

GATES CHILI SCHOOLS RESHUFFLE TO MEET STUDENTS' NEEDS

District

Enrollment, surge in ESOL learners prompt shift

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In her 38 years teaching in what is now the Gates Chili Central School District, Florence Brassier was witness to countless changes in education, including leaving her post in a one-room schoolhouse in the 1920s for the modern facility that now bears her name. That school, Florence Brassier Elementary School, lately has been evolving in a way to make its namesake proud. It has reinvented itself three times in the last six years, responding to pressures of declining enrollment, changing neighborhood patterns and a short surge in the number

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English language learner Oumou Sangare, originally from Guinea, gets help from teacher Paul Tucci while sitting next to classmate Michaela Roscoe in a kindergarten class at Florence Brassier Elementary School.

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of students speaking languages other than English.

Many local districts have seen increases in students needing English as a Second or Other Language (ESOL)

help, and enrollment has been falling in most suburban districts for years. But the particular combination of the two in Gates Chili has forced the district to think creatively of how best to meet all its students' needs.

In 2010, Florence Brassier was named a Blue Ribbon School, one of only 300 in the nation. A look at its enrollment, however, gave reason for concern.

It had 240 students in grades kindergarten through five, down more than 20 percent over 10 years and much lower than the district's other three elementary schools. It also had 90 percent white students in a district that otherwise was far more diverse.

To address both concerns, the district moved its elementary ESOL program from another elementary school to Florence Brassier. In one year, it went from having one student with limited English proficiency to 57.

The idea was to concentrate students who didn't speak English well in one school, where they could get more focused services while still integrating into general education to the extent they were able.

It seemed to be working at first, but the ESOL population kept growing while the number of native English speakers kept declining. It became impossible to mix a few ESOL students into a general education class with any proper proportion.

By 2012-13, nearly 1 in 4 of its students didn't speak English well, more than double the rate of any other school in Monroe County's suburbs.

"We went from three ESOL kids in a classroom to eight or nine, and it just wasn't working," Principal Tim Young said.

So, in 2013-14, the district reshuffled again, this time including all students.

It redrew its district lines to even out populations among its four elementary schools.

At the same time, it disseminated the ESOL students among three of the four elementary schools.

"The kids get to be together with their friends from their apartment complex or whatever," said April Cox, an ESOL teacher at Neil Armstrong Elementary School. "And they do better with shorter bus rides."

Unlike some districts with high ESOL populations, Gates Chili doesn't have a large plurality of students speaking one foreign language. Cox said she's responsible for seven students speaking seven different languages; Florence Brassier now has 26 students speaking 13 different languages.

Among them are Yusuf Charm, from Sierra Leone, and Oumou Sangare, from Guinea. Both are in a Florence Brassier kindergarten class cotaught by ESOL teacher Paul Tucci and general education teacher Paul Gundy.

Yusuf has been in the United States about 18 months, and he chattered easily in English while drawing a picture of a herd of dinosaurs one day last month. Oumou was drawing Rapunzel; she hasn't been here as long and still needs to practice her letters and sounds.

Tucci crouched between them as they colored, persistently eliciting full sentences. Gundy tailored his full-group instruction by using more pictures and simpler words — things he said helped the other students as well.

Having the ESOL children spread among three schools is working well for now, both said. But enrollment

and demographic fluctuations are a constant for school districts, meaning Gates Chili — and other local districts — are aware the need for change will likely come again.

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English language learner Yusuf Charm, originally from Sierra Leone, with classmate Julianna Gangross at Florence Brassier Elementary School; in the background is Oumou Sangare.

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