

Summary of the Connecticut Charter Schools Best Practices Report

Overview

This report represents a summary of the “best practices” self-reported by charter schools in 2007-08 annual reports submitted to the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE). Connecticut General Statutes (C.G.S.) Section 10-66ii requires the CSDE to annually publish a report on best practices reported by governing councils of charter schools pursuant to subdivision (5) of subsection (b) of Section 10-66cc of the C.G.S., and distribute a copy of such report to each public school superintendent and governing council of each charter school.

Background

The purposes of Connecticut charter schools are to: “(1) improve academic achievement; (2) provide for educational innovation; (3) provide a vehicle for the reduction of racial, ethnic and economic isolation; and (4) provide a choice of public education programs for students and parents.”¹ To accomplish these directives, charter schools are expected to develop, implement and sustain innovative practices and procedures. The flexibility afforded to charter schools theoretically results in the development of new practices that, in turn, can be shared with other public schools.

2007-08 Best Practices

The best practices included in the annual report are self-reported by each charter school’s governing council.² They represent practices and policies that school personnel believe to be the most innovative and effective at improving academic achievement. These data were included in the “Best Practices” section of the 2007-08 annual report, which asked the school to “describe two or three of their most effective best practices employed by the school that contribute significantly to the academic success of students.” It is clear from the annual reports that the schools’ mission influences the best practices and that these practices are not limited to the classroom and the curriculum.

The data reported for best practices varied among the 16 charter schools reporting information. Some schools reported practices in great detail while others listed a brief overview in a few paragraphs or a bulleted list. Overall, the practices link to categories such as: Curricular/Academic; Social Outcomes; Learning Community; and Governance/General School Policy. Specific best practices may fit into more than one category and it is important to note that the following list is a compilation of the data provided by all schools and all of the following practices are not present in every school.

Curricular/Academic

- curriculum based on students’ individual needs
- student-created goals
- smaller class sizes
- focus on standards-based curriculum (aligned with Connecticut and national standards)
- ongoing classroom assessments inform student needs and curricular modifications
- programs’ focus on inquiry-based, hands-on learning
- a variety of enrichment classes offered before, during and after school

¹ *Public School Choice in Connecticut: A Guide for Students and Their Families, 2009-2010*. Connecticut State Department of Education

² Charter school directors or their designee typically complete this task.

Social Outcomes

- strong parent-school partnership
- a variety of social programs highlighting important social skills such as respect, consideration and tolerance
- behavioral management plans which create a safe learning environment
- school uniforms which create unity and decrease competition
- counseling offered to students in need

Learning Community

- continuous feedback given to students regarding academic progress
- weekly professional development for teachers
- weekly meetings with director of curriculum to bolster professional development and teacher support/sharing
- new teachers involved in an induction program

Governance/General School Policy

- extended day and year for additional academic opportunities
- academic growth monitored through “Must Pass Policy,” as one example, to prevent social promotion
- great teachers are recruited

Recommended Follow-up

This publication is intended to facilitate collaborative efforts between public school districts and state charter schools. CSDE recommends that superintendents contact those charter schools whose best practices might be applicable to the mission and goals of their school districts.

School Name:	Achievement First Bridgeport Academy
Contact Person:	Debon Lewis Director Achievement First Bridgeport Academy 391 East Washington Avenue Bridgeport, CT 06608 Telephone: 203-333-9128 Grades: 5-6

BEST PRACTICES

CORE ELEMENTS OF AN ACHIEVEMENT FIRST SCHOOL:

Unwavering focus on breakthrough student achievement

- Student success is the leading factor in evaluating schools, teachers and principals.
- Our goal is to CLOSE the achievement gap by bringing urban students up to and beyond suburban standards. We are not satisfied to simply lessen the achievement gap.

Aggressive recruitment and retention of great people

- Achievement First (AF) spends considerable time and money on talent recruitment.
- Teachers have access to resources, lots of support, and a real voice in decision making.
- AF has programs to create career paths for teachers and “grow” our own leader talent.
- Compensation is driven by contribution to mission.

Targeted teacher and leader training

- Principals have a yearlong training “residency” before opening a new school, followed by ongoing training and mentoring. Teachers have four weeks of training before entering an AF classroom.
- Each school is led by a principal, two academic deans and a dean of students so that there are no more than 15 teachers per school leader.
- Teachers and leaders have an ongoing conversation about instruction with many informal observations and constant appraisal of data.
- Comprehensive teacher evaluations are done twice a year.

Great principals with the power to lead

- Principals have control over budget, hiring employees, evaluating employees, scheduling, and teaching strategies.

More time on task

- The instructional day is at least one and a half hours longer than traditional public schools. Students also attend a three-week summer academy. The combination of an extended school day and school year means that students are in the classroom for approximately 50 more instructional days each year than traditional public school students.
- Lots of time is set aside for reading (three hours daily for kindergarten – Grade 2 students and three and a half hours daily on reading and writing for Grade 3-7 students).
- Tutoring during the school day, after school, and/or on Saturdays is required for students who are struggling.
- Homework is given every night, including required independent reading.

Rigorous and standards-based curriculum

- What is taught at every grade level is clearly and systematically planned and implemented across the school to ensure quality and efficiency in every classroom and at every grade.

Effective unit and lesson planning

- Standards-based interim assessments are given every six weeks.
- Schools use a structured process for analyzing data and using it to plan future instruction.
- Teachers receive clear measures of how every student is doing in every subject every six weeks and meet with principals to strategize lesson planning accordingly.

Back office support

- School operations staff takes tasks off school leaders’ plates so they have more time for coaching teachers and working with students.

Achievement First Bridgeport (cont.)

- AF's central office is responsible for teacher recruitment, information technology support, curriculum development, fundraising and facilities, among many other functions. Teachers and school leaders can focus on what they do best without becoming overwhelmed with administrative tasks.

Disciplined, achievement-oriented school culture

- Schools are strict and structured with high expectations for student conduct.
- Countless details are intentionally managed to create an overall culture in which achievement is valued and “cool.”
- Every student wears a school uniform.

CORE VALUES OF AN ACHIEVEMENT FIRST SCHOOL:

Results without Excuses or Shortcuts

We work hard every day to deliver on our urgent promise to provide an outstanding education for all our students – an education that will help them graduate from college, enhance their lives, become leaders in their communities and enjoy real freedom and citizenship. In pursuit of that mission, we set ambitious, clearly measurable goals and strive to exceed expectations with exceptional regularity. We continually use data to track our progress and to find out where we are doing well and where we are falling short. When we do not meet our goals, we own our shortcomings, admit our mistakes and do not seek to blame external forces. We are not satisfied with “better” results that still leave our students behind their suburban, private school or international peers. We are working to level the playing field so that our students defy all the excuses and enjoy the full privileges of an outstanding education.

People Matter – Mightily

We understand that the quality and commitment of our teachers, school leaders, and other staff are what makes the real difference in the lives of our students. As a result, we put an extraordinary amount of our resources into finding, developing, and retaining great people. We want to make our schools places where great teachers want to teach. We strive to create work environments that are exceptionally professional, collegial and stimulating and where everyone has sufficient support, a real voice, and the tools they need to be successful. We expect all of us to work hard, but we also recognize and honor our personal, family and community commitments. We do not look for individual martyrs or super humans: rather, we give our teachers, school leaders, and staff the tools and support they will need – as a team – to accomplish our ambitious goals for students.

Excellence is a Habit

We strive to set the industry standard in all aspects of what we do. Baked into our culture is a relentless pursuit of excellence, and we do not settle for “so-so” from our students or from ourselves. “Good enough” is simply not. We recognize that we must be a disciplined organization that makes clear plans, establishes tangible goals and has documented replicable systems in order to sustain excellence over time. We do not lurch from one educational fad or new idea to another; rather, we understand the importance of continuous, thoughtful improvement and always strive to do better than before. We carve out time for reflection, research and development, and knowledge documentation in order to make excellence more predictable for ourselves and others. We will grow as fast as we can – but as slow as we must – to ensure excellence in every aspect of our work.

Sweat the Small Stuff

We believe that countless unseen or overlooked details are the difference between the mediocre and the magnificent. In everything we do, we pay attention to even the smallest details to ensure smooth, predictable and effective outcomes. We are motivated by the fact that our students pay the price when we fail to get the details right.

Team and Family

We are not islands working alone but integral parts of the larger AF team and family. We share in our collective success while celebrating the individual strengths of each person and school. We care about one another, treat each other with respect, and work hard to preserve a sense of family. We have fun together, even when our responsibilities are taxing. We collaborate and share best practices, never letting competition overshadow the ultimate goal of excellence for every student and school. We respect and celebrate our differences, knowing that we are stronger as a team because of them. When we see our teammates struggling, we pitch in, knowing that our teammates will be there for us when we need it.

First Things First

At AF, the needs of students always come before the interests of adults. We prioritize what is best for students first, with teachers, school leaders and central staff working together to ensure every child's needs is met.

Achievement First Bridgeport (cont.)

The central support team never loses sight of our core job, which is to keep distractions and other unnecessary responsibilities away from teachers and school leaders.

