DIFFERENTIATING AND SIMPLIFYING

TRANSFORMING SCHOOL RESTRUCTURING UNDER NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND IN NEW YORK

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Introduction

Critics of New York State’s school accountability systems, both inside and outside the state department of education, agree that the past systems were too complex. “Few fully understood the parallel state and federal systems,” admitted David Bryant, acting supervisor of New York’s Regional School Support Centers (RSSCs). At the same time, “one size does not fit all,” said Bryant; what works in New York City is likely to be very different from what works in suburban districts or in upstate New York. New state and federal initiatives in New York have attempted to simultaneously streamline a layered system of accountability and leverage more support for struggling schools that is tailored to their past reasons for failure.

Schools in restructuring—the controversial last consequence for persistently low performance under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)—are among those likely to be strongly affected by these changes. Schools must develop plans for restructuring if they fail to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) toward their state’s student achievement targets for five consecutive years, and must implement these restructuring plans if they fall short of AYP targets for six or more consecutive years. The NCLB law requires districts to choose one of five options for their schools in restructuring, such as replacing school staff or contracting with an outside organization to run the school. Federal guidance emphasized the need for schools to make dramatic changes in response to restructuring but left much of the details of decision making and implementation to districts and schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). New York State originally used NCLB’s flexibility to layer a federal accountability system on top of the state accountability system already in place.

During the last year, the U.S. Department of Education has also given some states opportunities to pilot new approaches to NCLB accountability. These approaches include differentiating sanctions based on schools’ needs and using growth models to determine schools’ AYP status based on the rate of students’ academic gains on state tests rather than just on the percentages of students scoring proficient. For 2008-09, New York received permission from the U.S. Department of Education to pilot a differentiated accountability system. New York’s pilot attempts to merge the state and federal accountability systems, makes Title I and non-Title I schools subject to many of the same supports and sanctions, and creates supports based on an on-site analysis of school problems. New York also proposed to pilot a growth model. Although the Department rejected the proposal, several New York education officials said the state plans to continue to work on the proposal.

How has the state developed this new differentiated accountability system? How do past efforts to restructure schools fit into the new system? What do educators at the state, regional, district, and school levels see as the promises and challenges of the new system?

To explore these questions, the Center on Education Policy (CEP) reviewed restructuring and accountability documents, examined state test results, and interviewed decision makers at the state and regional levels from fall 2008 through summer 2009. We also conducted case studies of restructuring by interviewing administrators and teachers and reviewing documents in three school districts—Central Islip Union Free School District, New York City Department of Education, and Syracuse City School District—and in six restructuring schools within these districts. Several key findings emerged from our analysis.

1 Title I schools are those that receive federal funds to improve education for low-achieving children in low-income areas through Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended by NCLB.
Key Findings

- **In 2008-09, about 8% of New York State’s Title I schools, or 251 schools, were in the restructuring phase of NCLB. Most of these schools chose the federal restructuring option of making “any other” major change in governance.** Many of these 251 schools had been in NCLB improvement for multiple years: 50 were in their fourth year of improvement, 50 in their fifth year, and 151 in their sixth year or beyond. Most (91%) of these restructuring schools were located in urban districts, and 70% were in New York City. The state had information about schools’ restructuring options under NCLB for the 46 schools in their second year of restructuring implementation in 2007-08. Of these 46 schools, 6 reported replacing staff and 40 reported making “any other” major change in school governance that produces fundamental reform.

- **Differentiated accountability will sharpen the focus on schools in restructuring in 2009-10 and increase the amount of state intervention in restructuring schools.** Under New York’s differentiated accountability pilot, schools will receive progressively more intense needs assessments and supports based on the number of years they remain in improvement. Schools in restructuring will be assigned a Joint Intervention Team that conducts an on-site evaluation of the school and makes recommendations for change. The state Commissioner of Education may also appoint a Distinguished Educator for a restructuring school. This person will serve as an ex-officio, non-voting member of the school board and will have veto power over the school improvement plan, unless the school or district gets a special override from the Commissioner.

- **A new state law, Chapter 57, may increase the number of schools in restructuring in the future.** Under the old state accountability system, schools that were furthest from meeting state standards and determined by the Commissioner to be most in need of improvement were designated as “schools under registration review” (SURRs). These schools had to meet specific performance standards within a certain time frame, and they received more intensive state auditing and technical assistance, regardless of which year of NCLB improvement they were in. Under the new accountability system created by Chapter 57, the SURR designation remains, but if a SURR school fails to make AYP, it moves directly into restructuring.

- **Regional School Support Centers provide restructuring schools with similar supports, but these supports vary in focus.** New York created seven RSSCs, most of which are housed within the state’s regional Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES), to provide assistance to schools in improvement under NCLB. In school year 2008-09, all RSSCs provided restructuring schools with supports rather than monitoring, according to our interviews with RSSC officials. These supports included assistance with data analysis and professional development. Despite similarities, the focus of the support varied; some Centers focused more on district leadership, some focused on instructional coaches, and some provided a mix of services.

- **RSSC officials see promise in the state’s new differentiated accountability plan but have concerns about communication and timeliness.** RSSC officials expressed positive views about various aspects of the new differentiated accountability system, as well as the state’s proposal to use a growth model for determining AYP. At the same time, all RSSC officials that we interviewed voiced concerns about what they viewed as a lack of clear communication regarding new state and federal policies and about the uncertainty surrounding their funding and status for the future.

- **District and school officials interviewed appreciated support from the RSSCs and the state but some wished for greater coordination of services.** At least one person in each of our three case study districts discussed the assistance the districts received for restructuring schools from the state.

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1 This percentage is based on the most recent data available from the National Center for Education Statistics, which indicate there were 3,224 Title I schools in New York State in 2006-07.
and their RSSC. Most believed this assistance was helpful. Several, however, noted that they had to make a special effort to coordinate all the different sources of support their restructuring schools received. For example, the principal at Grant Middle School in Syracuse holds a collaborative planning meeting for all the entities that support his restructuring school.

- **All the case study districts and schools said they were working to increase professional development and collaboration in restructuring schools.** Several districts had created new positions, such as coaches or content area specialists, to provide on-site training, observations of instruction, and feedback aimed at improving instruction. Many schools created core teaching teams in which subject area teachers shared students and had a common planning time. Other schools created official small learning communities where teacher teams functioned more like autonomous schools within the larger school. Participants were hopeful about this approach. In Central Islip, the middle school did not make progress until teachers were given a major role in decision making; however, implementing smaller learning communities in this district was a challenge due to teachers’ union contract and scheduling issues.

- **Many case study interviewees expressed concerns about the poor performance of student subgroups, particularly English language learners (ELLs) and students with disabilities.** Seymour Academy in Syracuse and other case study schools have found it challenging to revise their bilingual education or English language acquisition programs in ways they feel are instructionally sound for ELLs and will also lead to quick academic improvements for NCLB accountability. In New York City, where half the students are bilingual, schools have yet to find a uniform strategy to meet these students’ needs and instead use a variety of approaches. For students with disabilities, schools typically reported increasing their efforts to include these students in mainstream classes and having special education teachers and general education teachers collaborate to teach the class.

### Overview of Restructuring in New York

New York State’s treatment of schools in restructuring is on the brink of transformation. In January 2009, the U.S. Department of Education approved New York for the differentiated accountability pilot, which will have a large impact on schools in restructuring. In addition, the state legislature passed a new law called Chapter 57 in 2007 that has influenced the design of New York’s new accountability system.

#### THE OLD SYSTEM

Prior to differentiated accountability, New York had separate labels for the accountability status of Title I and non-Title I schools. Only Title I schools consistently faced federal consequences due to NCLB. The state also had a special designation and special consequences for schools that were furthest from state standards and were determined by the Commissioner to be most in need of improvement. The labels under the former accountability system included the following:

- **Schools in need of improvement** included Title I schools that had failed to make AYP for two or more consecutive years on an accountability measure and received sanctions and supports. Consistent with NCLB, these sanctions included requirements for schools to offer public school choice (year 1 of improvement), provide supplemental educational (tutoring) services (year 2), enter corrective action (year 3), plan for restructuring (year 4), and implement restructuring (year 5 and beyond).

- **Schools requiring academic progress** included non-Title I schools that had failed to make AYP for two consecutive years or more. However, the consequences and supports for these schools were less than those for Title I schools.

- **Schools under registration review** included Title I and non-Title I schools that had been identified for NCLB improvement or required academic progress, were furthest from meeting state standards, and were determined by the state Commissioner of Education to be most in need of improvement. SURR schools received more intensive support and monitoring, as follows:
The Commissioner gave them a set of performance standards, which they had to meet within a specific time. Standards and time frames differed by school.

They were audited by an “external team” led by a district superintendent and had to respond to the team’s findings in their district and school improvement plans.

They were assigned a state education department liaison, who provided on-site technical assistance at least one day per month.

SURT schools also were charged with improving or facing closure. According to the New York State Education Department, almost three-fourths (228) of the 312 SURT schools identified since 1989 have improved academic performance sufficiently to exit SURT status, although exiting SURT is not dependent on making AYP. Another 66 schools that did not meet their performance targets have been closed by school districts (New York State Office of Communications, 2009).

THE DIFFERENTIATED ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM

In 2009-10, the state’s new differentiated accountability system will change how schools are labeled and what supports they receive. The simplified system will no longer use different labels for Title I and non-Title I schools—an improvement according to several state and regional officials. “Before, if you weren’t Title I, you were sort of off the radar,” said David Bryant, the RSSCs acting supervisor. “We didn’t have the capacity to deal with these schools. Under the new system we will make no distinctions.” Funding to serve non-Title I schools will have to come out of state coffers, however, and several New York education officials expressed concern about whether funds would be sufficient.

Beginning in 2009-10, schools identified for improvement will be grouped into one of the following three phases, regardless of whether they receive Title I funds:

- Schools will be identified for **corrective action** if they have failed to make AYP for at least two additional years on an accountability measure for which the school was previously identified for improvement (formerly year 3 of improvement, also known as corrective action, or year 4 of improvement, also known as restructuring planning).
- Schools will be identified for **restructuring** if they have failed to make AYP for at least two additional years on an accountability measure for which the school was previously identified for corrective action (formerly year 5 or beyond of school improvement, also known as restructuring implementation).

All three phases in the new system involve common sanctions and supports. All schools at any of these phases must develop two-year school improvement plans, a departure from the NCLB requirement for yearly improvement plans. In addition, all identified schools must offer supplemental educational services. The requirement to offer students the choice of transferring to another public school does not take effect until the second year of school improvement, a switch from the NCLB requirement for schools to offer choice in year 1 of improvement and supplemental educational services in year 2. This change reflects the belief of New York education officials that supplemental services may be more effective than choice and should be offered earlier.

