

SUCCESS STORY

NY | 6–8 | Differentiated Instruction, Response to Intervention, Enrichment



Top-Performing New York Middle School Leverages Student Strengths Through Renzulli Learning Schoolwide Enrichment Model

Bayside Enrichment and Long Distance Learning (BELL) Academy, Queens, New York

Stats:

Grades: 6–8
Student enrollment: 301

Student population:

Asian	37%
White	35%
Hispanic	21%
African American	4%
Other	3%
ELL	14%
Special Education	7%

Summary:

After 24 years of experience in the field of education, including a seat on the “think tank” of gifted and talented education programs of New York City schools, in 2007, Cheryl Hatzidimitriou and her team combined the best of the best practices from the 40 programs she’d created and supervised to open a new kind of public middle school. The Bayside Enrichment and Long Distance Learning (BELL) Academy is a cutting-edge public middle school that integrates computer and videoconferencing technologies into the curriculum and takes a student-centered, project-based learning approach to instruction. With the Renzulli Learning Schoolwide Enrichment Model (SEM) at its center, BELL determines the interests, aptitudes, strengths and talents of students and crafts an engaging, individualized instructional pathway for each learner. A hands-on cluster program in which students explore dance, journalism, yoga, and other topics of interest; form technology-enabled connections with peers around the globe; and become deeply involved in community service projects ensures students understand global issues and what it means to give back to people in need.



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Principal of Bayside Enrichment and
Long Distance Learning Academy**

Four years into the experiment with this unique Renzulli Learning-based middle school model, in only their third year, BELL Academy rose to the number one performing school in the borough of Queens and ranks in the 98th percentile on the New York City Progress Report, which is used to measure all New York City public schools' overall performance. There are more than 700 applicants each year for fewer than 100 seats specialized high schools such as Brooklyn Tech, Bronx Science and LaGuardia High School of the Arts, which traditionally accept only the top two percent of students. BELL and boasts a record number of students accepted into these schools.

Challenges:

- ▶ Identify and maximize each student's individual talents and gifts
- ▶ Equip students with 21st century skills for success in the global economy
- ▶ Educate students to give back to their communities through charitable acts

It was first-hand perspective gained from her experience as a New York City Schools' Regional Director of Gifted and Talented Programs that inspired Cheryl Hatzidimitriou to leave that position and co-found a school based entirely on educational best practices she observed in her years as an administrator. Since opening its doors to students in the fall of 2007, the Bayside Enrichment and Long Distance Learning (BELL) Academy in Queens, New York, has gained an international reputation as a unique public middle school that functions like a high-performing private prep school.

The BELL Academy is designed around the Schoolwide Enrichment Model (SEM), an approach based on the research of Drs. Joseph Renzulli and Sally Reis of the University of Connecticut. Central to SEM is a belief that every child has gifts and talents and that instruction should address his or her individual interests and aptitudes.

“We like to say, ‘Educate children one at a time,’” says Hatzidimitriou, “and that means differentiating learning and providing students with as many choices and opportunities to succeed as possible.”

Student-centered and data-driven

The Renzulli approach begins with establishing a data-rich personal profile for every student reflecting interests, learning strengths, and preferred methods of instruction. Accessible to teachers, parents, and students, profiles supplement the school's multiple other methods for collecting key data to help BELL educators target instruction and build on the motivating factors that increase student engagement and positively impact performance. The Renzulli program also includes an extensive library of pre-screened resources, including websites, software, books, and articles, to help teachers customize activities for students.

Part of the BELL curriculum is a semester-long, project-based cluster program, in which students choose their top three courses from a list of ten at the start of the school year. These courses also reflect teacher interests and strengths, with staff surveyed each year to determine their major areas of interest. Yoga, cooking, quilting, newspaper,

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drums, Latin dance, woodworking, community service, and other diverse topics are among those from which students can choose. Student interest, rather than hard and fast lesson planning, drives cluster lessons, which students take for 90 minutes a week. For instance, in instructional technology specialist Robin Russell's yoga cluster, students research the history of yoga as well as practice yoga. At the end of each semester, each student creates a culminating project of his or her choice, based on preferred personal expression. Projects may take the form of a formal presentation, a movie on the effects of yoga on relaxation, health, and blood pressure or something else entirely. Says Russell, "Cluster programs supplement the purely academic and add another dimension to students' daily lives."