Whatever It Takes

We do not take “no” for an answer easily. If there is a way, we find it. We are persistent, insistent and deliberate in our actions. As our students climb the mountain to college through hard work, we do whatever it takes to help them be successful along their journey. We give one hundred percent every day and go the extra mile to make the difference in the lives of our students. We also understand that “whatever it takes” is a team mandate, with different individuals taking the lead at different times to ensure that our goals are accomplished.

Many Minds One Mission

Working together with our parents and supporters, we strive to ensure that our efforts are part of a larger effort to improve the communities in which we live and work. We are also partners in a national effort to ensure that every child has access to a first-class education. We understand that we cannot do this alone and we eagerly collaborate with others around the country who are working to make a difference in the lives of children. We are inspired by those who are pioneering new approaches to raising student achievement and we are eager to learn from the best practices of these high-performing schools, districts, and other organizations. In return, we are willing to share our successful strategies with other educational organizations in our communities and beyond.

Everything with Integrity

We value integrity and always model it for our students. The REACH values – Respect, Enthusiasm, Achievement, Citizenship, and Hard Work – are not merely posted on the wall for students; they are also our professional values and drive our words and actions as adults. We consider the impact our actions will have on others and work carefully to be transparent and fair. We admit our mistakes and work to make them right. Even when we are successful, we are humble and understand that we always have more to learn.

MISSION

“...to strengthen the academic and character skills needed for all students to excel in the top tier of high schools and colleges, to achieve success in a competitive world, and to serve as the next generation of leaders in their communities.”

School Name:	Amistad Academy		
Contact Person:	Elementary School Tisha Markette, Director 540 Ella Grasso Blvd. New Haven, CT 06519 Telephone: 203-772-2166 Grades: Kindergarten - 2	Middle School Matthew Taylor, Director 407 James Street New Haven, CT 06513 Telephone: 203-773-0390 Grades: 5-8	High School Jeff Sudmyer, Director 49 Prince Street New Haven, CT 06519 Telephone: 203-772-1092 Grades: 9-11

BEST PRACTICES

Amistad Academy continues to implement, teach and share with other schools and districts the lessons and practices we have refined over the years that account for our sustained success.

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Aggressive recruitment and retention of great people

- Amistad Academy spends considerable time and money on talent recruitment.
- Teachers have access to resources, lots of support and a real voice in decision making.
- Amistad Academy has programs to create career paths for teachers and to “grow” our own leader talent.
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Amistad Academy (cont.)

Targeted teacher and leader training

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Strategic use of data

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- School operations staff takes tasks off school leaders’ plates so they have more time for coaching teachers and working with students.
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Amistad Academy (cont.)	
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MISSION	
<i>“... to strengthen the academic and character skills needed for all students to excel in the top tier of high schools and colleges, to achieve success in a competitive world, and to serve as the next generation of leaders in their communities.”</i>	

School Name:	The Bridge Academy
Contact Person:	Timothy Dutton Director The Bridge Academy 401 Kossuth Street Bridgeport, CT 06608 Telephone: 203-336-9999 Grades: 7-12

BEST PRACTICES	
The Bridge Academy believes that there are a number of policies that we believe other districts should consider duplicating. They are:	
<p>“Must Pass Policy” -- The Bridge Academy requires every student to pass every subject in order to be promoted to the next grade. If they fail the class, they must make it up in summer school. We instituted this policy because we believe most of our failures occur from a lack of student effort. If students know they must pass a class, then they work harder.</p> <p>Reading program -- Students are required to read throughout the school year. When a student finishes a book of their choosing from our library, they test on the book using the Accelerated Reader computer program. If they pass the book, they earn a certain number of points depending on its length. Each student has a certain number of points they must earn during the year. If they do not reach their point’s goal, they must attend summer school! This program has drastically increased the number of students reading. Our student body of 178 passed over 2000 book tests last school year!</p> <p>Math Final Exam-- Students who fail their final exam must attend summer school until they master the objectives that were taught. We have found that this has increased student achievement in math.</p> <p>College Planning Program-- All seniors at The Bridge Academy are required to take a class that prepares the paperwork necessary to attend college. This includes the successful completion of SAT tests, college applications, financial aid applications and enrollment applications. This class is required for graduation, and ensures that all Bridge Academy seniors graduate with a college acceptance.</p> <p>Senior Project -- Seniors at The Bridge Academy complete an interdisciplinary paper and presentation as part of a class they all must take in order to graduate. As a culmination of the class, community members grade student presentations of their work. We believe this project is an excellent way to showcase our students work and prepare them for college level presentations.</p>	

MISSION	
<i>“... provides a college preparatory education designed to overcome the problems presently found in the inner city.</i>	

School Name:	Common Ground High School
Contact Person:	Oliver Barton Director Common Ground High School New Haven Ecology Project 358 Springside Avenue New Haven, CT 06515 Telephone: 203-389-0823 Grades: 9-12

BEST PRACTICES

Practice 1: Integrating an Environmental Focus with Standards-Based Planning and Effective Teaching Strategies

Connecticut’s achievement gap remains one of the widest in the nation; urban students, particularly economically disadvantaged young people of color in Connecticut’s cities, consistently under-perform their suburban counterparts. Narrowing this achievement gap requires research backed teaching strategies and a laser-like focus on academic standards. Still, a solitary focus on standards-based planning is a necessary but insufficient response to the achievement gap. Increasing student achievement requires novel approaches that engage students and create the necessary conditions for learning. Common Ground addresses the achievement gap through standards-based planning and research-based effective teaching strategies, as do other Connecticut high schools. We are completely committed to these responses, and recognize that students entering our high school are victims of the achievement gap. But we also employ a novel response to the achievement gap: using the environment as an integrating focus for student learning. We do so because a sturdy research base testifies to the effectiveness of place-based, environmental learning in promoting student achievement. We also focus on the environment because our mission is to create the next generation of environmental leaders and powerful citizens, and believe this work is important in its own right.

Since its founding, Common Ground has taken the environment as its organizing focus. But, in the context of high-stakes testing and NCLB pressures, it has sometimes been hard to justify and maintain this focus. Our response: to draw clear and strong connections between our environmental mission and our responsibility to help standards meet high academic standards.

This past summer, faculty and board members strengthened and solidified Common Ground’s commitment to environmental learning as it related to academic standards. Faculty, drawing on core charter documents and research into environmental literature, developed a set of six “big ideas” that define environmental learning at Common Ground. Then, using the format known as Standards to identify essential Questions, Understanding, developing Activities and Resources needed to produce Evidence (SQUARE) teachers mapped how environmental ideas fit into the curricula of specific courses across all disciplines. The school focuses on one of these environmental big ideas during each trimester, so that students can experience how this idea plays out across academic subjects. Short whole-school assessments, like those used to measure progress in core academic areas, will soon provide data on students’ understanding and commitment to these essential environmental ideas.

As our effort to define environmental “big ideas” indicates, Common Ground sees environmental learning as part and parcel of our effort to reach high standards for academic learning. The same standards-based approach that helps strengthen and assess content-area learning works well in defining core environmental learning goals, and then in articulating these goals across specific courses and activities. Whole-school formative assessments, and data based decision making, are effective in ensuring environmental as well as subject-area learning.

Still, this is not the essential connection between environmental mission and standards-based planning. In short, environmental learning is one sure route to achievement of academic standards. A California State Department of Education report (Lieberman and Hoody 1998) showed that many schools had success at addressing the achievement gap in core subject areas using the environment as an integrated context for learning. A broader base of educational research indicates that place-based, environment-focused learning provides the building blocks of effective learning environments. At the heart of place-based learning are the building blocks of student motivation — relevance, choice, control, a stimulating environment, authentic feedback, discovery — identified by decades of research (e.g., Deci and Ryan 1991; Adelman 1978; Patrick et al. 2000). This sort of learning embodies critical features of effective learning environments — features like challenge and high expectations, opportunities for contribution, expanding connections and networks — again based in research on families, schools and organizations (Learning First Alliance 2001; Connell, Gambone, & Smith 2000; National Research Council 2002). It is aligned with our understanding of learning theory and cognitive development, which emphasizes that learning, happens through active engagement, is social in nature and is context-specific (Driscoll 2000).

Common Ground (cont.)

It focuses squarely on “competencies that count” (Steinberg 2001) — solving “messy” problems, thinking critically and analytically, effective social interaction and cooperation and creating high-quality performances and products — identified by the Secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) and others as the necessary skills for success in work and life. Most importantly, it delivers on its promise to improve educational achievement and student learning (Expeditionary Learning 2001; Lieberman & Hoody 1998; Scales et al. 2000).

While an environmental focus supports student motivation and learning, other strategies focus directly on ensuring that students meet high academic standards. With support from ACES, and drawing on the work of Doug Reeves and others, Common Ground has integrated standards-based planning throughout the curriculum. In our annual summer institute and throughout the school year, teachers use a course planning approach that tightly couples power standards with academic learning. Three data teams – math, reading, and content-area reading and writing – meet regularly to examine student work and adapt instruction. To support this standards-based planning and our continued environmental focus, teachers are actively implementing nine effective teaching strategies identified by Robert Marzano and his colleagues. These strategies are not separate from the school’s environmental focus; instead, they work hand-in-hand with the school’s overall mission.