Within the preceding three phases, schools identified for improvement under NCLB will be further grouped into three categories of need:

- **Basic** schools are those that miss AYP targets in just one area (such as elementary-middle English language arts or high school math) and for just one student subgroup, but not for students as a whole (the “all-students” group). This category will be used only for schools in improvement (formerly year 1 or year 2 of improvement).
- **Focused** schools are those identified for improvement because more that one subgroup failed to meet a single accountability target or because the school failed to meet more than one accountability target even though the all-students group made AYP.
- **Comprehensive** schools are those that miss AYP targets for all subgroups or for the all-students group.
Schools at all three phases—improvement, corrective action, or restructuring—must conduct diagnostic assessments, create two-year improvement plans, and receive additional oversight and support. These activities vary primarily by phase of improvement and in a few instances by category of need (basic, focused, comprehensive):

- **Improvement** schools undergo a self-assessment using a state-created Quality Indicator document. In addition, “focused” or “comprehensive” schools are assigned a School Quality Review (SQR) team that conducts an on-site review. These teams were created by the Commissioner in 2007-08 and consist of at least two people, one from the state education department and one from either the regional BOCES or the school district. The team conducts an on-site review of the school and makes non-binding recommendations for improvement. Under differentiated accountability, the composition of SQR teams is expected to change and to include district representation.

- **Corrective action** schools are assigned an SQR team. They also participate in a more intensive curriculum audit, which is designed to improve instruction in the school. Finally, they must also choose one of the corrective action options in NCLB: replacing some school staff, implementing a new curriculum, providing teacher professional development, decreasing the school’s management authority, appointing an outside advisor, extending the school day or school year, or restructuring the school’s internal organization.

- **Restructuring** schools are assigned a Joint Intervention Team, which acts as a more intensive SQR team, conducting an on-site evaluation of the school and making recommendations for change. Joint Intervention Teams were created by Chapter 57 and are expected to begin work in school year 2009-10, although the details of how they will work with schools had not been finalized at the time of our study. Restructuring schools may also be assigned a Distinguished Educator; these positions are typically filled by former superintendents and principals. In the past, Distinguished Educators provided on-site technical assistance in English language arts or math to selected SURR schools. Under the new system, they will serve as ex-officio, non-voting members of the school board and have veto power over the school improvement plan, unless the school or district receives a special waiver from the Commissioner.

While New York has simplified its accountability system by creating one system for both Title I and non-Title I schools, it has kept the SURR designation for schools that the Commissioner determines are furthest from meeting state standards and most in need of improvement. SURR schools may be identified in any phase of the differentiated accountability system. As in the past, all SURR schools are assigned a state education department liaison, who provides on-site technical assistance at least one day per month. Chapter 57 and the differentiated accountability system have brought an important change to the treatment of SURR schools, however. If a SURR school does not make AYP, it moves directly to restructuring. SURR schools are eligible for additional state planning grants.

**NUMBER OF SCHOOLS IN RESTRUCTURING**

Prior to piloting differentiated accountability, New York had already received permission from the U.S. Department of Education to use an indexing system to determine whether schools will make AYP, rather than just setting annual targets based on the percentages of students performing at the proficient level on state tests. New York’s performance index assigns schools a number between 0 and 200 using a formula that takes into account the number of students who achieve the basic proficiency, proficiency, and advanced levels. To make AYP, schools and districts must meet annual measurable objectives (AMOs) that have risen over the past three years, as shown in table 1.

As required by NCLB, schools can also fail to make AYP due to additional indicators, including elementary-middle level science and graduation rates. Schools in New York that do not make AYP for four or more years on an accountability measure for which the school was previously identified are placed in restructuring.

Based on 2007-08 testing, New York had 251 Title I schools in restructuring. Many of these schools had been in improvement for multiple years: 33 were in year 6 of improvement, 50 in year 7, 53 in year 8, and 15 in year 9. New York also tracks the number of non-Title I schools in improvement, although prior to 2009-10 there were more limited supports or consequences for these schools. There are far fewer non-
Title I schools in restructuring than Title I schools, particularly in the later years of improvement, as shown in table 2.

Consistent with findings from CEP’s studies of five other states (CEP, 2008), far more of New York’s Title I schools in restructuring are located in urban districts than in suburban or rural districts. As shown in figure 1, more than 91% of these schools are in urban districts, compared with about 8% in suburban districts and less than 1% in rural districts. In addition, 70% are in New York City.

The state of New York has not yet determined the status of schools under the differentiated accountability system, according to Alan Ray, assistant state commissioner of policy and strategic planning. With approval of the New York Board of Regents, the state will use the 2008-09 state test results to place schools in the differentiated accountability levels and categories beginning with school year 2009-10, Ray said.

Table 1. New York State’s Annual Measurable Objectives for Performance Index Scores*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject and Grade</th>
<th>2006-07</th>
<th>2007-08</th>
<th>2008-09</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English language arts, grades 3-8</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math, grades 3-8</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English language arts, high school</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math, high school</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table reads: To make AYP in school year 2006-07, a school or district in New York State had to achieve a performance index score of 122 in English language arts for grades 3 through 8. For school year 2007-08, the objective rose to a performance index score of 133, and for 2008-09, it rose again to 144.

*New York also places a confidence interval, similar to a margin of error, around the AMO, so a school or district that missed an AMO by a small amount could still make AYP if its index score falls within the confidence interval.


Table 2. Number of Title I and Non-Title I Schools in NCLB Restructuring, 2008-09

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Year 4</th>
<th>Year 5</th>
<th>Year 6</th>
<th>Year 7</th>
<th>Year 8</th>
<th>Year 9</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title I schools</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Title I schools</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>304</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table reads: In 2008-09, 50 Title I schools were in year 4 of improvement (the planning phase of NCLB restructuring), 50 were in year 5 (the beginning of the implementation phase), 33 were in year 6, 50 were in year 7, 53 were in year 8, and 15 were in year 9. Altogether, 251 schools were in any phase of NCLB restructuring that year.

Source: CEP analysis of data from New York State Education Department, Schools and Districts in Need of Improvement, www.emsc.nysed.gov/irts/accountability/sini/.
States have two sources of federal funding to assist districts and schools identified for improvement under NCLB, including restructuring schools. The first is the 4% state set-aside of funds for school improvement authorized by section 1003(a) of Title I. New York's school improvement set-aside did not change much over the past year, totaling about $48.4 million in 2007-08 and roughly $49.0 million in 2008-09. The second source of funding for schools in improvement is a separate appropriation of funds authorized by section 1003(g) of Title I. Due to a national increase in these funds, New York's 1003(g) funds increased from about $12 million in 2007-08 to $41 million in 2008-09.

As allowed by federal law, the New York state department of education retains 5% of these 1003 (a) and (g) funds for state support of schools in improvement. The rest goes to districts, which distribute the funding to schools in improvement. Districts receive $50,000 per school in improvement out of the state's Title I 1003(g) and (a) funds. The districts must write plans indicating that the funds will be used to target particular subjects or subgroups that caused the school to miss AYP targets. The funds must also support the goals for school improvement outlined in the school's improvement plan, as well as any restructuring plans. The funds can be used for a variety of purposes, including professional development, before- and after-school programs, and instructional materials for students and teachers. It is currently unclear whether these funds may be used for the School Quality Review teams, curriculum audits, Joint Intervention teams, and Distinguished Educators that the state's new differentiated accountability system will require.

Some struggling districts and schools in New York also receive funding beyond federal school improvement grants. “These districts and schools get an enormous amount of extra state funding,” noted Assistant Commissioner Alan Ray. The largest source of additional state funding is the Contracts for Excellence funding stream, which the legislature enacted in 2007-08 after the state settled a lawsuit with the New York City Public Schools about equitable funding.

In the 2007-08 school year, 55 districts received a total of $428 million through Contracts for Excellence, while in 2008-09, 39 districts received a total of $478 million. Districts must participate in Contracts for Excellence if they receive a certain increase in state funding and if they are in improvement under NCLB. The districts must use the funds to implement one of the following “proven,” state-approved practices to improve student achievement:

- Class size reduction
- Increased student time on task
- Teacher and principal quality initiatives
- Middle school and high school restructuring
- Model programs for English language learners
- Full day pre-kindergarten and kindergarten

Figure 1. Schools in Restructuring in New York State by District Type, 2008-09

Figure reads: In the 2008-09 school year, 91.4% of New York's restructuring schools were in urban districts, 8.2% were in suburban districts, and 0.3% were in rural districts.

Source: CEP analysis of data from New York State Education Department, Schools and Districts in Need of Improvement, www.emsc.nysed.gov/irts/accountability/sini/.

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1 Although all states were required to set aside 4%, some were not able to do so because of a hold-harmless provision in Title I, as amended by NCLB. This situation is explained in more detail in two CEP reports (2006; 2007), available at www.cep-dc.org.
In addition, districts may use up to 15% of the funding for experimental programs aimed at improving student achievement if approved by the Commissioner.

The majority of schools in restructuring in 2008-09 were also in districts with Contracts for Excellence. Just 23 (or 8%) of New York’s schools in NCLB restructuring were not located in Contract for Excellence districts. Twenty-four districts with no schools in restructuring, however, also received funding through Contracts for Excellence, so this state funding has also benefited many schools in the early stages of NCLB improvement.

State funds have also been available for SURR schools that are in restructuring: $1.9 million in 2007-08 and $1.8 million in 2008-09. The funds are used to plan school improvement efforts.

**RESTRUCTURING OPTIONS**

New York does not deviate much from the restructuring options specified in the NCLB law. These options include:

- Entering into a contract to have an outside organization with a record of effectiveness operate the school
- Reopening the school as a charter school
- Replacing all or most of the school staff who are relevant to the failure to make AYP
- Turning operation of the school over to the state, if the state agrees
- Undertaking any other major restructuring of the school’s governance that produces fundamental reform

New York State, like the other states we have studied (CEP, 2008), does not use the option of taking over the management of restructuring schools. State officials said the state does not have the capacity to run individual schools, especially across a wide geographic area. Also, under the state’s current SURR system and the new differentiated accountability system, schools that do not make progress may be directed to close.

New York State tracks the restructuring choices of some schools as part of the consolidated state performance report required by the federal government. In 2007-08, 40 of the 46 schools in their second year of restructuring (year 6 of improvement) reported using the “any other” major restructuring option, and the remaining 6 reported replacing staff. Schools in other years of restructuring are not required to report their restructuring choices for the consolidated report or for other purposes, according to Alan Ray.

**Regional Assistance in Restructuring**

Partly in response to NCLB, New York established seven Regional School Support Centers in 2003 that would provide technical assistance and professional development to Title I schools and districts identified for improvement. The RSSCs were also charged with helping to manage support networks for school and districts which included, for example, the Bilingual Education Technical Assistance Center, the Regional Adult Education Network, the School Support Services Network, and the Special Education and Training Resource Network. Currently, six of the seven RSSCs are housed in BOCES, regional entities that provide services to all New York school districts outside of the state’s major urban areas. New York City’s RSSC is housed in the New York City Teacher Center, a professional development organization of the United Federation of Teachers. Communication and consistency within and between these organizations has historically been a challenge in New York (Bryant et al., 2007).

