

# No More 1s: 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 High School senior Manuel Rivera,<sup>1</sup> who most recently scored at the advanced level on New York State's test of English proficiency)*

The school district in Middletown, New York, in the state's Orange County, today serves close to 7,000 students in four elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school. The district is classified by the state in the highest of three 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 (ELLs)—a number that has grown rapidly over the past 5 years.

By anyone's measure, the schools were not meeting the needs of the ESL population. Four years ago, the Enlarged City School District of Middletown was identified under the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) accountability standards for its failure to support the academic achievement of ELLs. According to the District Report Card,<sup>2</sup> in 2006 26% of Middletown's sixth-grade

<sup>1</sup> Student name has been altered.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nystart.gov>

ELLs scored at the lowest level (1: not meeting learning standards), on the statewide test of proficiency in English language arts. A mere 40% of third-grade ELLs tested proficient or better in mathematics during that same year, contrasted with the 71% proficiency rate of their English-speaking peers.

In contrast, ELLs in Middletown met all academic requirements set by the state under NCLB for the 2007–2008 school year. More than 60% of these students also made significant advancement in their development of English, and 12% became proficient under state standards. These students also met Adequate Yearly Progress goals in math and English language arts in 2007–2008. Early results from the 2008–2009 state assessments show startling growth: Not a single child in either of the district’s middle schools scored 1.

Everything started to turn around early in 2007 because of 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, and they were determined to reform the culture. Dr. Kenneth Eastwood, the superintendent, described an early meeting with his core staff at which he introduced the new mantra: No More 1s (referring to the lowest possible score on the state achievement exams). Several team members laughed and scoffed at the concept that ELLs could ever hope to achieve that level academically. But under the new administration in Middletown, you either bought into the concept or you found another place to work. Though skeptical, administrators across the board 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 the School Management Program (SMP) at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) to conduct a program audit. Site visits and data collection occurred between January and March 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 ELLs. 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 jumble of programs with unclear intents, staffed and led by well-meaning adults who expected ELLs to remain under their supervision for their full educational careers:

- The district offered a variety of program structures (e.g., 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 approach, reflecting a lack of knowledge and understanding about the educational progress and standards for ELLs.
- There was no common expectation that ELLs would learn English while being held to the same academic standards as all other Middletown students.

An administrative work group was formed, comprising each principal and the directors of elementary, secondary, bilingual/ESL, and literacy education and 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. The No More 1s 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 ELLs.
- Teachers and students in all programs must be accountable to the building administrators, and the administrators must have a more active role in guiding 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 it 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 and consultants from UCLA were always present—allowing immediate access to information and decisions. Progress has been deliberate, and not always unidirectional, 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

Superintendent Eastwood gave voice to a simple, easy-to-understand goal: no 1s. This goal was for all students, including ELLs. Just as important, he has maintained a sharp focus on that goal since 2007 and required that every action be aligned to support achievement.

Eastwood is a knowledgeable, well-informed, quiet leader who insists that administrators use data and come to him with a solution in mind whenever they identify a problem. District staff no longer talk about evaluations or goal setting; instead they refer to annual “data reviews.” Administrators have had full access to consultants (such as those from UCLA’s 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 nonnegotiable.

Fred Griffin works with the youngest children in Middletown as principal of Chorley Elementary School, and he is responsible 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 in a new way when he became a principal and had to lead his school community down the path to no 1s. 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 the students in his school. A quality program review early in 2008, conducted by Chorley staff and SMP consultants, identified a general lack of awareness and identification

of children's language development needs. Well-meaning teachers did what they thought was appropriate, but lacked the resources and training to meet students' needs. The achievement of these students was suddenly highlighted and discussed in a very public way. And 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

Kris Kerr, Middletown's director of bilingual/ESL studies, has worked tirelessly since 2007 to build consensus and ownership, forming the foundation for success of the ELLs under her watch. Yet Kerr's role within the district has evolved, 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 needs and interests in every discussion of education.

You no longer hear anyone refer to ELLs 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. And a broadly based community stakeholders group meets monthly to facilitate communication in both directions. Concerns and suggestions for improvement are voiced through many venues, and all are considered seriously.

## SECURING RESOURCES

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 was already there. 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 that the materials will be found.

## USING DATA TO DRIVE DECISION MAKING

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

ELLs in Middletown (and the rest of the state) complete the New York State English as a Second Language Achievement Test 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. So there has never been a lack of data; the problem has always been obtaining, understanding, and ultimately letting data drive instructional improvements.

Native-English-speaking language arts teacher Beatriz Garzon was particularly appreciative of the ELL Quality Review Process, an evidence- and data-driven staff self-assessment and audit conducted at each school to develop action steps for program improvement. She found that her involvement in this process really deepened her knowledge of the ESL 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. And, 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 data to support students is even harder. Tracey Sorrentino, principal of Monhagen Middle School, said that 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 this process and helping them focus on changing the things they are able to change. He believes that there is sufficient research and that his staff know what works in classrooms where ELLs succeed, but lack real skill in knowing how to implement research in the classrooms.

Linda Hatfield, the district's literacy director, points to identification under NCLB as a low point, but a turning point as well:

*Being identified prompted us to reexamine 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. He says,

*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 has contributed to this success, originating from districtwide 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. For example, problems with student placement were identified, some of which were due to knowledge that was "lost"

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 has played a part in creating and sustaining the achievement growth of Middletown's ELLs, a remarkable change brought about by small steps, hard work, and a common expectation that all kids *will* learn.

## THE AUTHORS

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