

Building a Learning Community Part V:

A Portrait of Public School 51 in New York City's Community School District #2

By Christie Hudson
August 31, 2001

District #2's Strategy for Improvement

For well over a decade now New York City's Community School District #2 has been working to improve student achievement through a system-wide, content-driven reform effort targeted at the classroom level. At the heart of this reform is a commitment to continuous instructional improvement. Not only does the district expect more out of its students, it challenges its entire body of professionals to continually deepen their understanding of core subject matter, put to use effective instructional tools and achieve results, and, in the case of principals, serve as effective instructional leaders. To ensure the success of their reform efforts, District #2 has had to build an infrastructure that supports teachers and leaders in their efforts to deepen their understanding and improve instruction. On-going, consistent and targeted professional development has been the mainstay of this infrastructure, one that needs to be flexible. The schools that make up District #2 are scattered throughout Manhattan and run the gamut of diversity. From Lower Manhattan to the Upper East Side, District #2 serves poor children that live in shelters, children of recent immigrants, the children of stockbrokers, and everything in between. This extreme diversity has led the district to create an infrastructure that allows the level and intensity of support provided to schools to be tailored to their individual needs.

In this companion piece to the High Performance Learning Community's Video #5, we explore in-depth the story of one school in District #2, PS 51, a school where the district's reform efforts have had a visible and positive effect. Once a struggling school, it now stands as one of District #2's most impressive success stories, having beat the odds and made great strides in both the quality of instruction and extent of student achievement. We introduce you to the

kind of place PS 51 is and explore some of the hallmarks of District #2's improvement strategy that have been key factors behind the school's success: the school's intense focus on literacy; the quality of the professional development provided to their teachers; the strength of the relationship between their on-site staff developer and Gambino; and the instructional leadership Gambino provides. In the final section, we get to the bottom line on student achievement and examine the school's remarkable progress under Gambino's leadership.

PS 51 and a Focus on Literacy

Barbara Gambino began her tenure at PS 51, also known as the Elias Howe School, in the fall of 1995. Then, as now, it was a small school of about 300 students, mostly African-American and Hispanic. Located in the Hell's Kitchen area of Manhattan, it serves one of the poorer student bodies in the district, with nearly one quarter of its students living in shelters and temporary housing. Approximately 85% of the school's students are living below the poverty level. Slightly more than ten percent of the students that attend PS 51 are the children of recent immigrants. Unlike many high-poverty schools however, PS 51 has a relatively stable and well-prepared staff; 60% of the teachers have been at the school more than two years, and the principal has been there over there years. In addition, over 90% of the staff has an advanced degree (City of New York Board of Education, 2000). The middle school grades Gambino has added to the school provides further stability for the children in this neighborhood, giving them the opportunity to remain a part of this small and caring school from pre-kindergarten all the way to eighth grade. No doubt a reflection of the district's reform efforts, the school's stability in recent years has surely made a notable contribution to student achievement.

The skills that Gambino developed in her previous position as a Special Education Supervisor for District #2 make her particularly well suited for leadership of a school with a challenging student body such as PS 51. Like all schools in District #2, PS 51 offers full-day kindergarten, and extended day and extended year programs in order to provide its high-risk students with the support they need to succeed academically. However, because of Gambino's strong background in social services, PS 51 is often able to attend to its students' social needs.

She developed a School Based Support Team, consisting of a psychologist, social worker and educational advisor, to provide diagnostic and intervention services for students who are candidates for special services, including psychological, academic and social counseling and/or testing. The strength of this team is its ability to blend social services with academic support. In addition, although not automatically provided by the district, PS 51 employs a full-time guidance counselor. Fortunately, Gambino's expertise in school-based social services and insight as an instructional leader has helped her address the need for more thorough social services at PS 51, all the while maintaining high academic standards.

Much of the driving force behind PS 51's high academic standards comes from its status as a member of District #2's Focused Literacy Network. Focused Literacy schools have historically low achievement scores in literacy, high-poverty levels in the student population, and a significant proportion of students at-risk of failure in literacy. These schools receive more support and oversight than other schools in the district. The supports come in the form of monies for further professional development, extra literacy staff developers, more extended-day and extended-year slots for students, and additional materials to be used for literacy instruction. In exchange for the added support, PS 51 and other Focused Literacy Schools follow a more structured and intense version of the Balanced Literacy program used throughout the district. (Stein, Harwell& Damico, 1999) The Balanced Literacy program is a set of principles that guide literacy instruction in all schools in the district. Typically, schools have the flexibility to interpret the principles to meet the needs of their students. In Focused Literacy Schools there is slightly less flexibility.