Practice 2: Providing Big-School Opportunities in a Small-School Setting

There are enormous advantages that arise from Common Ground’s small size. Every one of our students is known well, allowing faculty consistently to challenge them and support them as learners. On the other hand, small schools often cannot offer the diversity of opportunities available to students at traditional high schools. Our response to this challenge: to create as rich a set of opportunities as possible for our students on site, and to use our larger community “campus” to further enrich our students’ learning opportunities. For instance:

- We keep the focus on academic success even after the school day ends. To participate in cultural, recreational, and community service activities from 4-5pm, students must first take part in an hour of academic enrichment activities – through a homework center, computer-based enrichment activities, one-on-one tutoring with Yale students, etc.
- Because Common Ground is both a high school and a community environmental organization, staffed with talented environmental educators, we are able to provide unique experiences connected to our school’s theme: environmental workforce development programs, opportunities for our students to teach younger children about the environment and an active adventure club, for instance.
- Through partnerships with community experts and organizations, we are able to offer our students out-of-school opportunities as varied as African dance, debate, peer mediation and youth philanthropy.
- Because we know our students well, we are able to link them with community-based learning opportunities that complement their academic learning and develop their passions. Common Ground students are well represented in after-school programs at the Peabody Museum, high-responsibilities roles at Solar Youth, documentary and organizing work through Youth Rights Media, etc. They also take courses at Yale, Gateway Community College and the University of New Haven, and participate in rigorous summer programs through Yale, Southern Connecticut State University, St. Joseph’s College and other institutions.

Much of this out-of-school work is supported by funds outside of the per-pupil expenditure provided to Common Ground. Grants through the 21st Century Learning Center program, workforce development funding sources and a variety of small foundation grants make them possible. Yet these out-of-school programs are central, not peripheral, to our success in supporting student learning.

Practice 3: Creating a School Climate that Supports and Celebrates Learning

Responding to concerns about student behavior and its effects on student learning, Common Ground began three years ago to implement a comprehensive approach to school climate. A new focus on developing student POWER – Pride, Ownership, Wonder, Effort and Respect – formed the foundation for a variety of strategies. During regular POWER assemblies, students have been celebrated for modeling POWER traits, and encouraged by speeches by leaders from the local community. These assemblies are just one of a number of the ways students are encouraged to be POWERFUL leaders: guidance groups develop POWER creeds as guidelines for behavior, and teachers send postcards home to celebrate students who are doing well in classes, for instance. These efforts have yielded clear results; detentions and suspensions declined 62 percent and 68 percent, respectively, in 2006.

Common Ground (cont.)

In Spring 2006, Common Ground introduced a new element of our comprehensive school climate strategy: an annual Step-Up Ceremony. During the ceremony, members of each class officially moved up to the next grade and supported other students as they made this step forward. Seniors shared lessons with younger students, presented a time capsule and unveiled a monument that will feature the handprints of every graduate of Common Ground, present and future. Other classes offered congratulations to their older peers, wrote letters to be opened in the following school year, or read part of a poem to see off graduates. The ceremony was a remarkably positive, focusing the entire school on the fruits of academic accomplishment.

MISSION

“...graduate students with the knowledge, skills and understanding to live healthy, powerful, and productive lives. We do so through authentic learning that develops academic excellence, ecological literacy, strong character and commitment to community.”

School Name:	Elm City College Preparatory School		
Contact Person:	Elementary School	Middle School	High School
	Morgan Barth, Director	Marc Michaelson, Director	Jeff Sudmyer, Director
	240 Greene Street	794 Dixwell Avenue	49 Prince Street
	New Haven, CT 06511	New Haven, CT 06511	New Haven, CT 06519
	Telephone: 203-498-0702	Telephone: 203-773-0390	Telephone: 203-772-1092
Grades: Kindergarten–5	Grades: 6-8	Grade: 9	

BEST PRACTICES

Elm City College Preparatory (ECCP) continues to implement, teach and share with other schools and districts the lessons and practices we have refined over the years that account for our sustained success.

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- Student success is the leading factor in evaluating schools, teachers and principals.
- Our goal is to CLOSE the achievement gap by bringing urban students up to and beyond suburban standards. We are not satisfied to simply lessen the achievement gap.

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- Teachers and leaders have an ongoing conversation about instruction with many informal observations and constant appraisal of data.
- Comprehensive teacher evaluations are done twice a year.

Great principals with the power to lead

- Principals have control over budget, hiring employees, evaluating employees, scheduling and teaching strategies.

More time on task

- The instructional day is at least one and a half hours longer than traditional public schools. Students also attend a three-week summer academy. The combination of an extended school day and school year means that students are in the classroom for approximately 50 more instructional days each year than traditional public school students.

Elm City College Preparatory School (cont.)

- Lots of time is set aside for reading (three hours daily for Grades K-2 students and three and a half hours daily on reading and writing for Grades 3-7 students).
- Tutoring during the school day, after school, and/or on Saturdays is required for students who are struggling.
- Homework is given every night, including required independent reading.

Rigorous and standards-based curriculum

- What is taught at every grade level is clearly and systematically planned and implemented across the school to ensure quality and efficiency in every classroom and at every grade.

Effective unit and lesson planning

- Standards-based interim assessments are given every six weeks.
- Schools use a structured process for analyzing data and using it to plan future instruction. Teachers receive clear measures of how every student is doing in every subject every six weeks and meet with principals to strategize lesson planning accordingly.

Back office support

- School operations staff takes tasks off school leaders' plates so they have more time for coaching teachers and working with students.
- ECCP's central office is responsible for teacher recruitment, information technology support, curriculum development, fundraising and facilities, among many other functions. Teachers and school leaders can focus on what they do best without becoming overwhelmed with administrative tasks.

Disciplined, achievement-oriented school culture

- Schools are strict and structured with high expectations for student conduct.
- Countless details are intentionally managed to create an overall culture in which achievement is valued and "cool."
- Every student wears a school uniform.

CORE VALUES OF AN ACHIEVEMENT FIRST SCHOOL:

Results without Excuses or Shortcuts

We work hard every day to deliver on our urgent promise to provide an outstanding education for all our students – an education that will help them graduate from college, enhance their lives, become leaders in their communities and enjoy real freedom and citizenship. In pursuit of that mission, we set ambitious, clearly measurable goals and strive to exceed expectations with exceptional regularity. We continually use data to track our progress and to find out where we are doing well and where we are falling short. When we do not meet our goals, we own our shortcomings, admit our mistakes and do not seek to blame external forces. We are not satisfied with "better" results that still leave our students behind their suburban, private school or international peers. We are working to level the playing field so that our students defy all the excuses and enjoy the full privileges of an outstanding education.

People Matter – Mightily

We understand that the quality and commitment of our teachers, school leaders, and other staff are what makes the real difference in the lives of our students. As a result, we put an extraordinary amount of our resources into finding, developing, and retaining great people. We want to make our schools places where great teachers want to teach. We strive to create work environments that are exceptionally professional, collegial and stimulating and where everyone has sufficient support, a real voice, and the tools they need to be successful. We expect all of us to work hard, but we also recognize and honor our personal, family and community commitments. We do not look for individual martyrs or super humans: rather, we give our teachers, school leaders, and staff the tools and support they will need – as a team – to accomplish our ambitious goals for students.

Excellence is a Habit

We strive to set the industry standard in all aspects of what we do. Baked into our culture is a relentless pursuit of excellence, and we do not settle for "so-so" from our students or from ourselves. "Good enough" is simply not. We recognize that we must be a disciplined organization that makes clear plans, establishes tangible goals and has documented replicable systems in order to sustain excellence over time. We do not lurch from one educational fad or new idea to another: rather; we understand the importance of continuous, thoughtful improvement and always strive to do better than before. We carve out time for reflection, research and development, and knowledge documentation in order to make excellence more predictable for ourselves and others. We will grow as fast as we can – but as slow as we must – to ensure excellence in every aspect of our work.

Elm City College Preparatory School (cont.)

Sweat the Small Stuff

We believe that countless unseen or overlooked details are the difference between the mediocre and the magnificent. In everything we do, we pay attention to even the smallest details to ensure smooth, predictable and effective outcomes. We are motivated by the fact that our students pay the price when we fail to get the details right.

Team and Family

We are not islands working alone but integral parts of the larger AF team and family. We share in our collective success while celebrating the individual strengths of each person and school. We care about one another, treat each other with respect, and work hard to preserve a sense of family. We have fun together, even when our responsibilities are taxing. We collaborate and share best practices, never letting competition overshadow the ultimate goal of excellence for every student and school. We respect and celebrate our differences, knowing that we are stronger as a team because of them. When we see our teammates struggling, we pitch in, knowing that our teammates will be there for us when we need it.

First Things First

At ECCP, the needs of students always come before the interests of adults. We prioritize what is best for students first, with teachers, school leaders and central staff working together to ensure every child's needs are met. The central support team never loses sight of our core job, which is to keep distractions and other unnecessary responsibilities away from teachers and school leaders.

