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### Culturally and linguistically-adapted school systems: A study of promising practices in odds-beating elementary schools

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## CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY ADAPTED SCHOOL SYSTEMS: PROMISING PRACTICES FROM ODDS-BEATING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

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This multiple case study investigated characteristics of six elementary schools in New York State with statistically significant better performance outcomes among their English language learner (ELL) students. Through documentary evidence, classroom observations, and interviews with students, teachers, and administrators, a system-wide approach to adaptations that benefit ELL students was identified. These adaptations were evident in: (a) school cultures that embrace ideals of equity of opportunity and celebrate diversity; (b) school climates that evoke a sense of safety and welcome; and (c) processes and practices that support advocacy for ELLs and their families. While the schools shared these common characteristics, educators employed some unique approaches in rural, suburban, and urban schools, holding implications for policies that take into account contextual variances in schools and communities.

*Keywords: culturally responsive pedagogy, ELL achievement, school ecology, social ecological theory*

**As** has been noted in a recent NYS TESOL article (Marcus & Box, 2017), the numbers of English language learners (ELLs) entering schools in New York State, as in other states around the country, have been trending upward over the past several years (Ruiz Soto, Hooker, & Batalova, 2015). Currently, over 8% of the NYS student population is categorized as ELL, and in the last decade alone that number has increased approximately 20% (New York State Education Department [NYSED], n.d.). Yet, many educators in New York State, as well as in other states around the country, continue to struggle to meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of the rising numbers of ELLs in their schools.

In response, recommendations have been put forward to improve how ELLs are served in NYS schools, including the Commissioners Regulation (CR) Part 154 revisions and the Blueprint for

ELL Success. CR Part 154<sup>1</sup> revisions, which introduced progressive mandates regarding the education of ELLs in the 2015–16 school year. In brief, CR Part 154 put forth a number of requirements, such as making sure that instructional staff working with ELLs in content classrooms include an English as a new language (ENL) teacher or a classroom teacher who has completed advanced coursework in using ENL teaching strategies, and providing ELL parent orientations and information regarding programs. Complementing CR Part 154, the New York State Education Department's (NYSED) Blueprint for ELL Success (NYSED, 2014) provides eight core principles with which educators are encouraged to align their work. Among other foci, these principles speak to the importance of broad ownership for ELL success, the provision of sufficient resources for ELL academic as well as social and emotional well-being, and adherence to the idea that home languages and cultures and family partnerships are assets to ELLs' learning.

Both CR Part 154 and the Blueprint recommendations provide direction on what to do to support ELLs' success through adaptations to curriculum and instruction, as well as via district- and school-wide staffing and communications. Moreover, they state the belief that all adults working in NYS districts and schools should and need to take a degree of ownership over the success of ELL youth rather than to expect that ENL/bilingual education teachers and administrators can do this complex work successfully alone. However, as Marcus and Box (2017) noted, in their recent commentary on CR Part 154 and the Blueprint, ". . . with such fundamental differences among school districts in our state, NYSED regulations on what type of program will best serve our ELLs must be flexible . . . offering a variety of program models to match the variety of demographics throughout our state's school districts" (p. 5).

In this context, the current study sought to identify characteristics of a diverse set of "odds-beating" schools where ELL student performance is better than average. Odds-beating schools were identified for statistically significant higher performance, taking into account their demographics on the 2013 and 2014 NYS Common Core English Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics assessments, as is explained in more detail in the Methods section. Conducted in the 2015–16 school year, this study had as its goal to add to the research base the identification of promising practices related to better-than-expected ELL educational outcomes in various types of elementary school settings, including urban, suburban, and rural; those with larger and smaller populations of ELLs; and those with ELLs of varying prior school backgrounds (e.g., refugee students with interrupted formal education [SIFE]). The overarching research question guiding this study was: How do leaders and educators in schools with consistently higher ELL performance on ELA and math state exams serve ELLs?

Framed by social ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1993; van Lier, 2004), which accounts for how contextual factors relate to individual performance, we designed this study to investigate different types of schools serving different kinds of ELL populations and gathered data from district and school leaders, teachers, and students. Thus, this study is situated in the research literature that focuses on cultural and linguistic adaptations to curriculum and instruction as well as qualities of school and district cultures and climates.