District leaders do not simply mandate what teaching principles should be used for literacy instruction and expect principals and teachers to do it effectively immediately. A substantial amount of the District 2's resources is put into ongoing professional development for every school; and it is ongoing professional development supported by strong instructional leadership that is necessary to the success of PS 51 and similar schools.

Professional Development and Instructional Leadership in PS 51

In District #2 accountability is a two-way street — teachers are accountable for providing students with quality instruction and in return principals and district leaders are accountable for providing the teachers with the support they need to do so (Elmore & Burney, 1999a). To this end, the district offers an array of professional development opportunities for teachers: district-sponsored workshops and institutes on specific instructional strategies or core subject matter, classroom-based assistance, intervisitations between schools and classrooms, and ongoing interactions among colleagues through study groups, grade-level meetings, and other specially arranged opportunities for teachers to meet and talk with one another (Elmore & Burney, 1999a; Stein, D’Amico & Johnstone, 1999). A key part of Gambino’s job is to arrange for and oversee the professional development experiences of her teachers. In some cases, this means providing the professional development herself — running grade-level meetings, workshops or discussion groups on particular aspects of instruction the school needs to work on, or observing and discussing lessons with teachers. At other times it means working closely with PS 51’s on-site staff developer, Kevin Hughes, to provide teachers with the support they need.

Whatever form it is in, District #2 teachers are expected to take back to their classrooms and schools what they’ve learned during any professional development experience and use it to improve instruction. This task isn’t always as easy as it sounds, which is why the role of the on-site staff developer is a critical one. On-site staff developers observe, assist and interact with teachers inside their classrooms in order to help them strengthen their instruction. They help teachers put into practice what they’ve learned during a professional development experience outside the classroom and work with principals to identify teachers who need assistance in an instructional or content area.

Like most staff developers in District #2, Hughes works at more than one school. During his two days a week at PS 51 he collaborates closely with Gambino to identify teachers’ strengths and weaknesses with respect to literacy instruction and plan the professional development they will need to push their capabilities further. Hughes considers Gambino’s strength as an instructional leader key to the success of the school. She is out in the school every

day, rather than closed up in her office, ensuring that her teachers are working hard to improve their literacy instruction. Each morning she does a “walk-through” of all the classrooms and based on her observations, makes recommendations to Hughes as to which teachers he needs to work with while at PS 51 that week. In exchange, Hughes asks Gambino to follow-up with teachers to see that they’ve incorporated their work with him into their instruction. Hughes and Gambino believe their close working relationship is critical to making their school a successful one. Hughes provides the deep, technical knowledge of literacy instruction, while Gambino provides the accountability and oversight for her teachers. To make this kind of partnership work, they believe it is important to get along not only as colleagues, but also as people. They need to be honest with one another — to be able to disagree and yet in the end present a united front to the teachers.

In this way, District #2’s principle of two-way accountability is threaded throughout PS 51. The teachers are accountable to their students and to Gambino for providing good instruction. Hughes is accountable for supplying strong professional development to the teachers so they can provide that instruction and Gambino is accountable for supporting Hughes in his efforts.

But the accountability doesn’t stop there. Just as Gambino is accountable to providing support for both her teachers and her staff developer, the district leadership is responsible for supplying her with the support she needs to do her job. The provision of Hughes in her school to provide deeper instructional assistance than Gambino can provide on her own is one way in which the district supports her. In addition, like all principals in the district, she benefits from a broad array of professional development opportunities, including: principals’ conferences and institutes which gather all the principals of the district together on a monthly basis to discuss issues of instruction; support groups and study groups targeted at small groups of principals with particular needs or interests; mentoring and buddying between principals within the district; and individualized coaching provided by the district leadership (Elmore & Burney, 1999b; Fink & Resnick, 1999).

