also includes extra support in the classroom, as needed. Across the higher performers, administrators have worked to build all teachers’ capacities to use a variety of programs and practices for developing literacy among diverse learners. Teachers focus intensively on literacy-building in the early elementary years and use technology to help monitor literacy development while at the same time motivating students to keep working at their own pace.

In the average-performing schools, the approach to literacy instruction is inconsistent from teacher to teacher, ESL instruction is likely to be separate from mainstream instruction, and technology is typically controlled by the teacher rather than put at the fingertips of students.

Fluid adaptation and deployment of resources

Being able to adapt and deploy resources to best meet critical needs is the lubricant that enables the structures underlying teaching and learning (e.g., curriculum, instructional programs, assessments, and material resources) to function effectively. In higher performing schools these resources are deployed in line with the school’s emphasis on grade-level or above literacy attainment for all students and on ensuring that all students can access an aligned curriculum that includes essential skills and knowledge. Thus they provide maximum levels of inclusion for ELL and special needs students, use an extensive array of intervention strategies including response to intervention (RTI), and pursue and successfully garner funding for extra support targeted specifically to ELLs and special needs students.

In the average-performing schools, efforts for inclusion and RTI are in their infancy and/or are being resisted.

Janet Angelis and Kristen Wilcox are, respectively, the director and principal investigator of the Know Your Schools—for NY Kids project, formerly known as Just for the Kids-NY, which conducted the study. Read the full report at www.albany.edu/nykids.