The Ebel School
Movado School District, Connecticut*

This is one of four state and 11 district case study papers from the Center on Education Policy (CEP) describing expanded learning time (ELT) initiatives. The major findings from all of the case studies are presented in the CEP summary report *Expanded Learning Time: A Summary of Findings from Case Studies in Four States.*

Key Findings

- **During its three years of School Improvement Grant funding, the Ebel School created longer blocks of instructional time for students by reconfiguring teacher preparation periods throughout the week.** At the same time, the school also added an extra hour of before-school planning and collaboration time for teachers each day, a change that the principal said has led to higher-quality, more rigorous classroom instruction.

- **After the three-year SIG ended, Ebel maintained the extra hour before school for teachers but discontinued the longer instructional blocks during the school day for students.** Support from the Movado district enabled the school to sustain the extra planning and collaboration time for teachers and continue funding teacher leadership positions and literacy and math coaches.

- **The Ebel School has partnered with organizations outside of the school, such as the local parks and recreation department, to provide afterschool programs.** Although these afterschool activities are open to all students, their enrollment is capped due to staffing requirements and funding limitations.

Background

The Ebel School is one of more than 40 schools in the Movado School District, which enrolls roughly 20,000 students. The Ebel School serves students in pre-kindergarten through grade 8 (see table 1 for more school information). The school received a federal SIG for

---

*To encourage frank responses from local interviewees, we have used pseudonyms for the case study districts and schools and for individuals interviewed in these sites. For the state-level interviewees, however, we have used the individuals’ real names.*
which the three-year grant period had already ended at the time of this study. Under Connecticut’s waiver of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Ebel is considered a “turnaround” or priority school—the lowest achieving 5% of schools in the state.

Table 1. Ebel Elementary School information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grades*</th>
<th>PreK-8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Locale*</td>
<td>City</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial demographics*</td>
<td>Hispanic, African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage free and reduced lunch**</td>
<td>Roughly 90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total students</td>
<td>Fewer than 500 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student to teacher ratio*</td>
<td>Fewer than 15 students per teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has or had a school improvement grant</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SIG intervention model</td>
<td>Turnaround</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21st CCLC funds in 2013-14</td>
<td>NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has been or is a priority school under state waiver</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*From CCD Public school data, 2011-12 school year.

**From Connecticut Education Data and Research’s district and school snapshots, 2011-12 school year.

Note: To protect the anonymity of schools all figures are approximations.

The information in this case study for both the Movado district and Ebel School is based on an interview with one school leader, Principal Grinberg, as well as on informal conversations with a few teacher leaders at Ebel and e-mail correspondence with a district official. For a variety of reasons, it was not possible to meet in person with any district-level officials in Movado.

According to Principal Grinberg, Ebel historically has been a “failing school.” A few years ago, the school was awarded a federal SIG and chose to implement the turnaround model, which requires schools to replace the principal and rehire no more than 50% of the school staff, among other actions. Thus, said Grinberg, about 50% of the staff are relatively new. Grinberg himself had worked for a long time in other schools within the Movado district. He became Ebel’s new principal prior to the SIG funding and was involved in the decision to implement the SIG turnaround model. He explained the rationale for choosing that model:

> [T]he staff had been here for a long period of time—not to say they were bad staff; they had just been here so long—and I wasn’t sure if I could change their behavior in a short period of time. . . . And so we decided to get fresh blood, more energetic staff. That’s why we decided to go with the turnaround model.

Most of the new teachers hired at the beginning of the SIG were first-year teachers. All of these teachers stayed with the school through the three-year SIG grant period and were still teaching at Ebel during the first school year after the grant ended, said Grinberg. “I think I have a tremendous staff.”

Despite strong support from Movado district officials and his school staff, Grinberg said that the school struggles with parent engagement, “like most schools in urban settings.”
Ebel offers family activities during the evenings, including English as a Second Language classes and dinners, but “it’s still a struggle,” he said. He hired a parent liaison to help recruit more parents into the school building and “find out what their needs are and see how we as a school can support the parents at home.”

**Expanded Learning Time Strategies**

Upon being notified that Ebel had received SIG funds, Grinberg and a Movado district official looked closely at the stipulations in the teacher contracts to see how the school schedule might be organized to expand learning time. The contract requires teachers to be offered 150 minutes total per week for preparation. Grinberg concentrated this teacher preparation period into 50-minute blocks of prep time during the regular school day for three days each week. On the remaining two days of the week, he allocated this time toward longer blocks of instruction for students in literacy and math. The specific days for these longer instructional blocks for students and the teacher preparation periods were staggered by grade level throughout the week. To find extra time in students’ schedules, Grinberg said they evaluated the transition time allocated between classes and the lunch period. Ultimately, they decreased the transition time between classes, which allowed for an additional 10 minutes, and cut the lunch period from a little more than 40 minutes down to 25 minutes. Teachers ate with the students on these days to help them with the transition back into class and minimize “the time it usually takes to “get on-task,” said Grinberg. As explained later in the challenges section, Ebel discontinued the longer instructional blocks after SIG funding ended.