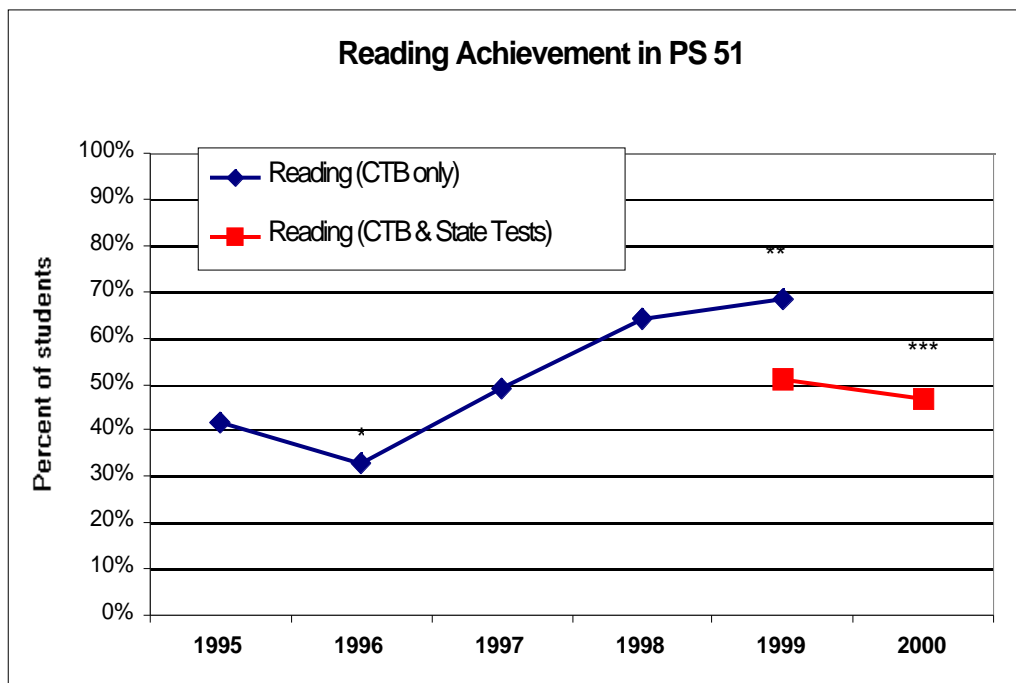
A key part of the professional development for new principals is a mentoring system that partners them with experienced principals in order to help the new leader “learn the ropes.” These mentors also provide feedback and guidance toward helping the new principal become an effective instructional leader. The district encourages even experienced principals to “buddy” with other principals in the district — to visit one another’s schools and classrooms, to provide outside perspective, and serve as one another’s “critical friends.” Gambino maintains that the assistance, reflections and support provided by her fellow principals in District #2 has been an invaluable resource to her and her school.

In the end, this system of mutual accountability leads to a professional community that permeates the layers of District #2’s system. It is a community dedicated to providing the highest quality instruction for students that they can, through the continuous, life-long learning of the adults responsible for that instruction. It is this love of learning that Gambino believes is at the heart of District #2’s work and of her own school’s success.

Student Achievement at PS 51

In the end, most districts and schools are ultimately accountable to the public and generally the public asks for hard evidence that their children are receiving an adequate education — usually in the form of achievement scores on tests in key subject areas. As is illustrated in the graph below, student achievement has improved steadily since Gambino became principal in the 1995-96 school year. Prior to her tenure as principal, only slightly more than 40% of students were scoring at grade level or better on standardized reading tests (CTB). However, by 1999, 68% of the students were achieving at or above grade level in reading as measured by the CTB. When New York State introduced its new performance assessments in 1999, PS 51 did quite well. Their eighth graders (39% achieving the standard) performed better than similar schools in the city (30% achieving the standard) and almost as well as the city as a whole (42% achieving the standard). But the real story was their fourth grade class. With two-thirds of their students meeting the standard they far outstripped both schools similar to theirs (22% achieving the standard) and the city as a whole (33% achieving the standard). This four-

year improvement in CTB reading scores and strong initial performance on the new state tests were achievements of which Gambino and her staff were understandably proud. It therefore came as quite a blow to see their test scores slide in 2000.