A study conducted in 2007-08 found that of the eight state education agencies in the Northeast and Islands region, New York had the most comprehensive documentation for its rationale for its system of support (Hergert et al., 2009). The system, however, may be on the verge of radical changes. New York is developing a new request for proposals (RFP) for RSSCs that may change both what these centers do and how they are funded, according to Roberto Reyes, the state Title I director. Past funding for RSSCs came from a variety of sources, including the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the Reading First program, and the federal Title II-A teacher quality program. “In the past we’ve really patched this together,” he said. The new RFP aims both to secure funding and to streamline and improve regional support for schools in improvement.
We interviewed directors of the seven RSCs to learn more about the Centers. In particular, we asked about their current strategies to support schools in NCLB restructuring and their hopes and concerns for the changes underway in New York’s system of school support.

**CURRENT REGIONAL SUPPORTS**

Our interviews revealed similarities across the RSCs: all provided restructuring schools with support rather than monitoring, and all provided assistance with data analysis and professional development. However, the focus of the support varied by center, with some focusing more on district leadership, some focusing on instructional coaches, and some providing a wide mix of services.

All of the RSC interviewees emphasized that the services their centers provide are designed to support schools rather than to monitor them. Most noted that this separation from monitoring responsibilities helped the center staff build positive relationships with schools and districts. “We do not want to be seen as monitors,” explained Vincent Tarsio, coordinator of the RSC within the New York City Teacher Center. “That would impinge upon our ability to build trust.”

State officials have yet to determine which entities will provide the evaluations and needs assessments required under the new differentiated accountability system, but David Bryant, the RSCs acting supervisor, noted that this may be the role of the new regional entities created through the new RFP. Although he said he was aware of the current RSCs’ preference to keep monitoring and support separate, he added that “there are people here at the state who do not think that way.”

All RSC interviewees also mentioned that the centers provided assistance in analyzing data and professional development for school and/or district staff. “We look at the state tests and base everything off of that,” explained Mary Balme, executive director of the Mid-West RSC. “Then, we go into schools. We provide professional development and coaching.”

Some RSCs focused their supports on district leadership rather than schools. Several interviewees felt this approach was responsive to district needs and offered the best way to improve schools. “Initially, our primary area of support was … job-embedded professional development,” said Ray Brodeur, executive director of the Long Island RSC. “We began to realize that the bigger need was leadership in the central office. We try to encourage a systems approach.”

Other RSCs focused more on instructional coaching for teachers. “We’ve tried everything that there is, and we’ve found that coaching works best,” said Margy Jones-Carey, executive director of the RSC at Erie 1 BOCES. “Every once in a while we do some group professional development, but we have shied away from that. It doesn’t change instruction.”

The Onondaga Cortland Madison RSC also reported a focus on instructional coaching. While Lynn Radicello, executive director of the Onondaga Cortland Madison BOCES, said this approach worked, she noted it was not without challenges. “It’s intense work with a few teachers. It can be frustrating in that here are a lot of teachers we’re not touching,” she explained. Teacher turnover can also cause problems, Radicello said. She described a school where a team of 8th grade math teachers really improved with the help of coaching, and then all transferred to other, better-performing schools.

The New York City RSC reported similar difficulties with teacher turnover. “We probably get between 5,000 and 7,000 new teachers out of 80,000 each year,” said Aminda Gentile, director of the New York City Teacher Center where the RSC is housed. “Historically, the most difficult schools were the ones where there was the most constant turnover. This has perpetuated the lack of success.” As a remedy, the RSC and Teacher Center work together to reach out to all new teachers, and the RSC focuses much of its efforts on instructional coaching.

While all RSCs offer a variety of services, some provide a wider mix. “We support the school improvement teams in various ways—coordination of meetings, gathering data, identifying professional development, classroom visits, development of comprehensive educational plans, identification of resources. It all depends on what the district needs,” explained Gladys Cruz, executive director of the Eastern New York RSC.
Most of the RSSC directors we interviewed in May and June saw several positive aspects to the new differentiated accountability system, and some also viewed the possible use of a growth model as a positive trend. At the same time, all of the RSSC interviewees expressed concerns about the future—specifically, about the uncertainty surrounding their responsibilities, contractors, and funding status for the future, and about what they saw as a lack of clear communication from the state and confusion at the district level regarding differentiated accountability and other new state and federal policies.

On the positive side, a few interviewees said they thought the differentiated approach to basic, focused, and comprehensive schools would be helpful in directing resources where they were most needed. For example, schools that were identified for improvement solely based on the performance of a specific subgroup, such as students with disabilities, might receive services just in the area of special education. Some interviewees said they welcomed the inclusion of non-Title I schools in the differentiated accountability system. “This provides us the opportunity to assist schools in need of improvement regardless of their Title status,” said Ed Forgit, executive director of the Dutchess BOCES, although he and others wondered about the funding for this expansion.

A few RSSC officials said they thought the school diagnostic assessments under differentiated accountability, such as those performed by the Joint Intervention Teams, would help schools improve. “The Joint Intervention Teams will make more solid recommendations about change,” said Gentile, New York City Teacher Center director.

Two RSSC officials mentioned the state’s proposed growth model as a positive force in the future. “The growth model has a lot of potential. It inspires schools. Schools are currently penalized for student mobility,” said Jones-Carey of the Erie RSSC. Although the state’s initial proposal for a growth model pilot was rejected, as noted earlier, the Regents want to propose it again, according to Alan Ray, one of the assistant commissioners.

At the same time, all of the RSSC officials interviewed expressed concern that as of April 2009, the state’s new RFP for regional support had not yet been issued. Most indicated that their staff were looking for other jobs due to the uncertainty of their positions at the RSSCs. “It would be good to know when the RFP is coming out. People are nervous about their jobs,” said Cruz of the Eastern New York RSSC. Since our April interviews, funding for the current RSSCs was extended for the 2009-10 school year, although at a reduced level—70% of the previous year’s funding, according to Bryant, the state RSSCs acting supervisor.

In addition, all RSSC officials expressed concerns about inadequate communication and confusion regarding new state and federal initiatives. For example, said Ray Brodeur of the Long Island RSSC, “School districts are just beginning to realize that differentiated accountability is coming. There appears to be confusion about what differentiated accountability will be. Developing a common understanding is the major problem at this point in time.”

The RSSC officials said they themselves had gotten mixed messages about what differentiated accountability and the initiatives in Chapter 57 would mean for their regions. Several welcomed guidance from the state in this area. “Strengthening our communication system to develop a shared understanding and a shared expectation for new policies, practices, and regulations is critical between the RSSC and the corresponding departments at the [state education department.] Opportunities to exchange information between the [state education department] and the RSSC in a face-to-face forum had been beneficial in the past,” said Forgit of the Dutchess BOCES.

State officials said more information about Differentiated Accountability would be publicized during the summer of 2009.

A Closer Look at Restructuring in Three New York Districts

In the winter, spring, and summer of 2009, CEP interviewed personnel from three New York districts and six public schools in restructuring. The schools we studied included the following:

- Reed School and Central Islip Senior High in Central Islip Free School District
• P.S. 24 and El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice in New York City
• Seymour Dual Language Academy and Grant Middle School in Syracuse City School District

THEMES FROM RESTRUCTURING DISTRICTS AND SCHOOLS

Our case study schools are in three very different districts: the largest district in New York (New York City), one of the “big five” large urban districts (Syracuse City School District), and a suburban, working class district (Central Islip Union Free School District). While these districts represent different types of districts within the state, our research shows several commonalities in how they and their schools approach restructuring.

First, at least one person we interviewed in each district discussed assistance from state liaisons and RSSCs. Most said this assistance was helpful. At times the assistance brought new ideas to the schools, and at times the assistance simply confirmed that the districts and schools were on the right track with their restructuring efforts. Several participants noted, however, that because assistance came from multiple organizations, schools had to work carefully to make sure services and ideas were coordinated. For example, the principal at Grant Middle School in Syracuse holds a collaborative planning meeting for all the entities that support his restructuring school.

Second, all the case study districts and schools said they were working to increase professional development for teachers in restructuring schools, both with outside consultants and district specialists. Most schools and districts were focusing on math and English language arts, although a few attempted to improve other areas of instruction as well. Several districts had created new positions, such as coaches or content area specialists, to assist with this increase in professional development by providing on-site training, observations of instruction, and feedback aimed at improving instruction.

Third, all case study districts said they had increased teacher collaboration. They did this in a number of ways. Some schools created core teaching teams, for example, in which math, reading, social studies, and science teachers shared students and had a shared planning time. Other schools created official small learning communities where teacher teams functioned more like autonomous schools within the larger school. While participants were hopeful about this approach, it was not without challenges. In Central Islip, in particular, difficulties with teacher union regulations and scheduling made this strategy for improvement difficult to implement.

Finally, many interviewees said they were concerned about the poor performance of student subgroups, particularly ELLs and students with disabilities. For ELLs, several schools reported working to improve their dual language programs, and all schools were using a variety of strategies targeted specifically on helping ELLs master English. For special education students, schools typically reported working on including students with mild disabilities in mainstream classes and having special education teachers and general education teachers collaborate to teach the class.

RESTRUCTURING IN NEW YORK CITY

New York City, at the extreme southeastern end of New York State, is made up of the five boroughs of Manhattan, Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens, and Staten Island. Its public school system is the largest in the United States, serving nearly 1 million children. For state and federal accountability purposes, New York City’s public school system is divided into 32 districts. Together these districts served 947,056 students in 2007-08, according to the most recent state report cards. Of these students, 71% were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch because of family income, 40% were Latino, 32% African American, 14% Asian, and 14% white. English language learners made up 15% of the city’s public school population and students with disabilities constituted about 10%.

Student Performance at the District Level in New York City

Each of the 32 districts that make up the New York City Department of Education (the school system’s official title) is considered a separate unit for determining district AYP and improvement status under NCLB. Therefore, the New York City system as a whole has no overall district improvement status. In 2008-09, 22 of the 32 districts were identified for improvement under NCLB. The same year, 183 of the city’s 1,186 Title I schools were in restructuring planning or implementation. While these 183 schools amount to more than 70% of all schools in restructur-
Elementary student achievement in New York City as measured on state tests has improved in recent years. Although the state did not plan to release high school test information until after the August 2009 Regents testing, elementary and middle school test scores for 2009 became available in the spring. Many district and school personnel interviewed expressed optimism that substantial numbers of restructuring schools in New York City may exit restructuring in 2009-10 on the strength of the 2009 gains, as reported in Table 4.

In 2002, New York State passed a law giving New York City’s mayor control of the public school system. Since that time, Mayor Michael Bloomberg and schools Chancellor Joel Klein have implemented a series of systemwide reforms, including setting promotion standards in elementary grades, creating a local accountability system, and developing a large cadre of new principals who have been given greater autonomy in exchange for greater accountability. Klein has also focused on closing underperforming schools and replacing them with new schools, including charter schools. Since 2002, Klein has ordered 21 large high schools closed, and more than 200 new small high schools have opened in New York City. A similar process is underway with the city’s middle schools.