## Related Literature

A number of scholars have noted the relationships of teachers adapting curricula and instructional practices and ELL student outcomes (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2006; Moll, 2015; Rodriguez, 2013). As some scholars have noted, teachers need to artfully employ culturally relevant, responsive, and even culturally sustaining pedagogies (i.e., those who seek to empower learners by connecting to their prior experiences and knowledge as they engage in school learning) to improve diverse students' performance and enhance their engagement (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012).

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<sup>1</sup>See <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/biling/docs/CRPART154Overview-webversion.pdf>

Adaptations to how language is used and taught are also necessary. In this vein of research, such pedagogical adaptations as sheltered instruction (i.e., the adaptation of content teaching, taking into account language objectives and needs for language scaffolding) and co-teaching (i.e., the use of content and ENL teacher expertise in combination for planning and delivery of instruction) have been studied with promising results (McCaslin & Burross, 2011; Short, Fidelman, & Louguit, 2012; York-Barr, Ghere, & Sommersness, 2007). York-Barr et al. (2007), for example, studied co-teaching instructional models to support ELL students in elementary general education classrooms, resulting in findings that indicate the import of time for teacher collaboration, strategic allocation of instructional personnel, and ongoing opportunities for teacher learning.

While attention to such cultural and linguistic adaptations to curriculum and instruction is desirable, they alone are not enough. Some researchers have identified the importance of the broader ecologies surrounding classroom instruction that also affect ELLs. They point specifically to the stances leaders and teachers take in their advocacy for ELLs and their efforts to support families in navigating and thriving in a U.S. school environment. In these studies, the qualities of messages educators circulate within schools, with families, and into the community are seen as essential (Ishimaru, Torres, Salvador, Lott, Williams, & Tran, 2016). Ishimaru et al. (2016), for example, highlight the import of “cultural brokering” between school personnel and families in the journey toward more equitable opportunities for ELLs to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. As they explain, cultural brokers are those individuals who “create safe spaces to help families ‘decode’ the dominant school culture, educate parents about improving their child’s achievement, connect parents to institutional resources and knowledge, and advocate for changes to the institution” (p. 852).

Imagining a culturally and linguistically adaptive school system that takes all of these concerns into account, then, we might see that all learners would be invited and expected to actively participate in cognitively demanding tasks that draw on their prior experiences and knowledge, and that district and school leaders and teachers would take into account their students’ diverse backgrounds, learning styles, and language competencies as they adapt rigorous standards-based curricula to their students’ needs. This would all be set within a district and school culture that embraces cultural and linguistic difference as an asset, complemented by district and school climates that are welcoming and inclusive of ELLs and their families.

Yet, several researchers note that teachers may not receive sufficient preparation in how to adapt the curriculum and their instruction while taking into account culture and language differences, and that even with preparation, teachers are likely to need ongoing modeling and considerable professional development support to master this complex competence. This is especially the case while implementing new and more challenging standards like the Common Core (van Lier & Walqui, 2012), as well as how district and school cultures and climates might be adapted to what has been called by some the “new mainstream” (see Swain & Deters, 2007), which is more culturally and linguistically diverse, requiring leadership among educators and other social service providers. Such an expansive and ecological framework is under-theorized in the research literature and holds ramifications for policy—an issue this research sought to address.

## Methods

In this qualitative multiple case study we relied upon a quantitative method (regression analysis) to select schools and utilized a replicated “unusual case” design (Yin, 2014, p. 57) to identify commonalities in schools characterized by relatively better student achievement outcomes.

### School Selection

Schools selected (see Table 1) were identified based on student achievement outcomes as well as a variety of other demographic criteria. Achievement outcome measures included the 2012–13 and 2013–14

NYS mathematics and English language arts assessments across multiple grade levels. Schools classified as odds-beating are ones in which ELLs exceeded expected average achievement in ELA and math at Grades 3–6 on the state examinations. Using SPSS quantitative analysis software, an expected average performance level was generated for each subject at each grade level. By comparing expected to actual average performance, schools could then be classified as odds-beating if the difference between expected and actual performance on average was greater than .5 standard deviation above the mean in comparison with all schools in the state (statistically significant). One hundred and twenty-seven out of 1,378 schools (9.2%) serving Grades 3–6 were identified through this procedure.

