

# Bel Air Elementary School Case Study

Prepared for  
**The Maryland State Department of Education**  
**Study of Adequacy of Funding for Education in the State of Maryland**

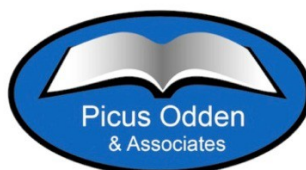
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### *Executive Summary*

This case of a high performing school is one of 12 school cases being studied as part of a comprehensive study of school finance adequacy in Maryland. The purpose of the cases is to identify the elements of the improvement strategies of the schools studied and to compare them with the elements of the school improvement strategy embedded within the evidence-base (EB) school funding model and then, if needed, to make adjustments in the EB model to reflect the Maryland context.

Four categories of schools were selected for case studies:

1. High performing schools, i.e. schools with a composite score of at least 90 percent of students performing at or above proficiency.
2. Improving schools, i.e. schools that had increased their composite percentage of students performing at or above proficiency by at least 50 percent over a six-year period.
3. Schools that had improved the composite assessment scores of various subgroups (limited English proficient (LEP) students, minority students, etc.) by at least 50 percent over a six-year period.
4. Schools that had reduced the achievement gap of their composite assessment score between free and reduce-priced meals (FRPM) and non-FRPM students by at least two standard deviations over a six-year period.

Bel Air Elementary School is an example of the first category of schools – a high performing school.

Bel Air Elementary School students have consistently achieved high performance rates on math, reading, and science assessments, with over 90 percent of students scoring proficient or above since 2007. The strong performance of all Bel Air students, including subgroups of special education students and students who receive free or reduced-price meals (FRPM), who traditionally score lower than their peers, resulted in Bel Air Elementary being selected for this case study. The study seeks to understand how these results are achieved.

Multiple factors contribute to the school's success. The small size of the school, along with regular parent involvement and a highly dedicated staff, promotes a sense of community. The administration, teachers, and parents have established a welcoming, purposeful environment centered on supporting students.

The principal maintains high standards and is committed to supporting her teachers in their effort to help every student be successful. She leads regular meetings to review data, provides for targeted professional development, and sets school-wide goals. She also led the development of the school's mission of becoming "A School Centered on Reaching Excellence," which promotes academic achievement, character development, and positive social interactions among

students, staff, and the community. The teaching staff at Bel Air is characterized by longevity – over half of the teachers have been there for 10 or more years. Teachers rely on their experience, professional development, and collaboration to meet the needs of every student. The availability of common planning time facilitates regular collaboration and communication among teachers, which leads to sharing best practices and resources to improve learning. Grade-level teachers share daily planning time, and planning time each morning allows for cross-grade planning and planning with the special education and reading intervention teachers.

At Bel Air, instruction is informed by data. Data are collected from a variety of state, local, and classroom assessments. Teachers meet regularly to analyze school-level, classroom, and individual data, and use this information to plan lessons and select resources.

Key instructional practices also contribute to students' success. There is a school-wide emphasis on individualized instruction and meeting the needs of every student. Early intervention ensures that students do not fall behind their peers. Teachers use small, flexible groups in math and reading, incorporate a variety of resources and instructional strategies, and use Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles to differentiate instruction. Curriculum materials are adapted to meet the needs of students. Teachers are encouraged to incorporate a variety of resources and strategies to enhance the district's curriculum. The special education teacher, reading intervention teacher, and instructional aides provide additional targeted support for students.

Taken together, the strong leadership provided by the principal, the use of instructional practices focused on individual student needs, small class sizes, the availability of collaborative planning time and targeted professional development, and access to resources has created a purposeful environment where students enjoy learning and experience high levels of academic success.