### Table 3. New York City Schools in Restructuring Planning or Implementation, 2008-09

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Year 4</th>
<th>Year 5</th>
<th>Year 6</th>
<th>Year 7</th>
<th>Year 8</th>
<th>Year 9</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title I</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Title I</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table reads: In school year 2008-09, 36 Title I schools were in year 4 of improvement under NCLB (the planning phase of restructuring), while 32 Title I schools were in year 5 (restructuring implementation).

Source: CEP analysis of data from New York State Education Department, Schools and Districts in Need of Improvement, www.emsc.nysed.gov/irts/accountability/sini/.

### Table 4. Percentage of New York City Students in Grades 4 and 8 Scoring At or Above the Proficient Level in Math and English Language Arts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grade 4 ELA</td>
<td>58.9%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>61.3%</td>
<td>68.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 4 Math</td>
<td>70.9%</td>
<td>74.1%</td>
<td>79.6%</td>
<td>84.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 8 ELA</td>
<td>38.6%</td>
<td>41.8%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 8 Math</td>
<td>38.9%</td>
<td>45.6%</td>
<td>59.6%</td>
<td>71.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table reads: In 2006, 58.9% of New York City 4th graders scored at or above the proficient level on the state test in English language arts.

Note: The data in the table were current as of June 23, 2009.

For this report, we interviewed two representatives from the New York City Department of Education’s Office of School Improvement; the executive director and three staffers from the RSSC for New York City; the principals of Brooklyn’s P.S. 24 and El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice, both of which are in restructuring; and two teachers from El Puente Academy.

Promises and Challenges of Differentiated Accountability in New York City

Schools in New York City are simultaneously held accountable under two different sets of measures—the state accountability system, which the state has sought to align more closely with the federal accountability system under No Child Left Behind, and the New York City Department of Education’s own accountability measures, which differ from the state and federal system in important ways. In school year 2006-07, the New York City Department of Education began issuing progress reports on each city school. The reports use an A-through-F grading system to rate each school’s performance on three measures. The first two measures, student progress and student performance, are tied to state tests and account for 85% of a school’s progress report grade. Student progress is weighted more heavily and examines year-to-year growth (including both test scores and credit accumulation for high school students), while student performance examines actual scores on state tests and, for high schools, graduation rates. The third measure, school environment, counts for the remaining 15% and is assessed based on both student attendance and surveys of parents, teachers, and students. Each school’s results are compared with all schools citywide that serve the same grade levels, as well as a peer group of up to 40 demographically similar schools. The peer group comparison weighs heavily in the calculation, so it is possible for restructuring schools to earn As and Bs on local progress reports even if they continue to miss AYP targets.

As of early June 2009, schools in New York City had not been informed about the state’s new differentiated accountability system, although New York City Department of Education staff were in regular contact with the state during the school year to stay abreast of its development. On June 30, the Department held a webcast about the new system for all New York City principals, and that webcast plus a New York City-specific set of frequently asked questions are available on an internal Web site, Learning Times. Since July 2, schools have been able to use the state’s Web site to determine their preliminary improvement status for the 2009-10 school year.

RSSC staff noted that differentiated accountability will permit them to work with schools earlier in the improvement process. “We’ve been advocating that for a while,” said Tarsio of the New York City RSSC.

Interviews with both RSSC staff and New York City’s school/district improvement liaisons suggest that the biggest changes likely to result from differentiated accountability are the new interventions for restructuring schools, especially the Joint Intervention Teams, and the inclusion of low-performing non-Title I schools in accountability consequences.

The increase in oversight from School Quality Reviews, Joint Intervention Teams, and Distinguished Educators should heighten the impetus for improvement, interviewees suggested. “We’ll have a sense of urgency,” said Ina Babb-Henry of the RSSC for New York City. “It used to be like [schools] could just stay there and ride the wave, but now they can’t. I tell schools, ‘Someone will be coming to visit you [if you don’t make AYP]. You don’t want that.’”

Those visitors won’t have an easy time making changes, RSSC staff predicted. “Interventions will be difficult. They must come from the district level,” said Tarsio.

However, the district and the state are still working out what Joint Intervention Teams will look like in New York, according to the school/district improvement liaisons interviewed. “I think that the people in charge are meeting and trying to work out a way to combine all kinds of things—one being the JIT—with other structures that New York City has in place. Not to get rid of it or anything like that because it’s a mandate, but to minimize the disturbance in schools by maybe coupling a few activities together,” said Sarah Center on Education Policy
Kleinhandler, a senior school/district improvement liaison in the Office of School Improvement for the New York City Department of Education.

New York City Office of School Improvement staff noted that many basic questions about how the teams will function have yet to be answered. “How many days a week, a month, whatever, will the team be in the school? And what will they do when they are in the school?” asked Mary Burke, a senior school/district improvement liaison. In addition, the members of the teams and the process for hiring them have yet to be determined.

Including non-Title I schools in accountability consequences will be another major change, according to both RSSC staff and the city’s improvement liaisons. Many non-Title I schools are low-poverty schools that have high overall test scores but have failed to make AYP due to the performance of subgroups. “I think the teams in those schools will be very jarred by this,” said Kleinhandler. Although New York City will lower the threshold for schools’ Title I eligibility from 60% of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch to 40% for 2009-10, many struggling non-Title I schools will still not qualify for Title I, and thus will be asked to develop new improvement strategies without receiving additional funds to support the work.

School Improvement Strategies in New York City

Two years ago, the New York City Department of Education changed its structure for supporting schools. Schools no longer rely on the system’s central office to support their efforts to improve; instead, all schools must choose to affiliate with one of 11 School Support Organizations, a mix of system-sponsored and nonprofit entities that help schools identify best practices in general instruction and targeted strategies to help specific student populations. These organizations also help schools prioritize among competing demands for time. This systemwide reorganization has affected how state and city technical supports for improvement planning are organized. The city’s school/district improvement liaisons have been reassigned to schools based on which School Support Networks the schools have joined. In 2009-10 the RSSC staff will be reorganized in a similar way.

State and local support for restructuring schools in New York City is tightly coordinated through the New York City Technical Assistance Network, which brings together the state’s offices of school improvement and special education, the RSSC for New York City, and the city’s office of school improvement. Leaders from these entities meet monthly and are in daily communication by phone and email, said Tarsio. The Network also sponsors monthly citywide meetings where staff from school support organizations, superintendents of the city’s 32 districts, and bilingual specialists receive information related to school improvement and classroom support for bilingual students and students with disabilities.

New York City schools in improvement, including those in restructuring, have two primary sources of support—the city’s school/district improvement liaisons and the RSSC—as well as one primary source of monitoring, state education liaisons. Each of the city’s improvement liaisons is assigned to work with three districts on district-level planning and data analysis. They also help schools prepare to be monitored by the state education liaisons regarding their Title I and Contract for Excellence spending. At the same time, each of these liaisons is assigned to work with multiple networks of schools within one or two School Support Organizations. Within the networks, “schools in [improvement] status are our first priority,” said Kleinhandler.

A key area of school support is school improvement planning. Both the city’s improvement liaisons and the state’s RSSC help schools write improvement plans, plans to spend school improvement grants, and restructuring plans. To help schools write informed plans, both technical support providers concentrate on helping schools gather and analyze data. The RSSC, in collaboration with the state education department and the New York City Department of Education, review and approve schools’ restructuring plans, said Tarsio. The city’s improvement liaisons work with schools in restructuring planning to complete a state template, and then assist schools in implementing their plans once they enter restructuring. Both RSSC staff and the liaisons said their planning role focuses on helping schools learn to analyze data effectively. Staff from both providers said they have the latitude to use their own judgment and take into account each school’s identified needs, strengths, and capacity for change when they advise schools about selecting specific improvement strategies.

Schools in improvement, including restructuring schools, are concentrating on professional development for teachers as an improvement strategy; according to
both RSSC staff and the city’s improvement liaisons. “We’ve had a huge push” for professional development, said Burke, one of the liaisons. “All of our schools have professional development plans, they have literacy and math coaches, they engage outside consultants. They’re more aware of exactly what is needed. A lot of our principals ask their teachers to fill out surveys so they can ascertain their professional development needs.”

Some schools are even developing a graduated system of professional development for teachers that progresses from more directed to more self-selected as teachers’ competence grows, regardless of seniority. “I have one school that just came off the [schools under registration review] list and [the principal] has a threetiered system of professional development,” Burke observed. “You could be a teacher that’s been teaching 10 years but you might be in the tier one.”

According to both RSSC staff and the city’s improvement liaisons, eligible schools are spending their school improvement funds largely on professional development for teachers, extended-day time, and technology. All schools are required to have a math and a literacy coach, which is paid for through professional development funds. Although the state offers six options for how schools can spend Contract for Excellence funds, New York City schools seem to be concentrating on reducing class size, providing mentoring for teachers and principals, and extending the school day.

Besides monitoring Title I and Contract for Excellence spending, state education liaisons monitor the implementation of school improvement plans at SURR schools. Under the old accountability system, they have been visiting SURR schools twice monthly. (SURR schools can be in any phase of school improvement, but many are in restructuring planning or implementation.) The city’s improvement liaisons have regularly accompanied the state personnel on those visits. “We visit together because we bring the balance,” said Burke. “The state education monitor will say, ‘I have your plan here and you said you were going to have common planning periods for professional development; is that happening?’ We might have been the person to suggest the common planning period to the school.”

If schools remain in restructuring for more than two or three years, the state will require them to change their restructuring plans, said the city’s improvement liaisons. However, finding the balance between giving a plan enough time to take hold and making needed mid-course corrections can be challenging. “We know that there’s kind of a delicate balance because change does take time,” said Burke. “You develop a restructuring plan. You don’t want to throw it out before you’ve had enough time to implement the change, but then you also have to be really vigilant that the plan has the ability to be successful. You may have to change some of the strategies if they’re not working.”

Strategies for ELLs and Students with Disabilities in New York City

In their consulting with schools on specific school improvement strategies and interventions, both the city’s improvement liaisons and the RSSC staff said that meeting the needs of students whose first language is not English is a huge challenge, whether or not they are identified as English language learners. “There’s no recognition that in New York City one of every two students is a bilingual child, whether they are identified as ELL or not,” said Olga Malo of the city’s RSSC.

Schools are using a variety of strategies to help bilingual students. “The trend there is hard to pinpoint,” said Kleinhandler. “In the schools I work with, we have a lot of English teachers of ELLs who are trained in QTEL,” or Quality Teaching for English-Language Learners. This program was developed by WestEd, a national research and development nonprofit organization. Other schools are investing in professional development from other sources for teachers to learn strategies for second-language acquisition and vocabulary development that they can apply in regular classrooms. Some schools are using school improvement and/or Contract for Excellence funds to purchase the Rosetta Stone language-learning software series.

“Part of the problem with bilingual education is … it’s difficult to get balanced bilingual teachers,” noted the RSSC’s Paul Zomchek. Many bilingual teachers are fluent in their students’ home language and still working on their own English skills. While full dual-language programs are increasingly popular, “it’s hard to create really dual language programs with strong English and strong Spanish” or other languages.