Next, a variety of other criteria was applied to filter the sample, including whether the school was in “good academic standing” or designated as a “reward” (i.e., high achieving or high progress) school by the state. We also winnowed the sample by identifying schools based on “urbanicity” (i.e., urban, suburban, and rural categorization), and favored schools serving more economically disadvantaged and/or ethnically diverse student populations. Finally, we eliminated any schools whose per-pupil expenditures, combined wealth ratio, and percentages of expenditures on instruction were above the norm. In essence, the schools studied provide better-case scenarios for ELL achievement on state assessments, taking into account poverty, diversity, and district and school resources.

**Table 1.** Odds-Beating School Demographics and Achievement Z Score<sup>2</sup>

School	Total Enrollment <sup>3</sup>	% ELL	% White	% Economically Disadvantaged <sup>4</sup>	PPE <sup>5</sup>	Z score
Catskill	760	3	72	62	\$24,032	.97
Schuylerville	718	2	96	31	\$17,884	1.5
Fostertown	637	11	28	61	\$21,878	.93
Van Rensselaer	622	8	63	73	\$19,870	.74
Guilderland	548	11	67	18	\$17,995	1.3
Blue Creek	482	6	68	24	\$18,457	1.78
NYS	N/A	8	45	54	\$21,812	NA

### Data Sources and Analytic Procedures

Once schools were chosen and leaders and educators agreed to participate, two researchers (the first two authors), each with PhDs in curriculum and instruction and trained in using the instruments and in human subjects research, visited each school to collect data. Through multiple visits, they gathered documentary evidence; conducted interviews with the ELL students, the principal, teachers, and district administrators; conducted focus groups with teachers; and collected field notes from observations in ENL and mainstream classrooms over an entire school term (January–June).

The documentary evidence included lesson plans and student work. Interviews and focus groups followed semi-structured protocols probing leaders’ and educators’ values and beliefs about ELL learners, academic expectations for ELLs, efforts to communicate with parents and community organizations, curriculum and instructional emphases, district and school resources including staffing, and assessment and data monitoring procedures. The interviews and focus groups were audiotaped and a record kept using a laptop computer. The classroom observations were guided by an observation protocol that prompted the two researchers to record descriptions of activities as well as conduct a debrief session with

<sup>2</sup>Z scores represent the standard deviation from the mean, with >.5 as statistically significant.

<sup>3</sup>Data are from the 2014–15 state report cards.

<sup>4</sup>One measure of poverty, and the one used here, is economic disadvantage (see definition at <https://data.nysed.gov/glossary.php?report=reportcards>)

<sup>5</sup>2012–13 districtwide total expenditures per pupil.

teachers about the intent and content of their lessons. Before and during site visits the researchers kept interpretive memos cataloguing questions raised, notes for follow-up, and the beginnings of interpretations, and shared these throughout the data-collection phase of the study.

Using typical case study procedures, the research team coded data thematically in alignment with social ecological theory and the literature review, and generated code reports by theme (e.g., curriculum, instruction, leadership) (Yin, 2014). This was done with HyperResearch data condensation software, which facilitates the parsing of data so it can then be queried in code reports. Next, they utilized matrices created in Excel to identify salient themes within the cases (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). The researchers then designed case studies for each school based upon this analysis of the themes and checked for the accuracy and completeness of the case studies with principals and superintendents (i.e., member checking) (Creswell, 2013).

Once case studies were finalized, a second phase of analysis followed: cross-case procedures utilizing the same code reports derived from HyperResearch as well as a matrix comparing themes were used to identify key similarities and differences across the schools (i.e., pattern-matching) (Yin, 2014). The researchers then engaged in axial coding, which involves chunking major themes and their relationships (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). In sum, for this study the strategies of researcher triangulation, data triangulation, and member checking were used to enhance credibility.

