

Westminster Community Charter School (WCCS)

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<http://www.westminsterccs.org>



WCCS Mission: It is the mission of the Westminster Community Charter School that all students will graduate with the necessary foundation to be successful in high school and/or higher educational institutions and to become productive and contributing citizens in our society and community.

WCCS Partners: Westminster Community Charter School Partnership is a collaboration of business, community, and educational resources with the goal of strengthening the quality of education provided at WCCS. Business & Community partners include M&T Bank, Kaleida Health, YMCA, and employees who work at M&T Bank and serve as mentors to WCCS students. Educational Resources include the Buffalo Public Schools, Columbia University Teachers College, and local colleges and universities.

The Charter Schools Program Dissemination Grant: Award of \$400,000 from September 1, 2008 through August 31, 2010

WCCS is the school that opened up the door!



During the symposiums, the library was filled with educators, all there for a common reason: to reach a higher proficiency in their work for children.

WCCS selected its primary purpose of the grant, as outlined in Title V, Part B of NCLB, as developing partnerships designed to improve student academic achievement. WCCS is utilizing the dissemination grant to fund ongoing conference and staff development activities. The primary purpose is to share, with partner schools in Western New York, WCCS' approach to using the Columbia University Teachers College (TC) Reading and Writing Project as part of the ELA curriculum. In addition, these schools are learning instructional leadership, classroom management, and other best practices WCCS has implemented. Over the past two years, WCCS hosted six Literacy Symposiums attended by hundreds of teachers and administrators from over 25 area districts, charter schools and colleges. For more information about WCCS' dissemination project please visit <http://www.wccsliteracy.org/>.

CSP Federal Dissemination Grant Staff worked together to coordinate the grant program, organize conference and staff development activities, develop reference materials for participating schools, manage recordkeeping, promote the program, and work with Columbia Teachers College staff developers:

- **Instructional Director (former Columbia Teachers College staff developer and now a WCCS employee):** Robert Ross, rjross@buffaloschools.org
- **WCCS Symposium Coordinator:** Lydia Brenner, LABrenner@buffaloschools.org



Prior to the Grant: At WCCS, the areas of reading and writing are targeted in order to improve student learning and the School uses the educational approach of the TC Reading and Writing Project, founded and directed by

Dr. Lucy Calkins, Professor of Education and author of several educational books. The central mission of the TC Reading and Writing Project is to provide children with the skills and resources to live richly literate lives.

The project focuses on the complex work of conducting rigorous reading and writing workshops in classrooms. These workshops function as foundations on which teachers build their classroom programs, and this literacy teaching helps teachers make and sustain fundamental changes in all their classroom practices. Teachers are involved in the ongoing process of learning new and evolving strategies, refining their craft of teaching, and increasing their skills in assessment of their work and their students' mastery of skills. This data, which drives their instruction, is derived from the use of running records, conferencing with students, the regular monitoring of partner groups, student book clubs, student writing, and exams (informal and formal).

The reading program is based on extensive classroom libraries featuring a wide range of culturally and ethnically-diverse books. The books are leveled and marked with stickers to help students choose reading material that is appropriate for their reading abilities. Therefore, students are not confined to reading material that has been designated for a specific grade level, but are free to choose literature of interest to them and at levels that enable them to develop their reading skills at their own individual pace. This system also enables teachers to better monitor student progress and to encourage students to expand their reading choices to the next level. Reading is not just a "subject, but instead is an integral part of the education process to help students develop into life-long readers."

Mini-lessons are used to break down the reading and writing process into manageable skill areas with specific steps to help the students link new information to previously mastered material. Students are introduced to a specific concept and then given the opportunity for guided practice, which is reinforced by working with peers and through conferences with the teacher. Writer's notebooks, goals assessment worksheets, and reading and writing curricular calendars are additional tools used by teachers in this program.