Whatever It Takes

We do not take "no" for an answer easily. If there is a way, we find it. We are persistent, insistent and deliberate in our actions. As our students climb the mountain to college through hard work, we do whatever it takes to help them be successful along their journey. We give one hundred percent every day and go the extra mile to make the difference in the lives of our students. We also understand that "whatever it takes" is a team mandate, with different individuals taking the lead at different times to ensure that our goals are accomplished.

Many Minds One Mission

Working together with our parents and supporters, we strive to ensure that our efforts are part of a larger effort to improve the communities in which we live and work. We are also partners in a national effort to ensure that every child has access to a first-class education. We understand that we cannot do this alone, and we eagerly collaborate with others around the country who is working to make a difference in the lives of children. We are inspired by those who are pioneering new approaches to raising student achievement, and we are eager to learn from the best practices of these high-performing schools, districts, and other organizations. In return, we are willing to share our successful strategies with other educational organizations in our communities and beyond.

Everything with Integrity

We value integrity and always model it for our students. The REACH values –Respect, Enthusiasm, Achievement, Citizenship and Hard Work – are not merely posted on the wall for students; they are also our professional values and drive our words and actions as adults. We consider the impact our actions will have on others and work carefully to be transparent and fair. We admit our mistakes and work to make them right. Even when we are successful, we are humble and understand that we always have more to learn.

MISSION

"...will strengthen the academic and character skills necessary for all students to excel in the top tier of high schools and colleges, to achieve success in a competitive world, and to serve as the next generation of leaders in their communities."

School Name:	Explorations Charter School
Contact Person:	Gail Srebnik Executive Director Explorations Charter School The Brian J. O'Neil Building 71 Spencer Street Winsted, CT 06098 Telephone: 860-738-9070 Grades: 10-12

BEST PRACTICES

Charter schools, especially those with good parent support, can undertake the needed educational approach that will satisfy the needs of our economy. But, more importantly, they emphasize the individualized path to lifelong learning that extends into every aspect of a student's life for many years to come. The emphasis on lifelong learning prepares the child to have a *life*, not an entitlement. I believe that Explorations does work towards this end. A major key to the success we have with students is our commitment to keeping an atmosphere that is safe and open to discussion.

Here are a few comments on this taken by me from an English class assignment on the first days of the school year. When asked how students felt about being safe in school:

“...Before I came to Explorations I went to WHS and LHS. In WHS there were cops at my school. ...I go to Explorations now and I have not seen any cops or violence...I feel safe in this school ...”

“...In comparison to the two schools I came from this school has no violence. I haven't seen a fight...lot of fights went down in my other HS and I didn't feel safe. This school is kind of like a safe-haven...”

“...The last high school I was at didn't feel safe at all. About one or two fights happened every day and teachers didn't do much to stop bullying or racial comments. At Explorations you aren't judged as much and there are definitely no fights. The teachers also do a lot more.”

Our teacher to pupil ratio ranges from a low of 1:4 to a high of 1:17. Most of our classes are kept to 14 or less students. By keeping class size low our staff is able to not only meet individual needs but to also foster a dialogue between generations.

We work with our special education program (teacher and tutors) to provide modifications for students in need. We are able to offer enrichment programs to gifted learners as well as helping them take advantage of the community college partnership program. We are a community that is nurturing and supportive of all learners. Our atmosphere is relaxed and students who have previously not experienced academic success are able to finally 'buy-into' a program that they feel connected to. Belonging is often a key to getting involved for teens. Our outward-bound, type, philosophy focuses on individual accomplishment while developing trust, camaraderie and team spirit. Working on challenges along with their teachers helps students form stronger bonds with them and these connections carry over into the classrooms. Our career education program brings students and businesses together where students learn firsthand that learning is a lifelong activity.

Finally, our connection to families helps us involve parents in their children's education. We require that parents, with few exceptions, attend a minimum of four parent meetings a year. The staff is given the responsibility to act as advisor to a group of students and to make contact with parents on a monthly basis on their child's progress. Many parents have started to e-mail the principal to keep on top of their children's program and this is welcomed and looked upon favorably.

MISSION

“...to provide a public school that cultivates a positive attitude toward life-long learning in an experiential, non-traditional educational setting. EXPLORATIONS Charter School provides an environment that models interdependence as the foundation of society. The program emphasizes activities which foster the acceptance of responsibility, development of positive decision making and problem solving skills; and encourages students to develop a healthy attitude toward their school, community, work, family, and most importantly, toward themselves. Family and community involvement at EXPLORATIONS Charter School demonstrates how each of us takes ownership in contributing to a better future for each other.”

School Name:	Highville Charter School
Contact Person:	William D. Troy Director Highville Charter School 130 Leederhill Drive Hamden, CT 06517 Telephone: 203-287-0528 Grades: PK-7

BEST PRACTICES

A. Certification of all staff

With the significant turnover of Highville Mustard Seed School staff, the new Highville Charter School focused on recruiting staff that demonstrated current certification for all grade and content areas.

B. Formation of PODS

Highville was divided into four academic Pods (groups). Primary grades, PK through Grade 1, Elementary, Grade 2 through Grade 4 and Middle, Grade 5 through Grade 7 (Grade 8 to be reinstated in 2008-09 school year). A leader was selected for each POD to ensure consistent instruction across grade levels and ongoing feedback and communication with administrators.

C. Evaluation

All teachers were evaluated by the Director and Associate Director during the 2007-08 school year. Using both formal observation and informal walk-through observations, administration was able to provide guidance and assistance to all staff. Regular contact with staff created an environment of school wide community support.

D. Intervention Room

To limit out-of-school suspension, Highville created a student intervention program, staffed by a full time teacher. The object of this room was to remind students that the consequence for inappropriate behavior would be temporary removal from the mainstream, reflection in their behavior and continued academic support. This program was well received by teachers and parents based on the premise that the learning environment must still be emphasized even while disciplinary actions are taken.

MISSION

“... an enterprising and caring community with strong parent and community involvement, prepares and instills a desire for all learners to confidently use technology, think globally, develop globally conscious citizenship, utilize world languages and the study of various world cultures as the basis for launching learners on their voyage as responsible navigators, to discover their potential and chart their course through an ever-changing, interdependent and global future.”

School Name:	Integrated Day Charter School
Contact Person:	Anna James Director Integrated Day Charter School 68 Thermos Avenue Norwich, CT 06360 Telephone: 860-892-1900 Grades: Pre-kindergarten - 8

BEST PRACTICES

The Integrated Day Charter School (IDCS) opened its doors in 1997 with full enrollment. It continues to have excellent Connecticut Mastery Test scores and a sizable waiting list. The success of this unique charter school can be attributed to the following factors:

- **Strong Home/School Communication**

The parents and teachers work together to provide the best possible education for all children. A Director’s Coffee provides an open forum for discussion on the second Tuesday of each month. Teachers make home visits prior to the opening of school. Students not working up to potential or experiencing behavioral issues take part in a Home/School Contract program and attend bi-weekly meetings with the student, caregiver, teacher and director, in an effort to improve progress and/ or

Integrated Day (cont.)

behavior. Voice mailboxes are provided to all families to facilitate communication. Caregivers work with staff members to set objectives at student led conferences, which take place in November and March. Workshops designed to raise awareness and support skills of caregivers are provided.

- **Student Input and Meaningful Work**

Personal research projects allow students at all grade levels to have input into what they study and how they present information to their peers. Teachers facilitate by providing feedback using the IDCS Research Rubric and insuring that all students are working at their appropriate academic level. Students reflect on their strengths and weaknesses, set personal goals and write self-evaluation papers three times each year. All IDCS classes take part in service learning projects that are identified by the students, themselves. Teachers ensure that curriculum objectives are integrated into projects that are chosen by and meaningful to the students involved.

- **Differentiated Instruction**

The individual differences of the students are considered as teachers plan large, small and individual lessons in core academic subjects. An early literacy program has been established that provides a wealth of materials, including a core reading program, that meet individual needs as identified through on-going assessment. Supplemental instruction, beginning in kindergarten, is provided for students identified as being at risk. Task analysis, direct instruction, assessment and remedial lessons are the core components of the mathematics program, supplemented by the textbook. Research projects are highly individualized and meet the needs of the child. A strong literature based literacy program has resulted in excellent test scores. Class novels provide the framework for addressing curriculum objectives and small group literature circles provide the forum for meeting the needs of all students.

Community Building

In a 2003 study conducted by Dr. William Preble, of New England College, it was found that the school climate at IDCS was particularly positive. All teachers have been trained in techniques to provide a healthy, positive classroom and school environment. Parents, volunteers, paraprofessionals and staff members are made aware of the basic tenets of the program. The governance at IDCS encourages involvement of all stakeholders in the school. Parents, teachers and community members are represented equally on the IDCS Board of Directors. Students, parents and teachers are members of the School Council and meet monthly to review policies and programs for approval by the Board. Student Council representatives from each class meet with the director monthly. Teachers are the primary members of the hiring committee and conduct three interviews with potential candidates. The final interview and hiring is with the director. Parents and Board members may take part in the hiring process.