## Findings

This study investigated what characterizes odds-beating elementary schools where ELLs achieve better-than-predicted outcomes on state assessments in English language arts and mathematics. In brief, findings derived from the collected data indicate that several characteristics of these schools work in combination to create school ecologies conducive to ELLs' success. These ecologies include: (a) school cultures that embrace the ideals of equity of opportunity and celebrate diversity; (b) school climates that evoke a sense of safety and welcome; and (c) processes and practices that support advocacy for ELLs and their families. While the schools in this study shared these characteristics, they also differed in some important ways. These variations are discussed in the latter half of this section through case descriptions.

### Embracing Equity and Celebrating Diversity

One characteristic the odds-beating schools in this study shared is their emphasis on equity of opportunity and celebrating diversity. This emphasis is embedded in the belief and value that individual differences offer additive benefits for adults' and children's learning and enrichment and should be celebrated. The Excellence through Creativity (ETC) initiative at Fostertown, an urban magnet school, provides an example. With one of its district's first dual-language programs, Fostertown leaders and educators share a school identity that embraces difference and equity of opportunity. A Fostertown classroom teacher described how she welcomes students from diverse backgrounds:

They're different kids from different cultures. So that as soon as you get your class you try to figure out [what] everybody's backgrounds [are]. And I just love their faces when I read something in Italian or with Spanish in it. They just brighten up, and then they'll come to me to tell me if I'm saying it correctly or incorrectly, and they're very proud of that.

As in Fostertown, teachers in rural Schuylerville enthusiastically expressed embracing diversity and celebrating students' home languages and cultures, as this representative quote from an ENL teacher there noted:

I think that they know that I'm interested in their language and their culture. I try to get them bilingual books. . . . I'll send those home so the moms can work with the kids and I try to let the moms know, "Please don't speak English with your kids at home. You have to be sure they don't lose their native language." I think it makes the parents feel a bit that they can work with their kids on concepts and read to their kids in Spanish and that they're still helping.

Suburban Guilderland Elementary School teachers also talked about diverse students as an enriching benefit to the school culture and learning environment. For example, a Guilderland classroom teacher said:

Yesterday we had a big Chinese New Year celebration and one of the students' moms came in. They made lanterns. The ENL student was really in the spotlight with her mom. They did a slide show and sharing, and the kids were asking her questions about her culture. So this interaction I think is really important. I don't always know what they know and don't know, so it's my philosophy that I always say to them, "I have so much to learn from you and you have much to learn from me." I try to model that so that the students see me doing that; then the students want to know.

Thus, in these schools, it is seen that valuing the cultural and linguistic resources of ELLs and celebrating their diversity are deeply embedded in practice.

### **Evoking a Climate of Safety and Welcome**

In all of the schools studied, teachers and school leaders interviewed identified schoolwide positive behavior and character education programs as contributing to a safe and welcoming environment where ELLs can thrive academically as well as socially and emotionally. Suburban Blue Creek Elementary educators described their long-standing tradition as a "Peaceable School" (a model for conflict resolution and positive behavior) that encourages adults and children alike to embody acceptance of others' differences and to hold high expectations for their active and kind participation in the classroom and school. With systems in place to ensure students' safety both physically and emotionally, ELLs in these schools are able to learn in a low-anxiety environment. As one Blue Creek teacher expressed it:

I think the goal for them [the ELLs] is to feel safe, to see themselves as students, to be able to problem solve, and feel that there's always someone there to help them do their academics or take care of their emotional needs.

A classroom teacher at Blue Creek described their work in positive behavior and character education:

This school is an eclectic group. It is heavily into character building, and we have a lot of programs and grants that help children to see the ramifications of their actions and to check before they make choices that may not be good for them, and it really shows in the community that the kids are special in that respect. We have a great international group, so we are lucky to have that worldview of what goes on in other countries.

And an ENL teacher at Blue Creek explained why educators there prioritize a safe and welcoming environment:

They [ELLs] will *not* learn English unless they feel safe and comfortable. So forget the curriculum until they feel safe, and this building is amazing because of the attitude of the teachers.

In general, the leaders and educators in this study showed evidence of purposeful acts to provide a safe and welcoming climate that was structured and supported through positive behavior and character education programs.