Meeting the needs of students with disabilities is another significant challenge as schools strive to make AYP.
Clearer trends are emerging in the strategies used to help these students. Many schools are using collaborative team teaching (CCT), which brings together a special educator and a regular classroom teacher in the same classroom. This is considered a class size reduction strategy and is eligible to be funded through Contract for Excellence. A recent audit of New York schools’ Contract for Excellence spending revealed that “much of the money was in reduced class size, CCT,” said Kleinhandler. To differentiate instruction for students with diverse learning levels, the city’s Office of School Improvement promotes the Achieve 3000 software package, which provides the same story at different reading levels. The phonics-focused Wilson Language Program is another district-approved supplementary curriculum that schools are using with both English language learners and students with disabilities.

Improving Adolescent Literacy at El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice

El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice is a small high school in Brooklyn’s Williamsburg neighborhood. The school was founded in 1993 by El Puente, a local community-based organization, in partnership with the New York State Education Department and New Visions for Public Schools, which supported the startup of 34 new schools between 1993 and 1998. (New Visions is now leading the city’s high school turnaround effort, which involves phasing out large underperforming high schools and replacing them with multiple small schools that share buildings.) In 2007-08, El Puente Academy’s total enrollment was 181 students, of whom 81% were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch and 83% were Latino. The same year, the school graduated 30 students, 24 of whom planned to continue their education at four-year colleges and universities.

El Puente Academy is a member of the New York Performance Standards Consortium, a group of 28 small high schools across New York State that has developed a performance-based assessment system as an alternative to traditional state testing. Consortium schools are exempt from all state testing except the Regents English Language Arts examination, which is used for state and federal accountability purposes. To ensure that the group of students tested is large enough to produce valid aggregate scores, El Puente Academy reports its Regents ELA results by two-year cohort. In 2007-08, El Puente’s subgroup of low-income students made AYP under NCLB’s safe harbor provision, but the “all-students” group and the Latino subgroup missed the safe harbor target by one and two percentage points, respectively. The same year, the school received an A on the New York State Education Department’s progress report with a score higher than 75% of the city’s high schools. In 2008-09, the school underwent its first year of restructuring implementation.

Table 5 shows the performance of El Puente students in grade 11 on the state tests.

In the future, Principal Héctor Calderón hopes the state will proceed with its proposal to adopt a growth model, perhaps following the model now used in New York City’s accountability system.

Table 5. Percentage of 11th Graders Scoring At or Above the Proficient Level on New York State Tests at El Puente Academy, in NYC District #14, and Statewide

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>English Language Arts</th>
<th>Math</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>El Puente Academy</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York City District #14, grade 11</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State average, grade 11</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table reads: In 2006, 30% of the 11th grade students at El Puente Academy scored at or above the proficient level in English language arts on the New York state test. This was below the New York City District #14 average of 43% and the state average of 69% for grade 11.

Source: Center on Education Policy analysis of New York State Education Department data.
“New York City has gotten something really good—a growth model that looks at not just where [students] are but how they’re progressing,” he said.

El Puente Academy received a $50,000 Title I school improvement grant in 2008-09. The funds were used to provide extended-day time for teachers to prepare students for the Regents English Language Arts examination and provide professional development “to help teachers learn how to help students do better,” said Calderón. Teachers collectively researched instructional strategies to help students in literacy, using materials from the Association for Supervision, Curriculum and Development and The Skillful Teacher, an instructional resource from Research for Better Teaching. The small amount of remaining funds was used to buy books and audiotapes for English classes. “I think [these strategies] will be very effective. The hope is to raise scores two years in a row,” Calderón said.

These targeted efforts to improve student achievement on the Regents exam are embedded in a well-established professional culture focused on overall school improvement, Calderón noted. “We’re focused on teaching, learning, and getting [teachers] to really expand their knowledge base of strategies to address student needs—how to become the best teacher you can be. That’s the fulcrum of change, the interaction between teachers and students.”

To that end, teachers regularly engage in professional development after school. They develop mastery targets students should reach in each subject area by the end of each trimester, and conduct formative assessments at three-week intervals to check student progress. “When 90% of [students] don’t understand something, you reteach, figure out why,” said Beth Wehner, a math teacher who doubles as the school’s assistant principal.

Coordinating Multiple Strategies Simultaneously at P.S. 24

P.S. 24 is a K-5 elementary school in Brooklyn’s Sunset Park neighborhood. According to state report card data, in 2007-08 the school enrolled 769 students, of whom 94% were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, 43% were English language learners, and 91% were Latino. In 2007-08, the subgroup of students with disabilities at P.S. 24 missed AYP targets; all other subgroups met the targets, although English language learners met them via safe harbor. On the New York City progress report the same year, the school received an A grade with a score higher than 61% of the city’s elementary schools. In 2008-09, P.S. 24 underwent its first year of restructuring implementation.

After serving as a literacy staff developer and assistant principal at P.S. 24, Christina Fuentes assumed the school’s principalship in the 2003-04 school year. At that time, about one-third of students were scoring at the lowest level on state tests. “Looking at test scores, we needed to decrease the number of level-1-scoring students,” she recalled. The school did so by targeting interventions at the lowest-achieving students in the tested grades. Table 6 displays the performance of P.S. 24 students on the state tests.

| Table 6. Percentage of Students in Grades 3-5 Scoring At or Above the Proficient Level on New York State Tests at P.S. 24, in NYC District #15, and Statewide |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
|                                                                 | English Language Arts |                      | Math            |                      | English Language Arts |                      | Math            |
| P.S. 24                                                           |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| NYC District #15 average, grades 3-5                              | 65%  | 65%  | 70%  | 74%  | 81%  | 86%  |
| State average, grades 3-5                                        | 68%  | 68%  | 73%  | 76%  | 80%  | 86%  |

Table reads: In 2006, 48% of the students in grades 3 through 5 at P.S. 24 scored at or above the proficient level in English language arts on the New York state test. This was below the New York City District #15 average of 65% and the state average of 68% for students in grades 3 through 5.

Source: Center on Education Policy analysis of New York State Education Department data.
At the same time, Fuentes said, she began “building a school that offers a quality education that anybody would be proud to offer their children.” To her, that meant recruiting highly qualified teachers with high expectations for students and knowledge of inquiry-based learning; developing a “strong” science and an “extensive” arts curriculum; and providing resources to meet students’ social and emotional needs, such as a health center, mental health services, and conflict resolution training. A strong physical education program and “lots of trips” were also on her school improvement agenda. “There are short-term goals and long-term goals,” Fuentes observed. “The two are related. Performance on state tests has to be looked at over the short term. There are things you have to do for the quick fix that aren’t necessarily what you do to build quality over time. But as you build quality over time, you are going to address what you need for state tests.”

Fuentes’ strategy for building quality over time has brought in a number of outside partners focused on improving instruction and integrating arts into the curriculum. Like many New York City elementary schools, P.S. 24 works on literacy issues with the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project, Columbia University. P.S. 24 teachers have also worked with consultants from the City College of New York’s Mathematics in the City program. To increase teachers’ capacity to serve students with disabilities, the school hired consultants from the Teachers College Inclusive Classroom project to train teachers in collaborative team teaching, the aforementioned special education inclusion strategy. Through a variety of grants, P.S. 24 partners with several New York City arts organizations, including Arts Connection, which provides a three-year artist-in-residence for every classroom as part of research on the effect of arts education on English language learners.

The school’s signature improvement effort has been the development of a Spanish-English dual language program. Through a state grant for dual language programs and a federal Comprehensive School Reform grant, P.S. 24 worked with the Education Alliance at Brown University to develop the program and trained teachers in second-language acquisition strategies. “The kids who made the most progress were the dual-language kids,” Tarsio observed. The program now includes about half the student body and draws both English- and Spanish-speaking students from beyond P.S. 24’s attendance zone. The dual language program made a big difference in the professional climate among teachers, Fuentes added. “It built capacity here. We were able to develop teachers who were sharing action research, opening doors to colleagues. It changed the culture of the school in terms of collegiality.”

In 2006-07 testing, P.S. 24 made AYP. “By that point we were really giving a good quality education to all our kids, not just triaging the lowest-level kids. As we get better and better, we start changing our strategy,” said Fuentes. “We’re at the point now where most of our interventions are targeted to [kindergarten].” In the 2008-09 school year, P.S. 24 had a small Spanish-language pre-kindergarten program, but at present overcrowding in the building precludes its expansion. As of early June, 55 prospective kindergartners were on a waiting list to enroll at the school. P.S. 24 is also increasing the number of teachers trained in the Wilson Reading System, a supplemental program for reading and spelling that focuses on phonics. The school has set aside an intervention period four days a week during which Wilson-trained teachers work with students in small groups.

Fuentes said the guidance she has received about restructuring has been sufficient. She has worked with Tarsio, Burke, and Kleinhandler. “[Tarsio] has been the main person who has helped us,” she said. Fuentes credited Tarsio with helping her and her staff understand and analyze state test data to determine where interventions should be targeted, especially in the early years of her tenure as principal.

While the RSSC has provided the most hands-on help, particularly with data analysis, the city’s improvement liaisons have helped with school improvement planning and meeting state compliance requirements. “[Burke and Kleinhandler] help you negotiate what to pay attention to” in terms of the comprehensive educational plan. They also helped with a Title I audit. “Last year we had to go through a state audit. They were very helpful and supportive. We passed with flying colors.”

**SYRACUSE CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT**

Syracuse City School District is one of the state’s “big five” districts, located in a mid-size city in north central New York. Like other upstate manufacturing centers, the city has undergone an economic decline in recent decades as factories closed and companies folded or rele-
The district has 38 schools: 5 high schools, 6 middle schools, 22 K-5 or K-8 elementary schools, 3 alternative schools, an early childhood program, and a special education center. In 2008-09, more than half of the district’s Title I schools (54%) were in NCLB improvement, and about a third of all the district’s schools were in year 5 of improvement or beyond. Two middle schools and four elementary schools were undergoing restructuring; four high schools were also in this stage but since they did not receive Title I funding they were not subject to NCLB sanctions.

**District-Level School Improvement Actions**

In January 2006, Syracuse City School District appointed a new superintendent, Daniel Lowengard, who was formerly superintendent in nearby Utica. At that time, the district lacked a coherent strategy for raising student achievement, according to Deputy Superintendent Christine Vogelsang. Schools were left largely on their own to figure out how to improve instruction, she said. The curriculum was outdated, and mental health services were lacking. Support staff and student programs were inequitably distributed.

“You could be on one side of town and take [music instruction in] stringed instruments, but not the other side of town,” she recalled.

Under the new administration, schools received more direction, more support, and greater accountability, said Vogelsang. The district rewrote the outdated K-12 curriculum and deployed a cadre of math and language arts specialists to provide professional development to teachers during the school day. Students received new health and social services; every middle school got a social worker, for example.