In addition to the reconfigured preparation periods and longer instructional blocks, teachers begin their day at Ebel at 8:00 a.m., an hour before the regular 9:00 a.m. start for students. Grinberg said that this common planning time every day for teachers is an integral part of the overall school improvement efforts:

> [During this extra hour before school teachers] plan together—they create their own professional development together. So they’re teaching each other, which is really great. So there is a lot of collaboration. There is a lot of mentorship. There [are] a lot of people visiting each other’s classrooms to see what’s best for our students.

Teachers received a 10% increase in their regular salary to compensate for this extra hour of common planning and professional development time. Because Ebel has been designated by the state as a turnaround school (see box 1), the school leadership “worked closely with the union president to do this,” said Grinberg. “We created work rules, so up front everyone knew what the work rules were, and they all agreed to it.” This additional hour of time for teachers is still in place, post-SIG, at the Ebel School.

Before implementing these schedule changes, Grinberg had to present the plan to the local school board. “It wasn’t that I had to ask permission . . . but I had to report,” he said, noting that he used data and research to explain to board members why he proposed an earlier
start for teachers and a later start for students. Ultimately, the board supported the scheduling changes.

Ebel also offers some afterschool activities, including programs mounted through an outside partnership with the local department of parks and recreation. For approximately 90 minutes after school, the partnership programs provide homework help, arts and crafts, games, and intramural sports. Although the programs are technically open to all Ebel students there is a cap on enrollment, due to staffing and funding restrictions. “I feel bad, because we had to turn kids away,” said Grinberg.

Box 1. State programs for district and school improvement in Connecticut

**Priority School Districts.** The priority School district program was established to provide support for school districts “with the greatest academic need” (CSDE, 2013a). The program funds an array of activities, such as dropout prevention, early reading interventions, and instructional technology, as well as initiatives to strengthen parent involvement and school accreditation. (Priority School Districts are different from “priority schools,” which Connecticut refers to as “turnaround schools.”)

**Alliance Districts.** This program is a targeted investment in the state’s 30 lowest-performing districts. Connecticut General Statute Section 10-262u established a process for identifying Alliance Districts and allocating increased Education Cost Sharing funding to support district strategies to “dramatically increase student outcomes and close achievement gaps by pursuing bold and innovative reforms” (CSDE, 2014). The districts must apply to the state for a formula grant and outline their proposed use of the funds. These districts submit plans to improve student achievement, which are approved by the Commissioner. During the 2014-15 school year, 14 Alliance Districts also qualify as Priority School Districts.

**Commissioner’s Network Schools.** This program provides resources to the lowest-performing schools in the state. The state Commissioner selects these schools, and all of the state’s turnaround/priority schools are eligible. Although Network schools remain a part of their local district, they receive greater flexibility and autonomy than other schools “in exchange for heightened accountability” (CSDE, 2013b). As of August of 2014, there were 11 schools participating in the program.

**Funding and Support**

To cover the 10% increase in teachers’ salaries needed to fund Grinberg’s cornerstone ELT initiative—an extra hour of teacher collaboration time every morning—the principal used local funding from the district’s operational budget, rather than from the school’s SIG award. This was intentional, he said, so that the planning and collaboration period would be sustained beyond the three-year federal SIG grant.

The school’s SIG status gave the principal some operational flexibility, and Grinberg also hired instructional coaches and set aside funds for stipends to teachers who took on seven newly created teacher-leader positions. These positions included literacy team leaders; teacher leaders to address behavioral issues, school culture, and other building-wide challenges; an academic leader to determine teachers’ training needs and arrange
professional development; and a bilingual leader to oversee data, provide training, and serve other functions for English language learner programs. Originally, these positions were paid for by SIG, but once the grant ended, the district had to find other sources of funding to sustain them. Grinberg said he worked with district officials to continue to fund these positions beyond SIG.

The Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) designated the Movado School District as an Alliance District (see box 1 for more information). This designation comes with additional reporting requirements as well as some state funding for school improvement. Grinberg did not think any of this funding is being used directly for ELT initiatives at Ebel, and a Movado district official confirmed this assertion. She reported that the stipends paid to Ebel teacher-leaders came from the Teacher Incentive Fund, a competitive federal grant awarded to the Movado district for teachers and teacher-leaders serving in low-performing schools.

Principal Grinberg spoke very highly of the hands-on support he receives from Movado district officials. In particular, one district leader has been especially helpful to the Ebel School, working with them to secure funding for the before-school teacher collaborative time and providing advice and assistance on the school’s improvement initiatives. Grinberg further described the assistance provided by this “tremendous” district official who was his direct supervisor:

[S]he figured out where in the operational budget [the extra pay] could come out of . . . She would call me on weekends, or we sent e-mails, so she knew exactly what was happening. So it was important that . . . we figure out what the issues are with our school and to actually plan according to that . . . We wanted to make sure we were doing the best for our kids.