## Advocating for ELLs

With the conviction that “where there is a will there is a way,” district and school leaders as well as teachers expressed an advocacy stance—one that is driven by a mission to offer optimal opportunities for ELLs to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally, and they see this as extending beyond the school walls. A Fostertown district leader explained her philosophy: “Every student needs access to everything. Every student should have breakfast and lunch. Every student should be able to participate in whatever club or activity or learning opportunity you have.” This urban school district leader went on to explain the import of having a shared vision of advocacy for ELLs and their families and what that means when translated into processes and practices in schools: “It’s a shared vision, to provide equity, and equity does not mean equal. It’s to provide every family exactly what it needs, whatever that may be,” she said.

A key component of this advocacy stance is that it did not end at the school building door, as implied in the quote above. In the schools studied, we noted that educators developed partnerships and connections to community service providers to advocate for the needs of their ELLs. For example, they connect with the community by organizing food and clothing drives for students in need. In Fostertown and Van Rensselaer, for example, connections and referrals are made to local Boys and Girls Clubs and community centers, where children and families can begin to develop ties to their neighbors and also take advantage of after-school tutoring, sports, art, music, and recreational activities. An illustration of this focus was expressed by a Fostertown district leader:

So we try to have that collegial network with every service, so that we really work to provide services for the whole child, depending on what the needs are. And we find that the needs are similar between the ELLs and the poverty kids and the special education kids. All their needs are similar in that they have the support they need to be able to learn in school. So we basically take care of anything we can.

In rural Schuylerville and urban Van Rensselaer, school personnel work with state and national migrant worker and refugee agencies to ensure that families are supported in their transition to the United States. Furthermore, in these schools, social-emotional, mental health, medical, dental, and vision care is coordinated by support staff through their connections and partnerships to county agencies and health providers. Echoing this holistic advocacy stance, a classroom teacher in suburban Blue Creek summed up the connection between social, emotional, physical wellness, and academics:

[Blue Creek] is very kid centered. I’m always worried about how the kids are feeling before the academics. If they’re not into it the academics aren’t going to happen. So it’s making sure everybody’s in a good place.

Overall, the leaders and educators in the schools studied share awareness of the need to advocate for ELLs in a variety of ways that occur within and outside the school walls, and they do so in their day-to-day practice. While the schools studied share the common characteristics described above, they also differ in important ways. These differences in the ways schools vary by their context are described in the following sections.

## A Deeper Dive: Urban, Suburban, and Rural School Cases

As a growing body of research literature suggests (Bronfenbrenner, 1993; van Lier, 2004; Wilcox, Lawson, & Angelis, 2015), key characteristics of district, school, and classroom processes and practices are in part a function of the contextual affordances and constraints individuals are offered in their unique settings. In essence, one odds-beater is not exactly like every other. In Table 2, key characteristics of urban, suburban, and rural schools are displayed, showing the commonalities and differences among



them. To highlight these variations, we share “snapshots” from one urban (Gregory, 2016a), one suburban (Wilcox, 2016), and one rural case study (Gregory, 2016b), highlighting a particularly strong practice in each.

**Table 2.** Key Characteristics of Urban, Suburban, and Rural Odds-Beating Schools

<b>Urban Schools</b>	<b>Key Characteristics</b>
Fostertown ETC Magnet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dual language program</li> <li>• System-wide leadership to support ELLs</li> <li>• A commitment to equity</li> </ul>
Van Rensselaer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High expectations and rigor for all students</li> <li>• A focus on high-quality literacy instruction for all</li> <li>• A culture of collaboration</li> </ul>
<b>Suburban Schools</b>	
Blue Creek	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Celebrating diversity and whole-child wellness</li> <li>• Leading to build teacher efficacy and commitment</li> <li>• Creating an inclusive and accessible environment for ELLs</li> </ul>
Guilderland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supporting literacy learning with multiple resources</li> <li>• Reaching out to families</li> <li>• Nurturing embedded and extensive professional learning opportunities</li> </ul>
<b>Rural Schools</b>	
Catskill	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Including and integrating ELLs</li> <li>• Individualizing instruction</li> <li>• Connecting with families</li> </ul>
Schuylerville	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adapting to meet the needs of individual students</li> <li>• Encouraging ENL teacher dedication and leadership</li> <li>• Supporting connections between school, home, and community agencies</li> </ul>

### **An Urban School Snapshot: Fostertown ETC Magnet School<sup>6</sup>**

Fostertown ETC magnet school is one of nine elementary schools in the Newburgh enlarged city school district. As a magnet school, its students come from all areas of the city and town of Newburgh, making for a highly diverse student population. Families submit their school preferences and then a lottery determines where students are placed. The district serves almost 11,000 students; 639 of them attend Fostertown. About 90% of the ELLs in the district come from Central America and speak Spanish.