Giving more frequent diagnostic tests has been one district strategy for improvement. Beginning in 2007, the district took part in a project on formative assessments with the New York Comprehensive Center and the Center for the Assessment and Evaluation of Student Learning in California, two federally funded resource centers designed to help states meet their NCLB goals. Teachers at 10 elementary schools learned how to analyze the math curriculum to identify common student misconceptions and missing skills. The goal was to address gaps in student knowledge quickly. Consultants trained the district’s 18 elementary and middle school math coaches to help teachers.

Year-end standardized testing is insufficient for monitoring student progress, especially in New York where test results are often not released until the middle of the following school year, Vogelsang explained. “[State] assessments are, in my opinion, to label the district or school, not to improve instruction. So we’ve put in other systems to do that.”

Elementary schools also administer DIBELS, a diagnostic reading test, several times a year. Middle school students are assessed twice a year with Acuity, an online assessment system that is aligned with state standards in math and English language arts, and beginning in 2009 with the Scholastic Reading Inventory. Ninth-graders are tested periodically using assessments developed by the Johns Hopkins Talent Development High School Program.

The district launched two more reforms in 2008-09 to improve teaching and learning:

- Through a reform called the Urban Teacher Contract, the district negotiated with the union to require all newly hired teachers to work an additional 100 hours during the summer. Most of the time is spent teaching summer school, but 25 to 40 hours must be spent on professional development selected by the school and offered at the school site. Existing teachers were also invited to join the program with a minimum five-year commitment.

- The district entered a partnership with Say Yes to Education, Inc., a national nonprofit group that helps districts construct a plan to provide extra academic and social supports intended to boost high school graduation rates. Syracuse’s plan also includes a Higher Education Compact that offers a free college education to students who attend district schools from grades 10 through 12 and are accepted into a state school or one of 23 private institutions. The hope is that more low-income students will complete college and more middle-income families will remain in the district and contribute to the city’s tax base.
Schools in restructuring receive several additional supports. The district maintains lower class sizes and provides math and language arts specialists who deliver professional development at the school site. Two to four times a year, teams of district administrators conduct an internal review of the school. Every classroom is observed, and the principal, staff, and students are interviewed. The school's strengths and weaknesses are measured against a rubric and detailed in a formal report.

Restructuring schools pay for additional improvement strategies out of their own funds, Title I school improvement funds, and Contract for Excellence money. Syracuse City School District was allocated $80 million over four years beginning in 2007. Vogelsang said while the district is happy to get the extra funding, she finds the inflexibility frustrating. Contract for Excellence money can be used only to support new innovations, not supplant existing funding; even if a grant runs out for a highly successful program.

Some of Syracuse's restructuring schools are also on the state's list of schools under registration review because their state test scores are furthest from state targets, as determined by the state commissioner. These SURR schools receive additional money. Vogelsang said that having overlapping federal and state accountability systems serves no real purpose and that schools don't distinguish between them. “If you're a principal you want to stay off the lists, and if you're on a list you want to get off the list. Nobody really cares at this point what [the list] is called.”

Last year, Syracuse made progress with schools on both the NCLB improvement and SURR lists. Three came off the SURR list, and six schools that were in NCLB improvement made AYP. No new schools joined either list. Vogelsang attributed the improvement to the coaching teachers received from math and language arts specialists, who were also intensively trained.

The state has been involved in Syracuse's school restructuring primarily through monitoring. Three part-time liaisons from the New York State Education Department visit the city's Contract for Excellence schools periodically to interview principals and teachers and look for evidence that programs purchased with those funds are implemented and functioning. The state also closely monitors the district's spending on those programs.

In 2009-10, the state intends to send Distinguished Educators to assist districts with schools in restructuring. As of April, the identity of these educators and their exact job description had not been determined. Vogelsang remained skeptical that they would have any new or useful ideas. Rural or suburban educators would be unlikely to have relevant experience, and no urban district has yet achieved uniformly high performance in its low-income schools, she observed. “Maybe I’m wrong and I’ll get a wonderful distinguished educator—but there are not a lot of us in urban leadership that have a good track record. There are just not.”

Rethinking Bilingual Education at Seymour Dual Language Academy

Seymour Dual Language Academy is a K-5 school located in the city's poorest neighborhood. Of the school's 380 students, 95% are low-income, 34% are African American, 54% are Latino, and 9% are white. The Latino students are nearly all from the same small Puerto Rican town of Loiza, the result of a chain migration that began in the mid-1980s. Loiza is "a very high-crime, high-poverty part of the island," said Principal Perkins. "If you got in a taxicab from the airport and said, ‘I want to go to Loiza’ they’d go, ‘No! You can’t go there!’" she quipped, adding that Seymour's neighborhood has a similar reputation. Despite the challenges, Perkins said both the community and the school are close-knit, and some talented teachers have remained on staff for more than 30 years.

In 2008, Seymour hit its schoolwide math and English language arts goals for the second year in a row, although the percentage of students meeting AYP targets remains below the state average, as shown in table 7. All of the school's subgroups made AYP except for English language learners, who fell short in English language arts.

Seymour has landed on state accountability lists periodically at least since the 1980s, said Perkins, who has been an administrator at Seymour for 11 years and principal for the last eight. Seymour's most recent restructuring effort began in 2005 when it became a SURR school because of its low state test scores.

In 2005-06, Perkins assembled a planning team that included teachers, parents, and community representatives. The team came up with four major improvement strategies: increasing parental involvement, extending...
the length of the school day, improving student behavior, and overhauling the bilingual education program. These remained the focus of improvement planning at Seymour under NCLB restructuring.

Using a variety of funding sources, Seymour was able to extend its regular school day from six to seven hours. Discipline improved dramatically when the school systematically rewarded good behavior with parties or points that students could spend at the school store. To encourage parent involvement, Seymour added daily workshops or volunteer activities that give parents ideas on how to support children’s learning at home.

Revamping the bilingual program proved the biggest undertaking. The school was already running a “two-way” bilingual program where native Spanish and native English speakers received literacy instruction in the second language only after having reached a certain level of proficiency in the first. When Seymour staff began visiting bilingual programs around the country that had successfully raised student achievement, they realized that their own approach wasn’t intensive enough, Perkins said. A consultant from New York City emphasized that point, said Perkins, echoing the consultant’s advice that “if you’re going to do this, you’re going to do it full out or you’re not going to have the results.”

Beginning in 2007-08, all English- and Spanish-speaking students in the dual language program were grouped together. Students receive literacy instruction in each language for 90 minutes every day beginning in kindergarten. During the rest of the day, they learn all of their other subjects in English one week and in Spanish the following week.

“All of the research [shows] that students coming out of dual language programs are passing the average performance of even native English speakers,” Perkins explained. For native English speakers, “we were finding research that learning in two languages is good for the brain.”

At each grade level, an English-speaking and a Spanish-speaking teacher work closely together to plan instruction so that students can transition smoothly. “They have to be doing the exact same thing at the exact same time because, let’s say this week everybody is doing where animals live, and then the next week the teacher is going to say, ‘Remember last week when you talked about where animals live in Spanish? Well, this week not only are we going to again look at where they live, but what’s in that environment that they can eat.’”

For English-speaking parents who did not want their children in the language immersion program, the school gave them the option of English-only classes. These classes include students with disabilities and are co-taught by a special education teacher and a regular classroom teacher. The English-only classes still receive 30 to 50 minutes of Spanish instruction daily, but in an immersion style where content from their regular classes is taught in Spanish. “It’s not ‘Hola, como estas?’ like when we [were] in high school. They’re actually learning in the language.”

Table 7.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>English Language Arts</th>
<th></th>
<th>Math</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seymour Academy</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syracuse City district average, grades 3-5</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State average, grades 3-5</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table reads: In 2006, 16% of the students in grades 3 through 5 at Seymour Academy scored at or above the proficient level in English language arts on the New York state test. This was below the Syracuse district average of 41% and the state average of 68% for students in grades 3 through 5.

Source: Center on Education Policy analysis of New York State Education Department data.
Under restructuring, Seymour also began to examine student data more closely and to schedule additional time for interventions. Once a week, teachers at each grade level meet during a common planning period to review the data. The first meeting of the month they review the results of student English language arts assessments, including the DIBELS. During the second meeting, they analyze math assessment data, and during the third, they look at students’ written work. Teachers spread the data out on a table and regroup their students according to the specific skills they need to review during a daily 30-minute intervention period, which is scheduled at a different time for each grade level. To keep the size of each intervention group small, resource teachers and teaching assistants lead some of the groups.

To provide classroom teachers with more professional development and planning time, Perkins requested that all teachers of physical education, art, and other “specials” teach a double period once every five days.

Seymour receives several sources of funding to support its improvement efforts. In 2008-09 the school received SURR funding, $50,000 in school improvement funds, and $575,000 in Contract for Excellence money in addition to its federal Title I funds. A $300,000 a year state bilingual grant also helps pay for extra teaching positions and the longer school day.

The school receives some state support for restructuring from a state education department liaison who visits about four times a year, Perkins said. The liaison visits classrooms, answers questions, shares observations, and ensures that the school is implementing everything in its improvement plan. During the rest of the year, she touches base with the principal regularly. “She emails me all the time if she finds a new piece of research or tries to connect us with dual language schools similar to us.”

Under restructuring, Perkins feels that the school has made substantial progress. Like many principals we interviewed, however, she finds NCLB goals for English language learners unrealistic. “Everything that we know about second language acquisition tells us that it takes students five to seven years to get to the level [where] they’re proficient enough to compete with other students. We’re asking them to do it after one year.”

She sees the pressure to meet unreasonable goals “causing principals to make decisions that aren’t in the best interest of the students. I was speaking to somebody that had a dual language program and they’re English-only now because they are afraid.” She said that is a concession her staff refuses to make. “We have decided that we’re going to put in place the most effective practices regardless of that legislation.”

### Focusing on Instruction at Grant Middle

Grant Middle is the city’s largest middle school, serving 650 students in grades 6 through 8, mainly from neighborhoods on the city’s north side. The shifting demographics in that part of Syracuse are a challenge for veteran teachers, who need to learn how to reach an increasingly diverse and low-income population, according to Principal Andrew Rudd. Fifteen to 20 years ago the area was primarily second-generation Italian, but gradually it became multiethnic with an influx of new immigrants and African American families. In 2008-09, the school was 42% African American, 41% white, 12% Latino, 2% Asian, and 2% American Indian. Most parents are low-income, working at service jobs, said Rudd. About 80% of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

In 2008-09, Grant entered its fifth year of restructuring implementation. The groups of students that have missed AYP targets have varied from year to year. In English language arts, most subgroups and the “all-students” group missed AYP targets in 2007 but hit those targets in 2008. In math, students with disabilities missed AYP targets in 2007, and English language learners missed them in 2008. Overall, test scores have risen but remain somewhat below city averages and far below the state. (See table 8.)

Administrative turnover in recent years may have slowed the school’s progress, according to Principal Rudd. In 2005, a longtime principal moved to a district position, but her successor remained less than two years before accepting a principalship in another district. An interim principal then served four months before Rudd’s arrival in the middle of the 2007-08 school year.