Integrated technology

Technology also assists in differentiated instruction at BELL. Throughout the year, Russell works closely with classroom teachers to craft projects that both dovetail with lesson units and empower students with 21st century investigative skills. For instance, Russell's cooperative poetry unit has kids creating their own poetry. They use the Renzulli Learning library of resources to add visually appealing graphics from selected websites, links to resource information, and first-person interviews with authors. "The beauty of Renzulli," says Russell, "is that

it includes tons of pre-screened resources geared to various reading levels so kids can pose questions and explore the Web to find the answers to those questions themselves."

Additional activities, including open-ended assignments, harness Renzulli Learning resources to engage students in higher-order thinking skills. These activities include identifying and analyzing several ways in which Dr. Martin Luther King influenced civil rights in American life as well as researching and creating pie charts to display the different cultures represented by the BELL student population.

Renzulli Learning's virtual library is also great for intervention. For example, teachers can direct students to grammar websites, where they can complete practice exercises independently at home. Teachers also can take students on virtual field trips to ancient Greece or to different rooms in the White House using Renzulli Learning, says Russell.

Extended family atmosphere

A positive and nurturing environment is another element central to student success at BELL, says Hatzidimitriou. "Every staff member knows every student by name, and students are nurtured from the time they enter the building in the morning until the time they leave at the end of the day."



“Come see our school. I guarantee you’ll be hooked.”

— Cheryl Hatzidimitriou, Principal of Bayside Enrichment and Long Distance Learning Academy



Indeed, when students struggle at BELL, they may be assigned school radio announcement duty to encourage a feeling of self-worth. “Kids who might fall through the cracks elsewhere don’t at BELL,” says Hatzidimitriou.

A 2009 district report card captures the special essence of BELL Academy. “From the daily morning announcements made by students to the after school All-Stars [enrichment] program, BELL Academy is a middle school completely focused on ensuring the academic and personal success of every one of its students.... Displays of photographs and honors celebrate the accomplishments of students, who are highly fortunate to be a part of the supportive, ‘family-like’ school community. As shared by a parent, ‘At BELL, teachers are not just teachers, they have big hearts and care for our children.’”

Community and global partnerships

What Russell terms the “urban advantage” — proximity to hospitals and museums, such as NY Hospital, the Bayside Historical Society, the Museum of Natural History, and the Museum of the Moving Image — injects a real world element into the BELL curriculum, and exposes students to a variety of cultural and scientific influences while providing opportunities to give back to the community.

Students involved in community-service clusters raise money to help the homeless with clothing and food drives, collect toys for the Toys for Tots Foundation, raise money for Haiti relief, and the Ronald McDonald Cancer Center for Children. They also perform for and assist seniors at the local Scheurer House.

Through the use of state-of-the-art videoconferencing technology, students transcend geographic barriers to travel virtually and learn about worldwide cultures and issues through ongoing communication with peers in Australia, Brazil, Canada, Italy, and other countries.

Results

The 2009 district report card identifies BELL’s partnership with Renzulli Learning as an “outstanding feature” of the school that helps teachers establish individual learning goals for students and enlists parents as partners to help achieve those goals.

Hatzidimitriou counts among BELL’s successes students receiving honor-roll certificates; students making special trips to the office to say good morning to the secretary; and a boy new to the school who has been doing “unbelievably well” after having been absent 130 days in a single year at his previous school.

“Come see our school,” says principal Hatzidimitriou to a reporter expressing awe at BELL Academy’s innovation and accomplishments. “I guarantee you’ll be hooked.”

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