Fostertown is well known within the district for its dual language program, which was moved to Fostertown when the school that had originally housed it closed. Many teachers from that school were transferred to Fostertown so that the program could maintain consistency. At Fostertown, some ELLs are selected for the dual language program; the rest are in the general education program, where they are served by the ENL program. In the ENL program, comprising both integrated classes, ENL teachers “push in” and co-teach the mainstream class and provide stand-alone ENL instruction, and “pull out” students to the ENL classroom for instruction. Dual language classes are taught by teachers who are certified as bilingual teachers and ENL classes are taught by ENL-certified teachers.

<sup>6</sup>This snapshot is excerpted from a full case study report (Gregory, 2016a).

**Highlighted practice: A commitment to equity.** A Newburgh district goal is that all students will be reading by third grade. District leaders expressed the importance of providing students with a strong foundation in literacy to support future learning, and district and school educators share a conviction that the dual language program works well for ELLs because it develops native language fluency and literacy skills, which leads to deeper learning. One of the five pillars of the superintendent's five-year strategic plan, called "Vision 2020,"<sup>7</sup> is "Educational Equity & Excellence," which includes a strong language foundation in K–2. A district leader elaborated:

We want to be sure that students have a solid early education K–2. For example, this year . . . we made sure that we had a strong foundations program in Spanish to ensure that our students whose home language is Spanish, and even for students in our dual programs, had that foundation.

She went on to describe a Spanish language foundational reading program that the district purchased to support students in their native language at K–1.

District and school leaders also discussed the goals of inclusion, full integration, and equity. As a district leader noted, "We want to be able to provide all our ELLs with the same learning opportunities as our English native speakers." The principal at Fostertown echoed these goals, and described how a school theme of performing arts helps to create opportunities for equity and success:

It also gives them another modality and another outlet to be able to express themselves. It brings them a lot of self-esteem, and I think students who have high self-esteem and who find ways to express themselves are successful in whatever they want to do.

Thus, in the urban schools studied, ELLs benefit from dual language programs and both school and districtwide emphasis on the provision of quality literacy instruction, so that ELLs enjoy equity of opportunity to thrive in their elementary years.

### **A Suburban School Snapshot: Blue Creek Elementary School<sup>8</sup>**

Blue Creek is one of six elementary schools that make up the large suburban school district of North Colonie, one of two districts that serve Colonie, a populous suburb in the Capital Region of New York State. Colonie has a long history that dates back to its roots as a Dutch colony, once largely agricultural but always rich in crossroads to more urban and industrialized cities and towns. Now, its remaining farms and hamlets nestle within and between highways and shopping malls in an increasingly diverse community.

The district has seen considerable demographic changes over the past few decades, particularly with the percentages of children growing up in poverty, a number that has increased from close to 10% in 2006 to 20% in 2016. Thus, approximately one in five children attending schools in the district today lives in a household that falls below the federal poverty line; although this percentage lies well below the state average, for those in the district "it's a huge sea change," according to a district administrator. These changes have required shifts in vision, mission, and priorities, as evidenced in the district's "Legacy Planning" efforts, intended to "establish a vision for the school for a decade to come—addressing a wide range of issues including growing enrollment and the capacity of current buildings, along with future program aspirations for all students."<sup>9</sup>

Blue Creek's K–6 building, which serves as a district magnet school for students with significant behavioral issues, is one of the most socioeconomically, culturally, and linguistically diverse elementary schools in the district. In addition to the rising percentages of students living in poverty, the percentage of ELLs attending Blue Creek has also risen from about 4% to over 6% of the total school population. Of

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<sup>7</sup>[https://www.newburghschools.org/news/Vision%202020%20The%20Way%20Forward%20over\\_15.pdf](https://www.newburghschools.org/news/Vision%202020%20The%20Way%20Forward%20over_15.pdf)

<sup>8</sup>This snapshot is excerpted from a full case study report (Wilcox, 2016).