### *Introduction*

Bel Air Elementary School is a small neighborhood school serving students in grades prekindergarten through five. Bel Air Elementary School is located about eight miles from downtown Cumberland, in western Maryland’s mountainous Allegany County Public Schools district. Many of the students who attend have parents who also attended this school in years past. Parent volunteers can be seen in the school at almost any given time, and the Parent Teacher Organization is active in planning and supporting activities for students. The community supports the school by attending fundraising events and spirit nights, which are often funded in part by local businesses. Within the school, teachers and students are a close-knit community. Half of the current teaching staff has worked at Bel Air for 10 years or more, and the small size and open design of the school creates an “everyone knows everyone” environment.

Bel Air Elementary School has established a reputation for excellence. In 2007-08 and 2010-11, Bel Air was named a School of Distinction by the Allegany County Board of Education. The school was named a Maryland Blue Ribbon school in 2010 and a National Blue Ribbon School in 2011.

School-wide enrollment has ranged from 215 to 254 students in the past decade. In 2014-15, approximately 216 students enrolled at Bel Air, with an average class size of 20 students.

Average class sizes by grade-level are presented in Table 1. The principal noted that class sizes at Bel Air are smaller than those at many other schools in the district. Class sizes have increased across the district because of declining resources. The impact of these cuts on Bel Air has been minimized because of the school’s small size and enrollment declines in past years.

**Table 1**  
**Bel Air Elementary School Class Sizes, 2014-15 school year**

<b>Grade-Level</b>	<b>Class Size</b>
Prekindergarten (1 class)	23
Kindergarten (2 classes)	17.5
One (2 classes)	15.5
Two (2 classes)	17.5
Three (2 classes)	20
Four (1 class)	28
Five (1 class)	24

The school hosts a half-day prekindergarten program. At the time of this site visit, it has one section, but in years when enrollment was higher, there were two sections. There are two sections each of kindergarten and grades one, two, and three. Currently, as a result of an enrollment decrease several years ago, there is one section each of grades four and five. An additional class will be created as the current grade three students advance.

The percentage of Bel Air students who qualify for the FRPM program has increased steadily over the past decade from 36.7 percent in 2004 to 48.1 percent in 2014. The principal anticipates reaching 50 percent FRPM enrollment by the 2015-16 school year, which would make Bel Air Elementary eligible for Title I funding. There was a 15.3 percent mobility rate in 2013-14, which is similar to previous years. The school is 89.2 percent white. The other 10.8 percent of students are mixed-race, Black, Hispanic, and Asian students. All students speak English as their first language. Table 2 shows student characteristics.

**Table 2**  
**Bel Air Elementary School Student Characteristics, 2014-15 school year**

Student Characteristics	Percentage of Student Population
Race/ethnicity	
American Indian/Alaska Native	-
Asian	1.4
Black/African American	2.3
Hispanic/Latino	1.9
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	-
Two or more races	5.2
White	89.2
Students eligible for free and reduced-price meals	48.1
Limited English proficient students	0.0
Students with special needs	16.7

A “-“ indicates either no students or the number of students was suppressed due to too few students in the category.

Bel Air experiences both the advantages and disadvantages of being a small school. The small size promotes an environment of collaboration and community, and there is genuine collegiality and support among the staff. At the same time, the small size of the school means fewer support personnel resources, e.g., there is just one reading intervention and one special education teacher.

Bel Air Elementary was a high-performing school between 2007 and 2014.<sup>1</sup> This case investigates how Bel Air Elementary has produced such strong student performance results. It draws from interviews conducted in January 2015 with the principal, 14 teachers, and the school counselor. Information was also collected from the school website, the School Improvement

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<sup>1</sup> Maryland Report Card. <http://www.mdreportcard.org/index.aspx?K=010702>

Plan, and other documents provided by the principal, including the daily instructional schedule, school staffing list, and sample curriculum materials.

The case has 11 sections: 1) school performance, 2) school staffing, 3) school goals, 4) school schedule and collaborative planning time, 5) curriculum and instructional program, 6) assessments, 7) extra help for students at risk of academic failure, 8) professional development, 9) school culture and leadership, 10) summary and challenges, and 11) the degree of alignment between the school’s strategies and the school improvement strategies embedded in the EB Funding Model.