During the Grant: The success WCCS achieved with the Reading and Writing Project approach resulted in Lucy Calkins recommending that WCCS serve as a demonstration site and learning lab for the successful implementation of the Columbia Teachers College Reading and Writing program. The grant served as a resource for ongoing conference and staff development activities in order to share the WCCS' approach to using the Reading and Writing Project as part of the ELA curriculum with educational professionals throughout



Western New York and beyond. The goal of the grant was to have WCCS teaching staff share with educators in other schools what they had learned, and the process of preparing the demonstration for other educators would aid the WCCS staff in refining and improving their own strategies and skills. To do this WCCS hosted symposiums at which the teachers became teacher leaders. In addition, partner schools were established.

In 2008-2009 and 2009-2010, WCCS hosted a total of six Literacy Symposiums. Approximately 75-100 teachers and administrators from 18 different area schools and colleges were in attendance at each of the three symposiums held March 20, 2009; May 20, 2009; and in the Summer Symposium during August 3 – 5, 2009. Approximately 100-110 teachers and administrators from 25 different area districts, charter schools and colleges were in attendance at each of the three symposiums held October 17, 2009; March 17, 2010; and July 28, 2010. Symposium information is posted at <http://www.wccsliteracy.org>.

Clarence Center Elementary and Maryvale Intermediate were partner schools. They attended the symposiums and the Clarence District also rented a bus to take 40 teachers to TC's Saturday session during March 2010. WCCS hosted a December 2009 session at Clarence Center Elementary where WCCS teachers visited the school and the classrooms followed by a session for sharing ideas with 20 of their teachers from across the district.

Benefits of this process include teachers having a stronger knowledge base, change in classroom performance, change in the way data was used, change in teaching practices becoming more reflective of the students' needs, reading workshops providing opportunities for the study of different reading levels. Library purchases were made with a different eye toward the students in matching their reading levels and interests. WCCS has experienced an increase in the use of the book room located in the storage room under the school library. Teachers borrow multiple copies of fiction or non-fiction titles for classroom use. This provides a variety of reading material for students since the titles differ from those found in the school library. This focus on reading has positive results as students have become savvy readers and are proactive in asking for books. A student requesting 4 books and sharing with 3 friends to read and discuss is just one of many examples. Students are encouraged to read on their own when school is not in session and they can borrow books from the WCCS library over the summer.



Students have more motivation and enthusiasm for writing when they know it will be read by an audience, so WCCS is always exploring opportunities to share student writing. Every month children publish their writing and put it in WCCS library. The booklets receive a barcode for

inclusion in the library catalog system and are organized by grade levels. The seventh grade students submitted their poetry to a newspaper and writing by seventh and eighth grade students is on display in the lobby for parents and visitors to view.

After the Grant: A variety of strategies and activities are being pursued to build on the positive outcomes of the grant. Both Ms. Brenner, a staff member of WCCS, and Clarence schools' ELA coordinator, plan to continue visits to each other's schools to further professional learning and the sharing of ideas.

To ensure that the skills and knowledge of the WCCS staff remain strong, the School has regular visits from TC staff developers throughout the year. WCCS also sends teachers for a one-week training session at TC in New York City during the summer as well as both Fall and Spring Saturday conferences.

WCCS continues to provide reading and writing project support to area schools, including other charter schools, and new teachers have come to visit WCCS. This program was originally for teachers in grades K-3, but has been expanded up to grade 8.



WCCS continues to see the benefits of the grant in classroom performance changes, how teachers continue to use data more effectively, how teachers have become more reflective, and how teachers support students to help them move from one level to another.

The WCCS Food Service Program



Another initiative that began during the grant period is the WCCS food service program. WCCS has established a culture of learning and nurturing that emphasizes the continuous development of the whole child. This includes instituting a food service program to promote the improved physical health of the student population. It is difficult to teach a child who is hungry and poor nutrition can lead to problems with growth, development and chronic health

issues resulting in excessive absenteeism from school, lower academic performance and reduced energy.