Notes: All test dates are for the spring of the school year, e.g. “1995” is the test given in the spring of the 1994-95 school year. 1995 data taken from archival records maintained by District #2. Data for 1996-1998 taken from the 1998 School Report Card for PS 51. 1999-2000 data taken from the 2000 School Report Card for PS 51.
 * Barbara Gambino completed her first year as principal in the spring of 1996. These scores are the first ones for which she is accountable.
 ** The reading test taken by all elementary schools in New York City (CTB) was renormed in 1996 and again in 1999. The slight drops in reading achievement seen during these years may be attributable to that renorming.
 ***Prior to 2000, test data for the state performance assessments and city tests (CTB/CAT) were not combined and were also reported in percentiles. As of 2000 these test results are now reported as the percent of students achieving at a performance level of 3 or 4 (roughly at or above standard) and are combined. Scores for 1999, when the new state performance assessment was introduced, are shown here both as they were originally reported (top two data points) and as they were adjusted for comparison with 2000 data (bottom two data points).

In the video, Gambino talks about the drop in her school’s test scores and how disappointed they were. Yet, for most of the grades tested, the scores were fairly stable between 1999 and 2000. The big drop, and the concern, came from just one grade — fourth grade. They had done so well in 1999 that a significant drop seen in 2000 was cause for much soul searching among the school’s staff.

Interpreting test results in a small school like PS 51 is a tricky business—especially when tests are only given in a few specific grades. When there are less than 50 students in each grade, poor performance on the part of even a handful of students can have a significant effect on the overall achievement score for the entire school. Principals must then look at the test scores in light of what else they know about the school, its teachers and its students. If a particular grade does poorly one year in comparison to the previous one, they must ask themselves: Were the students in this grade a particularly challenging set? Were the students the year before exceptionally strong? Was the whole class having difficulty? Or just few students? And if it is just a few students, who are they and why are they having trouble? Or was instruction not up to par with that of the previous year? If so, why not? What changed? Is the teacher a new one? Or new to the grade? What did his or her instruction look like that year?

Gambino says this is the toughest part of her job — grappling with these numbers, explaining them to herself, to her faculty, to the parents and the public, and then deciding what the school’s next course of action will be. Student achievement is the bottom line in her business, but untangling the implications of the performance measures she has before her for both instruction and teacher professional development is often a difficult task. Her first hand knowledge of the classrooms, teachers and individual students becomes a critical tool in the endeavor.

Concluding Remarks

Starting in 1987, District #2 set out on an ambitious endeavor to improve student learning through a district-wide focus on literacy instruction. This reform effort meant recreating the infrastructure that supports the district’s professionals so that they, too, could become life-long learners. It also meant developing a system of two-way accountability that ensured progress would undoubtedly come. PS 51 is truly an exemplar of the district’s reform efforts. The school’s designation as a Focused Literacy School, with its deep focus on literacy instruction and intense literacy professional development, hints at just how far the district is willing to go to make sure that every child has the core foundation they need to succeed in life. But it is not just

intense support from the district that drives PS 51 to succeed. It is strong instructional leaders like Gambino and her ability to blend social services with academic rigor that, in combination with a district-wide system of support, push schools like hers to far exceed expectations.

Additional Reading

- Elmore, R.F. & Burney, D. (1999a). Investing in teacher learning: Staff development and instructional improvement. In L. Darling-Hammond & G. Sykes (Eds.), *Teaching as the learning profession: Handbook of policy and practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Elmore, R. F., & Burney, D. (2000). *Leadership and learning: Principal recruitment, induction and instructional leadership in Community School District #2, New York City* (OERI contract deliverable). Pittsburgh, PA: High Performance Learning Communities Project, Learning Research and Development Center, University of Pittsburgh.
- Fink, E., & Resnick, L. B. (1999). *Developing principals as instructional leaders* (OERI contract deliverable). Pittsburgh, PA: High Performance Learning Communities Project, Learning Research and Development Center, University of Pittsburgh.
- Stein, M. K., D'Amico, L. & Johnstone, B. (April, 1999). District as professional educator: Learning from and in New York City's Community School District #2. Paper presented at *The School District as an Environment for the Improvement of Teaching*, an interactive symposium at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, April 19-23, 1999, Montreal, Quebec, Canada.