- **Arts and Physical Fitness**

The arts are not considered enrichment, but are an integral part of the educational program. Art instruction is provided in the classroom, in the studio and during individual workshops, by appointment. Student work is displayed on every wall, pottery and three-dimensional projects are displayed throughout the school. The IDCS does not have a gymnasium, and therefore physical education takes place primarily in the community. Swimming, ice skating, gymnastics, bowling, rope and rock climbing classes, dance and track are carried out at the YMCA and other community facilities. While other schools have been forced to cut instrumental music lessons, Suzuki violin lessons have been extended down to the preschool students. The arts are embraced and valued at IDCS.

- **High Standards for All**

All members of the IDCS learning community understand that they are part of a special institution. Standards are high for all involved. Teachers are expected to serve on multiple committees and attend a multitude of meetings. Professional development is valued. Abbreviated days for students provide time for mandatory, whole staff professional development opportunities designed to perfect the art and craft of teaching. The absence of numerical or letter grades simply means that all students should be challenged and working up to their potential. A perfect score simply means the objective should be modified.

MISSION

“... to provide a flexible and academically challenging atmosphere, which allows for the individual difference of the learners. Parents, students and instructors will work together to establish a developmentally appropriate program for each student. Character development and direct instruction in a social curriculum are an integral part of the program. A commitment to and involvement in the school community, as well as the larger Norwich community, are fostered.”

School Name:	Interdistrict School for the Arts and Communication
Contact Person:	Dr. Lloyd Johnson Executive Director Interdistrict School for the Arts and Communication 190 Governor Winthrop Blvd. New London, CT 06360 Telephone: 860-447-1003 Grades: 6-8

BEST PRACTICES

ISAAC’s Social Curriculum

Critical to Interdistrict School for the Arts and Communication’s (ISAAC) mission is a program to support the social and emotional growth and well-being of our students. ISAAC’s teachers selected the Responsive Classroom (RC) approach to incorporate into our school and initially, all teachers were trained by the Northeast Foundation for Children. Staff implemented RC after having worked together to make the program appropriate for middle school students. It has become vital to our school culture. It helps our students reflect on their behavior, understand the consequences of their actions, learn to support each other as members of a community and learn to take responsibility for their learning. Furthermore, it prepares our students well for high school.

When we became an expeditionary learning school, we saw how the principles of that academic program supported our RC approach. We changed our schedule to provide regular time for students to meet with an adult in a small group (“crew”), get support and work on a community service project together. We instituted opportunities to recognize students for positive behavior both academically and socially through all-school celebrations, award ceremonies and expedition celebrations.

The Director of Student Life position was created to oversee this positive program and to train new staff and ensure all staff was implementing the program uniformly throughout the school.

Learning Expeditions and Outdoor Expeditions

Each year, teachers plan integrated projects that focus on a central theme. These projects are Learning Expeditions. The Learning Expedition theme this year was “Human Interaction with Nature.” Students explored this theme throughout the year in all their classes. Their exploration culminated in projects where students demonstrated their learning through the use of oral and written communication, math skills, visual arts and technology. ISAAC students begin each year with camping trips called Outdoor Expeditions. ISAAC partners with the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection to develop educational programs for these Outdoor Expeditions.

MISSION

“...dedicated to being an experiential learning community where students, families and teachers are challenged to discover and express the best in themselves and each other while valuing the diversity in our school, our community and the world.”

School Name:	Jumoke Academy	
Contact Person:	Jumoke Academy Charter School Michael M. Sharpe, Chief Executive Director 250 Blue Hills Avenue Hartford, CT 06112 Telephone: 860-527-0575 Grades: PK-5	Jumoke Academy Honors Middle School Doreen Crawford, Principal 339 Blue Hills Avenue Hartford, CT 06112 Telephone: 860-527-0575 x130 Grades: 6-8

BEST PRACTICES

Reading First

The Reading First program is used to provide support for the application of the Scientifically-Based Reading Research (SBRR) and the proven instructional and assessment tools consistent with this research. This support was chosen to ensure that all children can read on or above grade level by the end of third grade.

The Reading First program was implemented by hiring an internal literacy facilitator and acquiring an external literacy facilitator. These support personnel provide the support to the classroom teachers on a daily basis. The facilitators assist the teachers in administering formative assessments. These assessments include Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), The Quick Phonics Screener, Rubin/Bernhardt Phonemic Awareness Survey, informal running records and DIBELS

Jumoke Academy (cont.)

progress monitoring. These assessments allowed the facilitators and classroom teachers to collaborate and individualize the instruction needed for Explicit Small Group Instruction. Grade level teams were initiated in March, to assess the data provided from the assessments and plans were implemented and monitored for all of the lower achieving students (Tier 3 students).

The Explicit Small Group Instruction is imperative to each students learning. The teacher is able to meet with three small groups each day, meeting with the neediest students daily and the less needy students less frequently. The facilitators also worked with the classroom teachers to coordinate a schedule that would allow tutors and paraprofessionals to work closely with the students to maximize time-on-task for all students. These practices are consistent with the direction of the State of Connecticut module: Explicit Small Group Instruction.

During the summer of 2006, the K-3 teachers attended the Reading First Summer Institute. The Institute was held locally and the teachers were allowed to choose specific workshops that would help them plan and implement new techniques and strategies in the classroom. Other professional development in Code instruction was provided in grade level meetings, based on the State of Connecticut Module, Explicit and Differentiated Code Instruction, with specific activities modeled during grade level meetings and in the classrooms.

The practice of the Reading First Program was successful at correcting the situation using the Quick Phonics Screener. Many students made progress in this area, however it also showed that some students whose deficits were exceeded their improvements and needed more time than what was provided to them. A review of the DIBELS scores at mid-year was encouraging, with the exception of Grade 2, students showed increased growth from fall to winter on all components of the DIBELS (fluency) assessments than their students in the previous year.

Throughout the school year, the classroom teachers coupled with the facilitators would discuss what strategies would be implemented to assist particular student's success in the needed areas. In March, it was found that Data Teams should be developed to monitor the progress of the neediest students (Tier 3). Grades K-3 also began using Lexia software mid-year. This software was provided to reinforce Code Instruction. It was helpful in differentiating practice for students, both in frequency of practice and level of instruction. It was utilized during the 45-minute per week media period and in classroom centers. These changes were implemented to more individualize the instruction to the neediest students.

Looking forward to the 2009-10 school year, we plan on changing the tutor schedule to allow all teachers to have time for whole group instruction before beginning small group instruction. The tutors will also be provided in pairs to each grade level so that they may provide tutoring services to both classrooms at one grade level at one time. This will allow for more flexible scheduling, based on student needs, including cross-classroom groupings if student needs dictate. Grade level data teams have been working since the Fall of 2007. The classroom teachers will also be more systematic in the use of informal running records to monitor student progress.

Further improvements that we envision for the future, are to standardize lesson formats for Explicit Small Group Instruction, as well as coaching and information provided to classroom teachers, tutors and paraprofessionals in all Reading First strands; Phonemic Awareness, Phonics, Vocabulary, Fluency and Comprehension. A fluency practice will also be incorporated into the daily schedule through choral reading with a monthly "share" at a Reading First Morning Meeting. The high correlation of the ORF (Oral Reading Fluency) Assessment of the DIBELS makes this a mandatory starting point to "dig deeper" into the cause and remediation of poor fluency.

We anticipate that these improvements will have a direct correlation to student success shown in DIBELS assessments and the Connecticut Mastery Tests.

Responsive Classroom

In June of 2006, Jumoke Academy decided to implement the Responsive Classroom approach in September of 2006. We decided on this practice to promote better classroom management, to further develop the school community, and to increase attendance amongst the students. We wanted to design a professional staff development plan that reflects our mission "...to prepare children to compete in the global market place, even as they now face social and economic challenges." The entire staff attended a weeklong training in June 2006 and we had follow up meetings and discussions throughout the school year.

The Responsive Classroom method of teaching and learning consists of sensible strategies for bringing together social and academic learning everyday. The basic beliefs of this approach are that it is important to know children individually, culturally, and developmentally, and academic learning happens best within a positive social context. The staff learned how to develop a positive community, use the same language with the students and with each other, uses an inquiry approach to stretch the

Jumoke Academy (cont.)

students’ thinking, and to continue to reinforce respect.

The following components helped the staff accomplish our goals. The first component is the Morning Meeting. This includes a greeting, sharing, group activity, and news and announcements. The objective of the Morning Meeting is to merge social, emotional, and intellectual learning by helping the students feel significant, feel that they belong, and to have fun in a learning environment. The second component is Rules and Logical Consequences. Students learn the skills of discipline, which will help them grow as individuals and as contributors to their community. The students develop skills of ethical and effective problem-solving as well as self-discipline.