To better meet the nutritional needs of our students, WCCS hired an Executive Chef to dramatically and measurably improve the quality of the food service program by increasing the nutritional value of menus, preparing meals that are free of additives and processed foods, and incorporating a variety of fresh foods,

including fruits and vegetables, into the meals. In order to help students become accustomed to the new foods, the Executive Chef visits classrooms to share new foods and flavors with the students. For example, students may be introduced to broccoli in both the raw state and cooked state, and then be given an opportunity to sample the food. By introducing new foods in the intimate setting of the classroom, students feel less intimidated to try something for the first time. In addition to tasting the foods, students learn about the nutritional benefits of each item and how to start incorporating it into their diets.

Additional nutrition education opportunities for the students and their parents are also planned as part of the program, since parental involvement is critical to changing a child's diet and knowledge about fresh food. Some of the activities being considered are a monthly newsletter, parent meetings to help parents support their child's education and academic success by providing information to them on nutrition and how to prepare nutritious meals, and an after-school gourmet club for students.



WCCS Facts and Figures

WCCS Charter Term:

Authorized by the Buffalo Board of Education, WCCS is a conversion school. It serves students in grades K through 8 and has an approved full enrollment of 550 students. It was granted a charter by the Board of Regents on July, 21, 2004. Staff arrived on August 23, 2004 and the school was open for instruction on September 8, 2004. During this 2010-2011 school year, WCCS is in the second year of its first charter renewal through June 30, 2014.

The Geographic Area



WCCS students and staff help to plant trees in the neighborhood around the School.

Buffalo, NY Statistics:

WCCS is located within the Buffalo City School District in Buffalo, New York and, like many cities, residents of the area face challenges:

- **Buffalo** is the third poorest city in the nation (US Census, 2009) and the neighborhood around WCCS is among the city's poorest schools and most needy.
- As the second largest city in NYS, **Buffalo** has endured a 44% population decline since 1970.
- In **Buffalo**, 29.9% of individuals live in poverty versus 14.2% in NYS and 14.5% in the US.
- 37.5% of families in **Buffalo** with children less than 18 years of age live in poverty.

The WCCS 14215 zip code within Buffalo:

- 20.1% of the children live in single-parent or no-parent families while the percentage is 8.1% for New York State (NYS) and 7.2% for the United States;
- Based on the number of Early Intervention children, the 14215 zip code has the 2nd highest number of developmental delays out of 60 zip codes in Erie County
- Residents in this zip code use 5.5 times the average rate of county health services;
- It has the highest number of households receiving food stamps and the greatest number of households receiving Medicaid out of 60 zip code areas in the county (according to a 2007 Erie County report); and
- 83% of the WCCS student population is eligible for the Federal free and reduced lunch program during this 2010-2011 school year. It is estimated that between 81%-90% of the student population receives public assistance.

WCCS Changes:

In 1993, M&T Bank approached the Buffalo Board of Education to partner with its lowest performing school, School 68 (now WCCS). School 68 had low student test scores which were at the bottom of the district for more than a decade prior to 1993, as well as high poverty, discipline problems, and high student mobility. WCCS is now one of the top performing schools in the District.



- Spring 2002, the School was designated as one of the most improved

schools in NYS.

- In 2006-2007, on NYS Math exam, WCCS ranked in top ten among all public schools in City of Buffalo for all tested grades (3-8) out of over 40 schools.
- In 2006-2007, on the NYS ELA exam, WCCS ranked in top ten among all public schools in City of Buffalo (over 40 schools) except for grade 5.
- In 2007, *Business First* ranked WCCS 6th out of 43 elementary schools and 3rd out of 34 middle schools in the Buffalo Public School District.
- On the Math 4, Math 8 and ELA 8 exams administered since the conversion WCCS has always scored above the BPS average and, in general, results are above or close to the state average.
- Using the new 2010 cut scores, 32% of WCCS students scored at Level 3 and Level 4 on all of the 2009-2010 New York State ELA tests as compared to 28% of BPS students. On all of the New York State Math tests, 47% of WCCS students scored at Level 3 and Level 4 as compared to 30% of BPS students.

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