<sup>9</sup>[http://northcolonielegacyplan.com/North\\_Colonie\\_Legacy\\_Planning\\_Site/Legacy\\_Plan.html](http://northcolonielegacyplan.com/North_Colonie_Legacy_Planning_Site/Legacy_Plan.html)

these students, the 33 ELLs studying at Blue Creek in the 2015–16 school year identified the following as their countries of origin: Armenia, China, Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Japan, Korea, Lebanon, Mexico, Pakistan, Puerto Rico, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Yemen, and Zimbabwe. So, while the school serves a moderately higher than average percentage of students classified as “white,” it also serves a slightly higher than average percentage of students classified as “multiracial” or “other” (26% in comparison to the state average of 12%).

**Highlighted practice: Staffing for fit to an inclusive and diverse environment.** For teachers to feel comfortable in this environment and to be successful, leaders are careful in selecting who can work at Blue Creek, with an eye toward commitment and dedication to serving a diverse student body. First and foremost, district and school leaders filter their candidates to those who, according to the principal, are “amazing.” They rely upon such individuals to be dedicated to each other, the children, and their families. The principal explained:

We hire amazing people and we rely a lot on the fact that we hire amazing people to do a lot of the lift. We rely on people being unbelievably dedicated to providing a great experience for kids. I feel like we’re really moving in the direction of institutionalizing a lot of our good work rather than relying on the work of individuals.

In addition to this quality of generally high commitment, looking to teachers’ beliefs about diversity is a key practice when hiring or seeking to retain employees. The principal recounted a time when children came to her to call out a substitute teacher for making comments about a child the substitute assumed was Asian, but was not. As an example of how this kind of situation is handled, the principal explained the issue to the substitute, who reportedly didn’t understand the problem—so was never invited back.

In contrast to the urban schools in this study, the suburban schools’ most salient affordances are schoolwide whole-child wellness programs, multiple professional development opportunities for teachers to take up culturally responsive pedagogies, and active outreach to parents and legal guardians as partners in ELLs’ learning. In these schools, emphasis is placed on hiring the right fit of adult—one who values diversity and has both the desire and capacity to adapt practices to meet ELLs’ needs.

### **A Rural School Snapshot: Schuylerville Elementary School<sup>10</sup>**

Schuylerville Elementary is one of three schools in the Schuylerville Central School district. It serves Grades K–5, and in 2016 was designated by the U.S. Department of Education as New York’s only “Green Ribbon School”<sup>11</sup> for its outdoor education program and its environmental sustainability efforts. Students leaving Schuylerville Elementary move on to the middle school (Grades 6–8) and then the high school. All three schools are situated on the same campus.

Schuylerville, the site of the Revolutionary War battle of Saratoga, is a rural and historic community. It is home to several horse, apple, and dairy farms, and many in the community commute to the nearby cities of Saratoga or Albany for work. With the abundance of farms, migrant workers have been attracted to Schuylerville for employment. Most come from Central or South America and speak Spanish.

The district has a total enrollment of 1,685 students in Grades K–12. One percent of those students are ELLs, with the majority Spanish speaking. Thirty percent of students are economically disadvantaged. Despite the challenges of meeting the needs of children who come to school with a wide array of socio-economic, cultural, and educational backgrounds, Schuylerville educators are firm in expressing their commitment to providing an individualized and caring education for all. A district leader remarked, “I feel

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<sup>10</sup>This snapshot is excerpted from a full case study report (Gregory, 2016b).

<sup>11</sup>See more about U.S. Department of Education Green Ribbon Schools at <http://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-department-education-green-ribbon-schools-honorees-announced> and Schuylerville’s award at <http://www.schuylervilleschools.org/schuylerville-elementary-school-receives-green-ribbon-school-sustainability-award-in-washington-d-c/>.

like the community believes that they have a district that provides not only the education but the heart and soul of every child's education and that we embrace every bit of that student."