English teacher Marie Finkelstein said the administrative turnover was hard on teachers. But she sees Rudd’s arrival as a positive development. Some districtwide school improvement strategies that were followed mostly in the-
ory before are now common practice, she explained. Now teachers in every content area are expected to make reading, writing, and vocabulary development part of the curriculum. “People are held responsible for the things that they do or don’t do, and I think that’s great.”

The school already had a number of good programs and practices in place before Rudd arrived, Finkelstein said. For example, Grant used Advancement by Individual Determination (AVID), a national program adopted in all the city’s middle schools by 2006-07, to help underachieving students learn the reading, note taking, and study skills needed for college success. Parent and community involvement was encouraged with open houses and special events such as family nights meant to highlight school programs.

Grant had also organized its school with teams of four core subject teachers who shared a group of students and common planning time. Teachers used the common time to discuss students’ progress and to plan activities such as field trips. But in 2008-09, the school began to devote more of that time to professional development, Finkelstein said. Two to three planning periods per week were set aside to discuss how to improve instruction. Teachers shared ideas on school priorities including vocabulary development, writing across the curriculum, use of assessments to guide teaching, and use of graphic organizers to teach higher-order thinking skills. “When I listen to our math teacher talk about things that she does in math, I start to think about how I can steal that and adapt it to teach my English curriculum,” she said. “I get some great ideas.”

Assistant Principal Uzo Unobagha explained that, according to research, the particular programs a school adopts are less important than the specific details of classroom instruction. The goal of the planning period discussions is to get teachers to think more deeply about their craft. For example, does your lesson have a clear objective aligned to the curriculum? How are you assessing students’ understanding moment by moment and altering your instruction?

To support Grant’s efforts to improve instruction, the district assigned a math specialist and a language arts specialist who visit two to three days per week. The math specialist is training math teachers on the district’s formative assessment initiative, while the language arts specialist works with the whole faculty on teaching writing and reading in every subject area.

Several times a year, district administrators tour Grant’s classrooms. Unobagha said they look for evidence of quality instruction, such as writing across the curriculum, formative assessment, questions that require higher-order thinking skills, use of graphic organizers, and assignments that are suitably rigorous for the grade level. “Then they share their findings with administrators, telling us about the areas that need to improve.”

As a restructuring school, Grant also gets additional support from the state, according to Principal Rudd. The regional Special Education Training and Resource Center sent support staff to Grant Middle three or four times a month during 2008-09. They worked with teachers during team meetings and in their classrooms.

### Table 8. Percentage of Students in Grades 6-8 Scoring At or Above the Proficient Level on New York State Tests at Grant Middle, in Syracuse City, and Statewide

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>English Language Arts</th>
<th>Math</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grant Middle</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syracuse City district average, grades 6-8</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State average, grades 6-8</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table reads: In 2006, 26% of the students in grades 6 through 8 at Grant Middle scored at or above the proficient level in English language arts on the New York state tests. This was above the Syracuse district average of 25% but below the state average of 55% for students in grades 6 through 8.

Source: Center on Education Policy analysis of New York State Education Department data.
on building procedures and routines to help students with disabilities comprehend their work and maintain focus. The regional Bilingual Education Technical Assistance Center sends support staff to Grant twice a month to work with teams of teachers on strategies for accelerating the academic growth of English language learners. The director of that center also serves on the school's advisory team. The Mid-State Regional School Support Center also sends consultants two or three times a month to observe classrooms and give feedback to teams, individual teachers, and the administration on areas for improvement.

To coordinate the work of the school's many state and district consultants, Rudd said he convenes all of them periodically to agree on priorities and ensure that their services are deployed strategically. “You all have to know what you’re doing together so that you’re not replicating [and] you’re not leaving gaps,” he explained.

To pay for its restructuring efforts in 2008-09, Grant received $681,000 in Contract for Excellence money and $50,000 in federal school improvement funds in addition to its federal Title I funds.

One support that Rudd said is lacking from both the district and state is timely data on students’ growth as measured against state standards. The district provides the ACUITY online assessment system, but Rudd questioned how accurately it reflects the kinds of questions students encounter on the state tests used for NCLB.

He also feels frustrated by the lag between state testing and data reporting. The general results of the multiple-choice portion of the English language arts test administered in January 2009 were released by spring he said, but a more detailed breakdown of the kinds of errors students made was not available. The written response portion of the test, which Rudd finds most valuable in identifying student weaknesses, was not available in 2008 until the end of summer. By that time, it was too late for teachers and administrators to conduct a thorough analysis of the results and use it to rethink their approach before the school year was again underway.

For next year, Rudd said the school had identified four main areas for improvement:

- **Student discipline.** The school will implement a strategy called the Positive Behavioral Support System. The idea is to reduce disruptions by building relationships with students, establishing consistent classroom routines and consequences, and offering therapeutic interventions to the most troubled students. Rudd said one goal is to reduce the disproportionate number of African American males who are referred to the administration for disciplinary action.

- **Instructional strategies.** In 2008-09 the school focused on basics, Rudd said, such as organizing a year-long schedule for teaching skills and content in each subject area, ensuring all teachers completed lesson plans for the week, identifying a clear objective for each lesson, and creating activities to build students’ vocabulary in every content area. In 2009-10 the school will focus on more challenging classroom strategies, such as differentiating instruction to meet the needs of students at various learning levels and administering formative assessments.

- **Special education.** The school will figure out how to support more students with disabilities in regular classrooms. In 2008-09, 55 students were assigned to self-contained special education classes. The problem, said Rudd, is that those teachers are typically unable to provide the same depth of content as teachers in the general program who specialize in a subject area. He believes that students are often placed in self-contained classes on the basis of their disability type rather than their individual needs. “I’m not convinced there’s real clarity as to why kids get placed in different service settings,” he said.

- **Academic interventions.** As required by the state, the school runs an Academic Intervention Services class for students who missed state test score targets. Some students also attend after-school tutoring. But Rudd said the school has not yet carefully analyzed student assessment data to match each student with the most appropriate interventions, which could include a variety of computer-based remediation programs the school already has on hand. “We’re not making good use of what we know about our kids and plugging them into the right interventions, and that’s really where we need to begin to have a serious focus,” he said.
Rudd said he feels he has the resources to turn around the school’s performance; he just hopes he has the time. “I think that the team I have working as administrators with me now, we can turn this place around pretty significantly in five years. Do we have five years? Or am I going to hit the SURR list before that, and they’re going to send me downtown to count beans?” he wonders. “I don’t know the answer to that question. So we’re working as fast as we can.”

RESTRUCTURING IN CENTRAL ISLIP SCHOOL DISTRICT

Central Islip Union Free School District serves a large, working-class suburb located in central Long Island about 50 miles from Manhattan. Of the district’s 6,000 students, 59% qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, higher than the state average of 44%. Over the past 30 years, Latino residents have made up a growing proportion of the community’s population with the most recent immigrants coming from El Salvador, according to one school administrator. Today the district is largely minority—59% of students are Latino, 30% are African American, 8% are white, and 2% are Asian. English language learners make up 25% of enrollment.

The district has eight schools: one high school, one middle school, five elementary schools, and an early childhood center. Two schools are undergoing restructuring—the middle school began in 2006-07 and the high school in 2007-08. The elementary schools have performed better on state accountability measures: one is in year 2 of school improvement and the rest have made AYP.

District-Level School Improvement Actions

School restructuring in Central Islip has caused friction between the district and its teachers’ union. While teachers received input on restructuring as members of school-based planning teams, the district’s central office made the final decisions, explained Denise Lowe, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction. “[W]e are at the stage where central office is accountable for [progress],” she said. “We’ve given the building less say over curriculum and other efforts.”

Central Islip Teachers Association is currently protesting the reorganization of the high school into smaller learning communities, claiming that it violates the union contract because teachers will be assigned to work in groups in close proximity rather than allowed to select classrooms based on seniority. Meanwhile, the district argues that changes made to comply with NCLB, a federal law, override the union contract.

Similar changes in the organization of the middle school several years earlier had also prompted dissent. But a new principal appointed in July 2006 made teachers more receptive to the reorganization by offering them greater input into school decision making, according to the staff we interviewed. Lowe expects high school teachers to become less resistant to the new organization once some of the kinks are worked out and they become accustomed to it. “It’s just the change process,” she said. “They don’t take the change process well.”

Central Islip first became interested in the idea of creating small learning communities in the high school in 2006, said Lowe, through a state initiative called Destination Diploma. The idea is to assign a group of core subject teachers to work with a small group of students for four years and collaborate to solve problems that interfere with their learning. School districts with low graduation rates, including Central Islip, were invited to a three-day conference on creating small learning communities. Lowe said district staff then toured other schools in New York State that had successfully implemented the strategy.

Restructuring strategies are paid for with a combination of district, special education, and Title I funds. The district’s major restructuring expenditures are for two literacy consultants, who provide professional development for high school teachers at $200,000 annually; the Institute for Student Achievement, a national nonprofit group that supports the creation of small learning communities at the high school at a cost of $375,000 annually; and Read 180, a computerized reading remediation program at the middle school, which is costing the district $300,000 over three years.

Central Islip has also received state funding for its restructuring efforts. The state paid for a vendor, selected by the district, to complete an audit of its curriculum, budgeting, and policies in 2005. The auditor advised the district to create a written curriculum in each subject area and hire district administrators to oversee and monitor implementation of these curricula. The district completed these recommendations over four years, according to Lowe.
The Long Island Regional School Support Center provides technical assistance and consultant fees for restructuring schools. For example, middle and high school teachers received several days of literacy training from a nationally recognized expert. The center also paid for Phi Delta Kappa, a professional organization, to train district officials on how to observe classrooms and provide feedback to schools on improving instruction.

A state liaison visits classrooms periodically at the two restructuring schools and debriefs the building principal and Lowe. The observations are typically “nothing we didn’t know that we needed to do,” said Lowe, but it’s still worthwhile to get another perspective, she added. She feels the next steps are more consistent monitoring of classrooms by administrators—she still catches a few teachers reading the newspaper instead of teaching—and more detailed feedback from subject area coaches on specific steps that teachers can take to improve. Lowe anticipates two more years of hard work before both the middle and high school are out of restructuring, but she said that overall she is pleased with their progress.

### Building Relationships at Reed School

In July 2006, the district appointed Christopher Brown as principal of Reed, a large middle school with 1,000 7th and 8th grade students. Brown said he quickly noticed some serious problems with the school culture, in particular “a disconnect between the teachers and the students—the students hadn’t bought into what was going on in the classroom so the teachers had lost hope and faith in a lot of the kids.” The whole atmosphere was one of disorder, he said, with “numerous fights, gang activity. It was just a pure culture of insanity.”

Even so, the school had some promising improvement strategies in place, Brown observed. In 2003, it had divided its faculty into teams of four core subject teachers. Each team shared a group of students and had common planning time to discuss the individual needs of these students. In 2004-05, the district hired a professor from Hofstra University to work with teachers on strategies for teaching language arts, such as leading small group discussions on novels. The school had also begun to include students with disabilities in its regular classrooms.