They create classroom rules and are provided with logical consequences to help them regain control, make amends, and to get back on track if they forgot or chose not to take care of themselves or each other. The third component is Guided Discovery. This technique is used to introduce materials and working areas to the students to get them acquainted with their new classroom and its many opportunities for learning. The fourth component is Academic Choice. The students are provided with academic choices that allow them to work at their own ability level and be appropriately challenged. By giving the students choices, we are increasing motivation, improving social interaction, thinking and problem-solving skills and we are decreasing problem behaviors. The students take ownership of their learning. The fifth component is Classroom Organization. Everything we put into practice in our classrooms can be supported by the physical environment that we create. The way we organize tells the students that “this room was created for you, with your needs in mind, because you and your learning are important.” The final component of Responsive Classroom is Reaching Out to Parents/Guardians. This component guides the teachers and staff on how to inform the parents/guardians and keep them involved in their child’s life at school. It is important to know the children as well as the parents/guardians.

At our bi-weekly staff meetings, we shared ideas and assessed what was working and not working in our classrooms. We worked collaboratively to make The Responsive Classroom Approach work well in our school. We made sure that the students remained at the center of our decisions about organization, policies and everyday teaching by discussing the negatives and positives of the activities in our classrooms. Then we applied what we had learned using our own teaching styles, against developmental milestones, and offering a variety of learning paths.

After implementing the Responsive Classroom Approach for one year, we found that the students have better social skills and felt more positive about school. Teachers and staff collaborated with each other more, and felt more involved in decision making at Jumoke Academy. With the support of each other and the administration, teachers felt more effective and more positive about their teaching. Using this approach helped us to offer the students more high-quality instruction because we were getting more feedback and we were able to create a positive school climate. The staff was very consistent with the language and routines with the students. We were able to show how important it was to further develop our community by all being on “the same page.” Our daily attendance jumped to 97.5 percent. By maintaining our goals and working cooperatively, we had less behavior issues and we showed increases in our CMT scores.

MISSION

“...to prepare children to successfully compete in the global marketplace despite the social and economic challenges they may presently face. The academy is dedicated to rigorous academic and social standards achieved by holding high expectations for all students during challenging instruction.”

School Name:	New Beginnings Family Academy
Contact Person:	Paul Whyte Principal New Beginnings Family Academy 184 Garden Street Bridgeport, CT 06605 Telephone: 203-384-2897 Grades: K-8

BEST PRACTICES

At New Beginnings Family Academy, we employ a number of unique practices that other districts may benefit from. These include a Guided Study Program designed to meet the individual needs of every student, morning meetings, school uniforms and a 200-day school year. These practices are intended not only to augment the rigors of our academic curriculum, but also to cultivate an atmosphere of cohesion and cooperative interdependence among students of all grade levels.

New Beginnings Family Academy (cont.)

Best Practice #1:

The Guided Study Program provides remediation and enrichment services to students, based on teacher referrals. In addition to providing recovery in mathematics, reading and writing to struggling students, advanced learners are exposed to such new skills as dance, guitar, drill team, Spanish and others.

Best Practice #2:

During morning meetings, students in every grade level gather together to receive reinforcement of their positive attributes. During this time, outstanding classroom behavior is recognized, and older students are given the opportunity to serve as role models for the lower grades.

Best Practice #3:

School uniforms encourage students to work together in uniformity by eliminating a significant element of distraction. We, at New Beginnings Family Academy, have found that uniforms create a classroom environment more conducive to learning.

Best Practice #4:

“Summer Academy” provides an extra 20 days of education for our students. This additional instruction has proven invaluable in reducing the effects of the summer regression that most students experience.

Best Practice #5:

Our extended year component, which was renamed “Summer Academy” during the 2007-08 academic year, provides an extra 20 days of education for our students. This additional instruction has proven invaluable in reducing the effects of the summer regression that most students experience.

Together, these best practices have enriched the quality of education provided to New Beginnings students and positively impacted the environment in which they learn.

MISSION

“...provides each student with a superior education that creates high academic achievement and the intellectual foundation to make sound, ethical judgments in an environment of innovation and cooperation among the whole school community.”

School Name: **Odyssey Community School**

Contact Person:

Elaine Stancliffe
Executive Director
Odyssey Community School
579 West Middle Turnpike
Manchester, CT 06040
Telephone: 860-645-1234
Grades: 4-8

BEST PRACTICES

Odyssey Community School continues to employ a variety of research-based practices that contribute to student achievement.

Best Practice 1: Implementation of Saxon Math Curriculum

In an effort to address math scores on the CMT, Odyssey Community School piloted a new math program in Grade 6 during the 2007-08 year. All sixth grade students were taught from the Saxon Math Course one program. Highlights of the material include:

- distributed units of instruction which provide the time for every student to master the standards;
- integrated learning, which results in students developing and retaining a deep understanding of mathematics;
- incremental learning, which provides a built-in system for tracking and benchmarking student mastery of every part of the standards.

Sixth grade teachers were trained in the use and delivery of the Saxon Math program. As evidence of the efficacy of this program, we examined data from the 2008 CMTs:

Fifty –four and half percent of students in Grade 6 prior to the use of the Saxon Math materials scored at the proficient level and 21.2 percent scored at Goal. After implementation of the Saxon Math program, 88 percent of students scored at the proficient level and 58.8 percent scored at goal. These scores represent an increase of 33.7 percent at the proficient level, and an increase

Odyssey School (cont.)

of 37.6 percent at the goal level.

The most effective tool we used to ensure successful implementation of this practice was to ensure that the teachers who were piloting the program were fully competent and enthusiastic about using it. Their high level of buy-in ensured that the program would be delivered in a formal, structured manner.

We implemented the Saxon Math program across all grade levels in September 2008.

Best Practice 2: Advisory Program and Character Education

Students learn best in schools where they feel safe both physically and emotionally and where the culture and climate of the school is positive and respectful. Research has shown that a strong character education program contributes to a positive school climate, which in turn contributes to higher student achievement.

Odyssey’s Advisory Program provides a setting for one adult to interact with a small group of students. The Advisory Program has been a part of Odyssey since the school’s inception. The Advisor acts as an advocate for his or her students, and maintains an awareness of the academic and behavioral progress of each student in the advisory. The formal Advisory curriculum is spiral in nature, and can be categorized in three distinct areas—strengthening academic abilities, improving social skills and developing personal strengths.

As evidence of the efficacy of the Advisory Program in improving student achievement, we turn to parent and student surveys conducted on an annual basis. The vast majority of those surveyed pointed to the positive school climate as a major factor in their success in school.

We intend to continue to develop our Advisory Program, and will provide professional development on the sustainability and growth of a robust Advisory Program to our instructional staff.

MISSION

“...provides a positive intermediate elementary and middle school experience that emphasizes academic excellence, the ability to communicate effectively using traditional and technological media and the development of strong character and self-confidence. The unique mind and heart of each child is nurtured as students are taught to internalize the CIRCLE values (Courage, Integrity, Respect, Curiosity, Leadership and Excellence) and to become productive members of their community.”

School Name: Park City Prep Charter School

Contact Person: Bruce Ravage
Executive Director
Park City Prep Charter School
510 Barnum Avenue, 2nd floor
Bridgeport, CT 06608
Telephone: 203-953-3766
Grades: 6-8

BEST PRACTICES

High School Placements

The Guidance Counselor and Director devoted a great deal of time and effort in guiding and supporting our eighth graders in gaining admission to “choice” public and private high schools. This past year, more than 75 percent of our graduates were accepted to one or more of these selective schools. We believe that it is critical that our students go on to a high school with the right kind of environment in which they can excel. By sending them to the more selective and competitive high schools, our students are more likely to be among more students who are focused on academics and have ambitions of successful careers than if they were to attend classes in the local high schools whose “drop-out” rates are frighteningly high. This year, we are aiming for at least 90 percent of our eighth grade students to gain admission to such selective schools. Last year, we added Notre Dame, Fairfield Prep, St. Joseph’s and Laurelton Hall. This year we expect to increase the number admitted to those schools and expand the options for our graduates to include a number of new independent day and boarding schools, as well.

Park City Prep Charter School (cont.)

Classroom Management

Classroom management continued to be a major focus in year two, just as it was in our first year. Our regularly scheduled faculty meetings (often twice per week after school, were largely devoted to training teachers in effective classroom management techniques). In addition, regular visits to the classrooms by the Director and Assistant Director, further guided the teachers. Teachers were also provided with regular opportunities to view lessons in the classrooms of colleagues who were already skilled in such practices. Despite our best efforts to provide our teachers with information, training and support, a sizeable number of our teachers still struggled to create an environment in their classrooms that was conducive to effective learning. Five of last year’s 12 teachers were replaced for the 2007-08 year and one new position was added, as well, a self-contained grade six class. The new Dean of Students position was also eliminated, as it proved ineffective. With the support of our Board of Directors, we launched an aggressive campaign to hire the most qualified teachers to replace those were not effective, and provide those who were effective with incentives to return. The result was that we were much better poised for the 2008-09 school year to see significant improvement in students’ performance. With more effective classroom managers in place, it is expected that the environment in the classroom will become increasingly conducive to learning, resulting in improved student performance.