**Highlighted practice: Coordinating and connecting.** In this relatively small rural elementary school, several service providers interact to coordinate interventions for children in need. Academic intervention services (AIS) teachers in math and ELA, literacy specialists, special education teachers, the ENL teacher, support staff (social workers and psychologists), as well as school and district administrators, all work together to ensure that each child has the appropriate level of intervention needed for academic and social growth.

Parents are seen as an important part of the team in coordinating services in Schuylerville. Teachers reported that bilingual interpreters attend meetings and/or documents are translated to make sure that parents understand the processes and programs in place to help their children. In addition, outside agencies are sometimes contacted to help families with physical or mental health needs or counseling. One support staff person noted that the team's goal is "Finding out what their needs are and doing everything we can to meet those needs either within the school or using the resources we're aware of in the community to meet their needs. I would say that's the key."

Discerning the specific needs of ELL students can be very challenging, educators at Schuylerville reported. It requires a coordinated effort among various specialists to figure out if a child is struggling because of a learning disability or because of language competencies not yet developed. When educators believe that language is not the issue, but that instead it is cognitive, the district tries to have any such students evaluated in their home language to obtain an accurate sense of their abilities. As a special education administrator explained:

The difficulty for those kids who are referred to the special education committee is having the opportunity to have them thoroughly evaluated in their language, because that right now is a *huge* hurdle. Those bilingual evaluation folks are very few and far between.

Once screened, she noted, ELLs who are at advanced proficiency in English yet score low on ELA and/or math benchmark or state assessments are referred for AIS services. AIS teachers coordinate their services with one another as well as mainstream teachers to make sure each child receives the appropriate intervention.

In comparison to the urban and suburban schools in this study, the rural schools investigated leverage their relatively small size to coordinate support, individualize instruction for ELLs, connect to families, partner with community agencies, and utilize the ENL teacher to provide leadership and advocacy for ELLs.

## Limitations

We acknowledge that our findings, while offering a composite of promising practices, also come with clear limitations. Our study was conducted in only six schools, and these schools were not identified as the highest performing in the state. Instead, they represent settings that beat the odds, taking into account measures of poverty and diversity as described in the Methods section; if we had chosen schools based on other criteria, we may have derived different results. In addition, it is important to note that we based our school sample selection on ELL student performance on state exams, which provides only one measure of ELL achievement. Other measures of ELL performance or "success" could also be used to identify schools and would likely lead to a different sample that might in turn result in different findings.

## Conclusion

This study provides evidence that cultural and linguistic adaptations within school ecologies that support advocacy for ELLs is common in odds-beating schools. These system-wide approaches call on educators to expertly provide opportunities for ELLs to engage in a productive struggle to meet high

expectations for learning in classrooms with their peers while also providing the emotional and social supports to avoid frustration and welcome their full participation in classroom and school activities as well as in their communities.

The several characteristics of the districts' and schools' ecologies we identified provide a vision for what a culturally and linguistically adaptive school system might look like. This vision is offered with the caveat that educators in the schools studied time and again provided the refrain that "it" (their approach toward meeting ELLs' academic, social, and emotional needs) is still a work in progress. In the words of one of the teacher participants in this study, "We realize this is the class in front of you; [we ask] 'What's going to work for them?' It's not what worked last year or years before; it's in front of you." Indeed, the wide variety of ELLs' needs, dynamic demographic shifts, and policy changes occurring in New York State and nationwide calls for a uniquely concerted and ecologically nuanced effort from many contributors to adapt school systems to meet the challenges at hand.

For policymakers, district and school leaders, teachers, school staff, and researchers alike, contextually nuanced and actionable models for successfully institutionalizing culturally and linguistically adaptive school systems for diverse youth are still on the horizon (Lawson & van Veen, 2015). While CR Part 154 and the Blueprint for ELL Success articulate many of the components of ideal models, making strides at scaling up and implementing such systems requires innovative thinking among a variety of stakeholders, including those working in community organizations and social service agencies that intersect with schools and districts with variable resources and capacities for adaptations. We therefore propose that a convergence of effort across these disparate organizations, with attention to the contextual affordances and constraints in different schools and communities, is necessary in order to co-construct systems of support that better serve the next generation of New York State's culturally and linguistically diverse youth.

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