The principal who put those strategies in place was a strong administrator, according to Lowe. “She did come in like a bull in a china closet but she was hired by a board that wanted that. She knew what she wanted to do to move that school.”

Still, the school’s test scores remained well below state averages, as shown in table 9. In 2005-06, students with disabilities fell short of AYP targets in reading, and English language learners missed AYP targets in both subjects. The board decided to deny tenure to Reed’s principal at the end of her third year. In Lowe’s view, the denial was a political move, although she said they did cite low academic performance as an official reason.

In his first year, Brown said he resisted making significant changes. “I focused more on building relationships with people.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 9. Percentage of Students in Grades 7-8 Scoring At or Above the Proficient Level on New York State Tests at Reed Middle School and Statewide</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>English Language Arts</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Math</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2006</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reed Middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State average, grades 7-8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table reads: In 2006, 34% of the students at Reed Middle School scored at or above the proficient level in English language arts on the New York state test. This was below the state average of 52% for grades 7 and 8.

Source: Center on Education Policy analysis of New York State Education Department data.
“He’s got an open mind,” said special education teacher Wendy Kaplan, a union representative, of Brown. She said that teachers often found the previous principal unresponsive to their ideas. Brown, on the other hand, listens to everybody’s opinion. “There’s a lot more trust and a lot more give-and-take.”

As teachers felt more supported by the administration, they began to work together more effectively, Kaplan explained. Previously they had resisted the interdisciplinary teams, which they felt had been imposed on them. Under Brown, they began to work together on common strategies for building students’ vocabulary skills across all subjects.

Faculty cohesion made an impression on students, Kaplan continued. “As soon as the students realized that we were working together, they had a slight attitude adjustment towards coming to class, being on time, and doing what they needed to do.”

To curb school violence, Brown said that he did seek long-term suspensions for the most serious violations. But providing troubled students with more personal attention was the most crucial strategy. “I would have lunch groups with the hardest of the hardcore kids. And they would come in here and they’d sit down with me and we’d do homework.”

To build better relationships between students and faculty, Brown also asked every teacher to select two to four students to receive individual attention either during or after school. Not every teacher volunteered, but Brown estimated that as of spring 2009, about 10% of students were being informally mentored by staff. He also asked teachers to accept more responsibility for handling student discipline in their classrooms. “I made it very clear to teachers that a student who was late to class isn’t a student that you throw out.”

After Brown’s first year, the school made AYP in math but still missed targets in reading for students with disabilities and English language learners. Vocabulary was a particular weakness schoolwide, he said.

To raise reading test scores, the school went all out, adding literacy activities to every subject area, Brown said. Teachers on the literacy team, which he created to give faculty more input, developed materials to reinforce reading and writing across every subject, including physical education. The school also added more creative writing to the English curriculum, with students creating their own poetry, plays, and books. To support staff in designing the new literacy activities, the school used improvement money for additional professional development from university consultants.

The school adopted Read 180, a reading intervention program for students who are performing at least two years below grade level. Students follow a computer-based program for 80 minutes daily, completing tasks at their own level. The class is scheduled during the Academic Intervention Services period, a state-mandated class for all students falling short of standards, and also takes the place of one technology class. Participating students are also enrolled in a regular English class. With the triple dose of language arts, “we’re seeing kids make four and five years’ growth a year,” said Brown.

Reed is continuing to provide after-school remediation to struggling students. Prior to state exams, teachers lead 15 to 20 extra-help sessions in each subject. Students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch may receive district-funded supplemental tutoring services delivered by outside providers. An outside group also provides academic support for 60 English language learners three times a week during most of the school year.

Throughout the restructuring process, the state and district have provided useful support, according to Brown. When he first arrived, the school didn’t have a restructuring plan in place. A liaison from the Long Island Regional School Support Center helped him figure out how to complete it. Initially the liaison visited the school biweekly, and now she visits monthly to observe classrooms and offer advice. She was particularly helpful on identifying consultants to offer professional development in literacy, he said.

In 2008, Reed’s hard work paid off, and the school made AYP for the first time. Getting teacher buy-in was the key to that success, Brown insisted. He explained that all the school’s new reading and writing strategies were proposed by the teacher-led literacy team. “That’s the reason why we’re making strides here—the teachers took ownership. They did it themselves.”
Overcoming Obstacles at Central Islip Senior High

When Franklin Caesar was appointed principal of Central Islip Senior High School in April 2007, the school’s restructuring team was debating two potential plans. One would locate all the freshmen in a single wing of the school to provide them with extra support and supervision during their first year of high school. The second idea would break the entire school of 1,800 students into smaller learning communities where small groups of students and four core subject teachers would remain together for four years.

Caesar quickly found the first idea unworkable—there were simply too many freshmen to fit them all into one wing. He began to research the second option, inviting a principal from a nearby high school that had divided into smaller communities to speak with the restructuring committee in May 2007.

“When we returned in September of 2007, I said to the restructuring team, we cannot go with a freshman center. We have to go with the small learning communities,” he said.

Assistant Superintendent Lowe recommended that the school work with the Institute for Student Achievement (ISA), a nonprofit service provider that became the high school’s official partner in October 2007.

At the time, the percentage of students meeting or exceeding state AYP targets in English language arts and math was equal to or higher than the state average. (See table 10.) The scores had improved since 2006 when the school missed AYP targets for all students in both subjects. In 2007, Central Islip Senior High hit its schoolwide targets but missed them in both subjects for students with disabilities.

Working with ISA, the restructuring team developed a plan. Since the school had five assistant principals, each could be assigned to oversee a small learning community of up to 400 students. The learning communities would be phased in over four years, beginning in 2008-09 with the incoming freshman class. Teachers and administrators liked ISA’s idea of an advisory period that would provide time for student mentoring.

But the plan faced a number of obstacles in its first year. The first obstacle was space. ISA advised the school that each academy should occupy its own section of the building, but the building’s configuration made that impossible, and students were scattered.

The second obstacle was the teachers’ union contract, which held that teachers could not take on an advisory period without dropping a class period. The district was unable to fund the extra positions to make that happen.

The third obstacle was scheduling. Teachers in each community were supposed to have common planning time that would be used in part for professional development from ISA. But scheduling common planning time for teachers in the small communities was impossible while the rest of the building was still organized by departments that needed their own common planning time.

| Table 10. Percentage of Grade 11 Students Scoring At or Above the Proficient Level on New York State Tests at Central Islip Senior High and Statewide |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
|                                  | English Language Arts | Math            |
| Central Islip Senior High        |      |      |      | 61%  | 74%  | 65%  |
| State average, grade 11          | 69%  | 72%  | 75%  | 71%  | 74%  | 76%  |

Table reads: In 2006, 71% of the 11th graders at Central Islip Senior High scored at or above the proficient level in English language arts on the New York State test. This was above the state average of 69% for grade 11.

Source: Center on Education Policy analysis of New York State Education Department data.
The teachers we interviewed expressed frustration over the setbacks. For math teacher Amy Pang, the scheduling conflict meant that she had to choose between attending the Institute workshops and teaching a class that students needed to prepare for the end-of-course state Regents exam. She chose to teach. “That to me is more important.”

Math teacher Cathleen Cunningham said that many teachers volunteered to participate in small learning communities the first year because of the opportunity to mentor students during the advisory period and were disappointed when that time wasn’t provided.

Both Pang and Cunningham felt that the professional development they had received was inadequate for the demands placed on them. Cunningham explained that the state monitor had criticized teachers for insufficient “inquiry-based learning,” which she took to mean that student questions need to be more of a driving force in the lesson. But when students lack an understanding of basic concepts, she explained, it’s hard to get them to form a meaningful question. Cunningham said she repeatedly invited her ISA coach to visit her classroom and demonstrate some of the inquiry-based strategies presented in workshops. “She said, ‘I don’t do that.’”

Principal Caesar said that he has a plan to resolve these issues. At his request, ISA agreed to have its coaches visit classrooms and model inquiry-based teaching. In 2009-10, the school will create time for teachers to meet with colleagues in their small learning communities by eliminating common planning time during the day for academic departments. Instead, teachers will meet by department once a month after school for professional development or planning specific to their subject area, an arrangement permitted by the union contract. Student advising sessions will take place two or three afternoons each week, and the extra pay for participating teachers will be covered by a three-year grant recently awarded to the school to extend its school day.

Beyond small learning communities, the high school is pursuing a number of other restructuring strategies. School administrators received training on how to conduct “walk-throughs,” or brief classroom observations, and then use their impressions as the basis for discussing improvement strategies at monthly department meetings. A university literacy expert is working with English and social studies teachers to help them move away from lessons that involve mainly lecturing at the chalkboard to activities that more actively engage students. A second consultant provided through the BOCES is helping teachers in all departments to design reading and writing activities that build literacy skills while reinforcing content. Teachers are also learning to tailor instruction to meet a variety of learning levels.

To support struggling students, the school organized after-school Regents review classes, which focus on preparing students for the state Regents exams. These exams are used both as high school exit exams and as the NCLB high school accountability tests. Some of the review classes are designated specifically for English language learners. The district also purchased an online Regents review program and provided every student in grades 6 through 12 with an account. Caesar said he is using an automated calling system to phone the homes of students with disabilities to urge them to take advantage of the program.

In moving the school out of restructuring, Caesar sees the continued union opposition as a challenge but not an impediment. “They want their contract honored, [and] I understand that,” he said. “But the reality is that we are a school in restructuring, and so as long as I am not violating the sense of that contract, I believe that I have to do the things that have to be done to move the school forward and, hopefully, off the [needs improvement] list.”

Conclusion

In the past New York state had multiple systems of supports and sanctions for schools in restructuring, the last stage of school improvement under NCLB. In 2008-09, the state had 251 Title I schools in restructuring, and that number is likely to grow, due in part to rising state targets as well as a new state law that moves the lowest-performing schools into restructuring more quickly than the federal law.

In this atmosphere of increasing numbers of schools in restructuring, New York is piloting a new differentiated accountability system. In the new system, schools will receive progressively more intense needs assessments and supports based on the number of years they remain in improvement. Schools in restructuring will be assigned a Joint Intervention Team that conducts an
on-site evaluation of the school and makes recommendations for change. The state Commissioner of Education may also appoint a Distinguished Educator to serve as an ex-officio, non-voting member of the school board.

State officials said the goal of the new differentiated accountability system is both to differentiate supports and sanctions for schools based on needs assessments and to simplify the current system. The details of the new accountability system, however, are still very much in the works. RSSC officials we interviewed believed that the new system had great promise. At the same time, all were concerned about what they viewed as a lack of clear communication regarding new state and federal policies and about the uncertainty surrounding their funding and status for the future. District officials in New York City and Syracuse had similar reactions to the new system in that they hoped some of the changes would be improvements but were unsure how these changes would be implemented.

In the future, it will be important to examine how the changes of differentiated accountability are communicated to regional assistance agencies, districts, and schools, as well as how the changes are actually implemented. Other state officials, policymakers, and school improvement organizations may be able to learn important lessons from New York’s attempts to both differentiate and simplify.

References


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