Inquiry-Based Science

Students must have the opportunity to explore and discover in the same way that real scientists practice. The cornerstone of our science course is the Science Education for Public Understanding (SEPUP) program, a “hands-on”, issues-oriented series of actual investigations in which students conduct experiments in the areas of life, physical and earth science, designed to enable them to learn the skills involved in genuine scientific inquiry and understand the relevance of science in the real world. In order to be certain that the skills and understandings needed to demonstrate proficiency on the science CMT’s will be covered, consistent with the science curriculum frameworks, some additional inquiry-based resources have been added to enhance what is covered in the SEPUP instructional program. We intend to maintain the program in use but make certain “student-friendly” modifications. Further, teachers are receiving training from SEPUP representatives as well as attending various on-going professional development at various workshops. Inquiry-based science, the foundation of our science program, demands exceptional classroom management in order to be effective. Again, with a new science teacher in place for 2008-09, positive change is expected.

MISSION

“...promote academic excellence and foster interest and competence in math, science and technology and raise the level of performance of middle school students from communities historically under-represented in the fields of science, technology and math.”

School Name: Side by Side Community School

Contact Person: Matthew Nittoly
Director
Side by Side Community School
10 Chestnut Street
South Norwalk, CT 06854
Telephone: 203-857-0306
Grades: PK-8

BEST PRACTICES

Much of the emphasis on instruction and assessment at Side by Side has recently evolved based on the teachings and trainings of the Connecticut Accountability for Learning Initiative (CALI). Thus, it can be said that the ‘Best Practices’ of teaching at Side by Side in 2007-08 were based on this approach.

CT Accountability for Learning Initiative at Side by Side Community School: In response to the feedback from the Connecticut State Department of Education Charter Renewal proceedings, our student Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT) scores, as well as to previously self-identified areas in need of improvement, Side by Side Community School’s preliminary School Improvement Team was formed in June 2007 in an effort to distinguish areas in need of further development and expansion in relation to curriculum, assessment, and instruction. Since forming, the team broke down the areas in need of improvement into three categories: data collection and analysis, assessment and evaluation of student progress, and curriculum/standard alignment. As a result, our first efforts have been focused on providing the professional development, collaborative time, and administrative support and guidance required to address these three focus areas.

Side by Side (cont.)

In early Fall 2007, it was decided that teachers would have release time from 2-4 p.m. on Wednesdays to continue the efforts made during the 2006-07 school year toward creating a consistent, systemic way to align curriculum with the CT standards. Teachers and Administrators have been looking at curriculum areas, identifying standards needing to be covered based on the Connecticut frameworks, and creating timelines for covering the identified grade level standards. The goal has been to decide scope and sequence of curriculum for the purpose of creating and/or implementing new systems of evaluation. Exploration of possible assessments was conducted at this time. This preliminary work has led to the purchase of more rigorous formative assessments in the areas of mathematics and reading that will be used school wide to provide the data required to make informed decisions regarding instruction and interventions. These assessments were chosen based upon their ability to meet several criteria; their ability to inform the data decision team, their compatibility with the school's mission statement and philosophy, and their affordability.

The first curriculum area addressed has been mathematics. Curriculum was more tightly aligned to the Connecticut frameworks, and the "Exemplars" standards based instruction and assessment program was purchased and implemented. Aligned with both national and state standards, Exemplars provides both student and teacher centered rubrics, as well as a systematized, school wide assessment system that lends itself to ongoing curriculum work. Differentiation is also built in to each of the performance tasks, so that all learners may access the assessment, instruction and have valid and accurate data gathered on their achievement levels. Side by Side is in the early phases of implementing this system, with teachers trying out initial performance tasks and following up with collaboration in regards to scoring during their Wednesday professional development time.

To address the area of formative assessment in regards to reading, the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System was purchased. This system was chosen based upon several specific criteria as well. Firstly, it places students on a gradient which aligns with our current 100 Book Challenge, a program that over the last 5 years has served to successfully motivate reluctant readers. Secondly, it contains a DRA component as required by the Connecticut Department of Education for all reading programs. It also 34 provides a detailed and quantifiable assessment of reading comprehension, as well as links assessment to instruction to meet students' specific, individual needs. Lastly, it is an efficient way to collect data, as it provides recording forms, checklists, and other data management resources. This system will be launched by late January.

Assessment was only one part of the curriculum and instruction work that has been occurring here at Side by Side. Beginning in late fall, and continuing as part of an ongoing process, faculty and administration also began to move into the data collection and analysis phase. Student work is being collected and sorted in data carts for purposes of analysis designed to inform instruction and determine interventions. Integral to this phase is participation in the Connecticut Accountability Learning Initiative. As part of the Connecticut Accountability Learning Initiative, administrators have attended a series of trainings designed to assist schools who have been identified as underperforming on the CMT's. These trainings were primarily in the areas of assessment and evaluation, with sub-topics categorized as data-driven decision making, standards based curriculum, and common formative assessments. Administrators brought the information gained at these trainings to the Wednesday all-teacher collaborations in order to begin expanding, enriching and implementing the three-tier assessment plan created by the School Improvement Team over the summer. This process has involved:

- a) The creation and/or implementation of formative assessments to be administered minimally three times a year as an effort to consistently obtain current, accurate data to inform instruction and identify the need for interventions
- b) Structured, collaborative analysis of collected data, particularly of student work/products gathered in the student data carts
- c) The review of rubrics and other assessment and evaluation tools in regards to their efficacy and accuracy of measuring student progress
- d) Making referrals to the Title I and ELL interventions, and deciding upon appropriate and effective interventions (see intervention flow chart attached)

Inherent in this process is the belief that the data-driven decision making process should be teacher driven, and thus the school improvement team should allow the restructuring of the assessment and evaluation process at Side by Side to be guided by their teaching styles and philosophies. The Data Team and the Three-Tier Assessment Plan are efforts to enhance and expand upon curriculum and instruction, not to alter the basic philosophies underlying the teaching and learning process. This plan intrinsically will focus on considering how to organize and design classroom process and products to show evidence of learning.

In addition to the model of 'accountability for learning' approach that has been implemented, the following practices were employed at Side by Side School during the 2007-08 school year and were most effective at fostering high academic achievement from our students.

Side by Side (cont.)

A.U.S.S.I.E (Australian United States Services in Education) Literacy Program

This literacy program was initiated five years ago and continues under the auspices of an Early Reading Success grant. The program affords us the opportunity of a literacy specialist who is on site and provides direct instruction to the teachers.

- Stated goals are to support teachers in developing understandings and strategies for supporting ‘at risk’ children using a variety of instructional practices and to establish “differentiated instruction” at the classroom level.
- The literacy consultant works directly with the teachers, utilizing co-teaching models, collaborative planning and the provision of immediate feedback as tools for enhancing instruction. In addition, the specialist models lessons for the teacher to observe. This same practice has been used to improve writing. For their professional development piece, the staff created a literacy curricular map to identify exactly when and how each skill is taught.
- Professional development topics have included phonological awareness and instruction, spelling, guided reading, reciprocal teaching strategies, comprehension, summarizing K-3, assessment in reading and differentiation for small group instruction.
- Using an ongoing assessment of the DRA, the writing map and a developmental writing continuum, the reading and writing evaluation of each student is continually monitored and shows marked improvement.
- Time was allotted for planning, mapping, and professional development.
- A math specialist was made available for ten hours of direct consultation throughout the school year. She worked with teachers in aligning the school’s math curriculum with the Connecticut Mathematics frameworks. The goal was to ensure a standards based curriculum that would form a continuum throughout a child’s eight-year educational experience at Side by Side.

100 Book Challenge

- This practice, first adopted because teachers saw a need for books to be available for students in their homes, has continued to be successful throughout the 2007-08 school year. Wrapping up its fourth year, this challenge fosters enthusiasm and provides the resources necessary to foster early literacy skills and habits.
- In every classroom, students are able to identify the right level book for them, take it home, read for a half hour and then have a parent sign the reading log to verify the time. Ongoing professional development was provided to the staff to support them as they continue to implement this challenge.
- The most successful part of the plan continues to be parental involvement. Increased interest was taken in what the children were reading and monitoring the fact that it was happening. The most success came from the ELL students and the middle of the road students who started to make continual progress.

English Language Learners

ELL students are a growing part of our school’s population. Because of this, a great emphasis is placed on ensuring that the practices of our teachers enable these students to successfully access the curriculum.

A. ELL Program/Model Structure Description

In keeping with Side by Side’s mission to reflect and enhance the diversity of our community, our Title III instructional program is based on a push-in inclusion model, with an emphasis on collaboration between head teachers, assistant teachers, and the ELL push-in teacher. The goal is to provide targeted support services to our English Language Learners based upon the standards outlined in the Connecticut Curriculum Frameworks. English is the language used for instruction at all grade levels.

In kindergarten through fourth grade, students remain in one classroom with the same teachers throughout the day. Individualized goals are developed for ELLs using data from standardized assessments (including LAS Links) as well as qualitative observations and evaluations. Strategies are implemented to achieve these goals through one-on-one support (provided by the classroom teachers and ELL push-in teacher) and small group work, designed to meet the needs of the ELLs. For the content areas, classroom teachers work with the ELL push-in teacher to ensure that language is used in ways that make it understandable to the learner, even though English language proficiency is in progress. In other words, the ELLs receive comprehensible input.