A few CSDE officials also monitor school improvement at Ebel, said Grinberg. One state official, he noted, observed the implementation of ELT and other improvement activities and gave the school “another lens to look at it . . . she was supportive that way.”

The Ebel School does not receive any funding under the federal 21st Century Community Learning Center program.

Challenges

The Ebel School encountered a few challenges in implementing the ELT initiatives, said Grinberg. One such challenge is to keep the “teachers fresh—it’s a long day,” he said. “Keeping the kids focused” during the longer instructional blocks can also be a challenge for teachers. Even though the SIG funding has ended, teachers still arrive an hour before school for common planning and professional development every day. But the students no longer have extended instructional blocks for literacy and math twice per week, and teachers now have an individual preparation period every day during the school day. The principal explained:
The teachers . . . not having a prep time [two days each week], I had to stop doing that because I could see they were burning out. Even though they were trying, they were getting tired. People were getting sick, and it just wasn’t worth it. It wasn’t worth the aggravation that it brought.

There was also some pushback from parents about the later start time for students. Grinberg explained that the current Ebel School building was relatively new. When students and staff were moved back into the building from a temporary space they used across town, they changed the start time from 8:30 a.m. to 9:00 a.m. The later start time was a challenge for some parents who were accustomed to dropping their children at school around 8:15 a.m. and then commuting to work. With the 9:00 a.m. schedule change, “it became a day care issue.” Currently, the school offers a resource center with open gym, library time, and breakfast so that parents may still drop their children at the school earlier.

In hindsight, Grinberg recognizes that numerous changes were made in the first year of SIG implementation—“it was a lot thrown at [teachers] that first year.” He would advise others who are leading school turnaround or ELT to implement changes more gradually, with ample input from teachers, rather than trying to do everything at once.

**Progress with ELT**

Since SIG implementation, instruction has become more rigorous in Ebel classrooms, according to Grinberg. He attributes much of this change to the extra time for common teacher planning and professional development. He also credits this improvement in instruction to teachers taking on leadership roles, teaching other teachers, and collaborating on professional development. Grinberg shared the following specific example:

> Yesterday . . . we had a second grade teacher who is a vertical team leader for K-3. She came upstairs to show the teachers, the seventh and eighth grade vertical team, how to do backwards planning, looking at the Common Core and how to unwrap [the content in the standards]. So, it’s been such a godsend—it makes my life so much easier because there are so many issues . . . to have everyone else on board and taking these leadership roles. I think that’s the reason why the school is where it is . . . [We have] the extra time for teachers to plan and to look at challenges and try to figure out together, How do we get through these challenges?

Grinberg said that during the first year of SIG implementation, the school met the federal accountability requirements for adequate yearly progress through No Child Left Behind Act’s “safe harbor” provision. (Under safe harbor, a school can make adequate yearly progress even if it does not meet the state targets, as long as the numbers of students who are not scoring at the proficient level on the state tests is reduced by 10% from the
From that point forward, Ebel students as a group have met the annual targets for achievement on state assessments. As a result of these test score gains, the state and district officials “haven’t bothered us,” said Grinberg, and “it has been great because [our district representative] told them just stay away, they’re on the right direction.”

Grinberg noted that the improvements in test scores are connected to multiple factors, rather than just to more instructional time. He specifically cited teacher collaboration and planning, staff changes at the school under SIG, and overall improvements in the school culture as factors that have contributed to these gains. “I don’t think it was just one thing; I think it was multiple things,” he said, including “teachers now being cognizant of how to plan for our kids.”

As noted previously, Ebel has retained all of the new teachers hired at the beginning of the SIG grant, despite the high turnover rate for teachers in other schools in the Movado district. Grinberg explained:

> I think, and you can talk to the staff, they like it here because they have a voice. They know they can come to my office and say, “You know, Mr. Grinberg, this does not work for me, and here’s what I’m thinking” . . . And the fact that they’re not alone, they’re not isolated. They’re working with their colleagues . . . And they get a chance to do leadership roles, so I think that works for them.

Finally, the Ebel School—with help from the Movado district funds—was able to keep the additional hour of planning time for teachers, teacher leadership positions, and the literacy and math coaches after the SIG funding ended.

**School Leadership Perceptions of ELT**

Overall, the Ebel School concentrated its efforts on providing more time for teachers to meet, collaborate, mentor one another, and develop plans. Principal Grinberg asserted that this was the most effective approach to improvement at his school:

> [T]eachers needed time to get together and collaborate and mentor each other and create action plans together and plan together. For me, I think that [providing time for teachers to meet] is the best thing that we have done when we got the SIG grant.

Grinberg was less confident about the impact of ELT for students. While he acknowledged the importance of additional time for interventions and enrichment activities for students, he cautioned that extra time should not be spent on more of the same thing. “[O]ur kids do need time to practice what they’re learning the in the classroom . . . and enrichment programs . . . but I would make sure I plan it so that it’s different than the school day,” he said.
References


