



# case study

## *Transforming a "Failing" School*

In 2004, P.S./I.S. 50 (The Vito Marcantonio School), located in East Harlem, New York, was generally regarded as a failing school in urgent need of help. School violence was high, parents and guardians were disillusioned, and the building was in a state of disrepair. The challenge was to transform a school where little instruction was taking place into a community of learning focused on student achievement. The effort to bring about this dramatic change was led by the school's Principal, Rebekah Marler-Mitchell, who drew upon the support of her Regional Local Instructional Superintendent and consultant, Liz Humphrey.

Encouraged by the research of Richard Allington's "What Really Matters for Struggling Readers – Designing Research Based Programs" (2000), the team created a plan for the school community designed to:

- cultivate a caring community through whole-school and classroom-based expectations with a system of natural rewards and consequences;
- promote strong lines of communication and the development of shared language and values;
- provide professional development to change instructional practices;
- establish a culture of conversation between students and teachers, parents and school leaders about goals and how they can be achieved;
- shift from one-size-fits-all reading instruction to a balanced and comprehensive approach to literacy focused on independent reading at every level and instruction driven by assessment data.

## FINDING A SOLUTION

Systemic change in the school culture, the curriculum and instructional practices was needed in order to meet these goals. The Principal recognized that changes had to bring about results quickly in order to gain the support of a tired and frustrated school community. While the school community, led by the Principal, focused on meeting the school's mission of creating a caring community, the AUSSIE/Editure consultant focused on the professional development required to usher in a balanced approach to literacy teaching that incorporated a range of instructional practices.

The collaboration between the school and AUSSIE/Editure made possible a range of professional development opportunities. The careful planning and resourcing of the professional development were significant factors in its success. This included:

- weekly whole-staff, or grade-level team meetings using assessment data to plan differentiated instruction;
- voluntary, paid lunch-time and after school sessions focusing on best practices, positive learning environments, the use of assessment and data analysis, and engaging ways to approach literacy;
- intra and inter-school visitations to observe effective teaching strategies;



- a heavy emphasis on lab site demonstrations to model best practices (these grade-level lab site demonstrations were followed by reflection and planning sessions);
- a series of grade-level, full-day workshops devoted to the planning of reading and writing curriculum calendars and units of work.

At the heart of the change was the voluntary, monthly teacher planning committee meetings. The committee focused on identifying the challenges and finding solutions to ensure P.S./I.S. 50 continued on a path toward raising student achievement. Success at P.S./I.S. 50 resulted from outstanding school leadership, AUSSIE/ Editure-led professional development, the establishment of professional learning teams, the creation of a caring culture, and the commitment to improving teaching practices and student learning outcomes.

P.S./I.S.50 has been transformed into a caring learning community where students have enthusiasm for reading and writing with the stamina to read and write for extended periods, have meaningful conversations about their learning, and have their work celebrated and proudly displayed. Teachers have successfully integrated a balanced literacy curriculum into their daily teaching practices and use assessment to differentiate their instruction.

## IN THEIR OWN WORDS

### REBEKAH MARLER-MITCHELL, PRINCIPAL P.S./I.S. 50

Ms. Marler-Mitchell received the Colin and Alma Powell Legacy Award in recognition of the school's commitment to and practice of its "whole student philosophy of learning and living."

Ms. Marler-Mitchell describes her experience working with AUSSIE/Editure: *"...eternal thanks for listening, for hearing the sounds no one else does, and for being our grand maestro – tuning instruments, that had been long ago discarded, into a symphonic delight! I hope you love this metaphor for our shared journey as much as I do! Here's to more duets and concerts!"*



## POSITIVE GAINS

- a significant increase in school attendance;
- an increase in school library book circulation from 8,000 books in 2003-2004 to over 20,000 in 2005;
- an increase in the percentage of students achieving at levels 3 and 4 between 1999 and 2006/2007.

At the same time there was:

- a significant decrease in school violence and incidents requiring police intervention;
- a 60% decrease in school suspension rates between 2004 and 2006.