In fifth grade through eighth grade, students rotate classrooms and teachers throughout the day for different content areas. Again, individualized goals are developed for ELLs using data from standardized assessments (including LAS Links) as well as qualitative observations and evaluations. The ELL push-in teacher works with the content area teachers to integrate these goals in each content area classroom. Comprehensible input is emphasized.

Side by Side (cont.)

B. Description of Instructional Classroom Strategies/Practices

The major classroom practices and strategies teachers use when working with ELLs include the following:

- Increasing Comprehensibility - Drawing from Krashen's theory of comprehensible input, this principle involves the ways in which teachers can make content more understandable to their students. Specific strategies include providing many nonverbal clues such as pictures, objects, demonstrations, gestures and intonation cues; building from language that is already understood; using graphic organizers; hands-on learning opportunities; and cooperative or peer tutoring techniques.
- Increasing Interaction - Drawing from Swain's emphasis on comprehensible output, a number of strategies have been developed that increase students' opportunities to use their language skills in direct communication and for the purpose of "negotiating meaning" in real-life situations. These include cooperative learning, study buddies, project-based learning, and one-to-one teacher/student interactions.
- Increasing Thinking/Study Skills - Drawing from Cummins' theories of academic language and cognitively demanding communication, these strategies suggest ways to develop more advanced, higher order thinking skills as a student's competency increases. Chamot and O'Malley (1994) developed the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA) to bridge the gap between Cummins's theories and actual classroom strategies. These include asking students higher order thinking questions (e.g., what would happen if...?), modeling "thinking language" by thinking aloud, explicitly teaching and reinforcing study skills and test-taking skills, and holding high expectations for all students.

Some of the strategies used for specific content areas include the following:

- Literacy: "Language Experience" approach (using students' words to create a text that becomes material for a reading lesson), dialogue/interactive journals (students write in a journal, and the teacher writes back regularly, responding to questions, asking questions, making comments, or introducing new topics - the teacher does not evaluate what is written, but models correct language and provides a non-threatening opportunity for ELL students to communicate in writing with someone proficient in English, and to receive some feedback), readers' theater (formatting a story like a script so that a small group of students presents the story to the class - this strategy allows students opportunities to have repeated exposure to the same text, experience the simultaneous visual and auditory presentation of words as they follow the script, and offers an engaging way for ELLs to hear peers model fluent English).
- Mathematics: multimodal learning (using pictures and manipulatives to help illustrate concepts), flexible means of representation (allowing students to present their learning in flexible ways, such as drawing, using math tools instead of writing, etc.).
- Social Studies & Science: anticipation guides for textbook readings (questions and activities for students to engage in before reading in order to activate prior knowledge and form a purpose for reading), targeted vocabulary development (creating picture dictionaries for new vocabulary, word maps, vocabulary games, social studies/science unit word walls), hands-on investigations/experiments.

MISSION

"...to ensure that every child succeeds and every voice is heard. We will engage our students in a challenging and relevant curriculum of the highest standard that will reflect and enhance their diversity and promote their unique gifts and talents. We will build character and responsibility through public service and political action that will instill a sense of social justice. We will support the needs of our families. We will strive to perfect the art and craft of teaching and promote excellence in our profession."

School Name:	Stamford Academy
Contact Person:	Michael McGuire Director Stamford Academy 229 North Street Stamford, CT 06092 Telephone: 203-324-6300 Grades: 9-12

BEST PRACTICES

Academic Best Practices

Staff Certification – In accordance with best practices all teachers and administrators held current certifications in their subject area.

Teacher Meetings – Held weekly on Fridays. All teachers met and discussed a variety of issues. In addition, this time was dedicated to the professional development of each teacher. Topics included Socratic methods, peer coaching, mentoring and other professional development topics as selected by the Director of Curriculum.

Supervision – Each teacher was required to meet with the Director of Curriculum and discuss pedagogical issues. Teachers were mentored by the Curriculum Director on a variety of topics including lesson plans, classroom management and other teaching techniques. In addition, the Curriculum Director was responsible for weekly professional development updates on all teachers.

Schoolwide Projects – As described in this report, all students participated in schoolwide projects. The students were graded cross-curricular. The two projects this year were: Black History and Flight.

Social Best Practices

Risk Management - Once a month during our weekly staff meeting, we engaged in an activity called Risk Management. This process was modeled after the meeting of medical professionals at Boston Children’s Hospital. During the hour-long process, a staff member presents a difficult issue that they encountered over the past month. In a structured and facilitated way, the entire staff walks the presenting staff member through a series of questions and suggestions about how to deal with a similar event in the future.

Family Advocacy – All students were assigned a family advocate whose job it was to take the social and emotional temperature of the child each day when they arrived at school. In addition, they met with each child once per week for 30 minutes. At this meeting they constructed and reviewed the current 90-day social and emotional plan. They were also required to meet with each family once a month at their place of residence. They also had the responsibility of advocating for the child during discipline meeting and during other educational functions.

Family Centers, Inc. – Based on the premise that a happy child is a productive child, all students that apply and go to Stamford Academy agree to some form of counseling. During the past year, most were involved in group sessions with topics ranging from teenage life to drug and alcohol abuse. Others required one-on-one sessions and they were seen weekly by a clinician.

Supervision – All employees receive weekly supervision. This social service model is designed to allow employees a forum for issues, give them a platform for professional development and provides an open communication stream with supervisors.

MISSION

“... to re-engage and guide students in acknowledging and developing their educational strengths while acquiring the skills to contribute positively to themselves and their community.”

School Name:	Trailblazers Academy
Contact Person:	Craig Baker Director Trailblazers Academy P.O. Box 359 Stamford, CT 06904 Telephone: 203-977-5690 Grades: 6-8

BEST PRACTICES

Critical Friends Group

Trailblazers Academy adopted the Critical Friends Group approach during the 2005-06 school year. This decision was based on the staff's desire to improve the professional learning community by creating an environment where teachers felt safe to share pieces of student work and ask for constructive criticism and other input from colleagues. Much of the process focused specifically on how to address the needs of reluctant and below-grade-level students. Over the course of the 2007-08 school year, we adapted the CFG process to include a clear focus on differentiated instruction strategies.

We continue to use as a guiding question, "How does Trailblazers Academy respond when students don't learn?" The conversation around this question is based on the model presented by Richard DuFour in his book *Whatever It Takes*. Throughout the year we continued to come back to this question with a clear focus on creating a timely, systematic and directive response based on intervention rather than remediation.

Over the course of the 2008-09 school year, we will continue to strengthen our intervention practices based on these differentiated instruction strategies. We will begin with a review of all four strategies and move into Professional Growth Teams based on grade level. We believe that one of our strongest features is the consistency we provide to our students. It was decided that we will be able to offer better services to our students if all teachers in the same grade level research, practice, and discuss the same strategy for an extended period of time. Teachers will be given approximately one hour each Friday to work with their teams and take turns sharing progress with the larger staff.

While strengthening our intervention practices we will also move toward the implementation of Common Formative Assessments. We anticipate support from the Connecticut Department of Education as we work toward our school improvement goals.

Curriculum Alignment and Power Standards

Like many schools across Connecticut, Trailblazers Academy will continue to follow the statewide initiative to improve student performance by developing clear, essential standards and better aligning the curriculum to those standards. Students continue to enter sixth grade at Trailblazers Academy two to five grade levels below in reading and math. By creating clear objectives, designing pre/post assessments and collecting data, we will be able to better pinpoint effective methods and identify the holes in our program.

This process was started in the 2004-05 school year with staff members attending trainings in Making Standards Work and Data-Driven Decision Making. Trained staff then presented materials to the larger staff. Staff members met over the summer of 2005 to revise math and language arts power standards and to create drafts for science and social studies.

During the 2006-07 school year, a final draft of the science and social studies power standards was created. Teachers created a solid year-to-year plan to align these standards to our curriculum. In June of 2007, we purchased supplemental reading material, maps, videos, and lab equipment to support each content area as well as the range of student needs within each grade level. The social studies teachers also created four essential questions that students will discuss and answer each year as they travel from Ancient Civilizations in sixth grade to Geography & World Cultures in seventh grade and end in eighth grade with United States History. We will keep a comprehensive portfolio of student responses to show growth from sixth grade to eighth grade.

Weekly Curricular Supervision Meetings

Based on the social work model of having weekly clinical supervision meetings, our Director of Curriculum meets with each teacher for a minimum of 30 minutes per week. During this time, the Director of Curriculum is able to ask questions about lesson plans, choices of modes of instruction and needed support. This time is also an opportunity for the teacher to bounce ideas

Trailblazers Academy (cont.)

off a master teacher and converse about both struggles and successes in the classroom. Coupled with classroom observations, this is a professional development tool that is meaningful and consistent throughout the year.

MISSION

“...to hold all students to high academic expectations. While maintaining small classes and fostering positive relationships, the school builds a strong academic foundation for each student by emphasizing core subjects, basic skills and character development.”