***School Performance***

Table 3 shows the composite data used to select Bel Air Elementary for this case study. The percentage of students who are proficient or advanced across all subjects (reading and math in grades three through five, and science in grade five) was averaged to produce a number – percent proficient/advanced – for each year from 2007 to 2012. For 2013 and 2014, only scores for “All Students” were available. During this latter two-year period, the State’s curriculum standards changed, but the test did not. Statewide test score results dropped over these two years. Schools that had a drop of less than one standard deviation were given preference for being included as a case study.

**Table 3  
Bel Air Elementary School Performance, Maryland School Assessment (MSA), 2007-2014**

<b>Average School-Wide Percent Scoring Proficient/Advanced in Reading, Math and Science</b>								
<b>Performance Level</b>	<b>MSA 2007</b>	<b>MSA 2008</b>	<b>MSA 2009</b>	<b>MSA 2010</b>	<b>MSA 2011</b>	<b>MSA 2012</b>	<b>MSA* 2013</b>	<b>MSA* 2014</b>
All Students	94	97	95	93	97	98	95	90
Free and Reduced-Price Meals (FRPM) Students	93	94	92	87	96	98	NA	NA
Limited English Language Proficient (LEP) Students	-	-	-	-	-	-	NA	NA
Special Education Students	89	80	93	86	95	95	NA	NA
Non-White, Non-Asian Students	-	-	-	-	-	-	NA	NA

A “-“ indicates either no students or the number of students was suppressed due to too few students in the category.

\*Assessment data by student subgroup for 2013 and 2014 were not available at the time this report was written.

Bel Air students consistently performed well on Maryland’s standardized assessments between 2007 and 2014, averaging between 93 percent proficient or above in 2009 to 98 percent proficient in 2012. Subgroups of special education and FRPM students are no exception, achieving a proficiency rate greater than 90 percent in most years.

### School Staffing

Table 4 shows the school’s staff. The administrative staff at Bel Air includes the principal, school counselor, and the secretary.

**Table 4**  
**Staffing in Bel Air Elementary School**

Category	FTE
<i>Administration</i>	
Principal	1.0
Clerical	1.0
<i>Prekindergarten Program</i>	
Licensed Teachers	0.5
Instructional aides	1.0
<i>Main Program</i>	
Core Teachers	10
Elective Teachers: 1 Librarian/Media, .7 Music, .4 Art, .4 Physical Education	2.5
Special Education	1.0
Reading Intervention	1.0
<i>Aides</i>	
Instructional Assistant – Kindergarten	1.0
Instructional Assistants – Special Education	2.0
<i>Pupil Support</i>	
<i>Licensed</i>	
School Counselor	1.0
Nurse	1.0
<i>Non-licensed</i>	
Custodial Staff	3.0
Lunchroom Staff	4.0

Bel Air has 10 full-time core teachers who teach kindergarten through grade five classes and are responsible for content area instruction in math, reading, writing, science, and social studies. There is also one full-time special education teacher and one full-time reading intervention teacher who works primarily with kindergarten through grade three students. The school has four part-time elective teachers – physical education (.4), art (.4), and music (.3 and .4) and a full-time media specialist (also an elective position) who serves as the librarian, technology teacher, and gifted education teacher. Students have one elective each day: library, media, art, music, or physical education. In the 330 minutes of daily instructional time, elective teachers provide 45 minutes (13.6 percent) of instruction (including transition time) and classroom teachers provide the other 285 minutes (86.4 percent). Teachers have planning time while their students are with the elective teachers. A standard formula for the number of elective teachers is to have the number of elective teachers equal to 20 percent of the number of core teachers, which would equal two positions for this school ( $0.2 \times 10$ ). The total at Bel Air is 2.5.

A certified teacher teaches the afternoon prekindergarten program at Bel Air. This year, because of the large class size (23 students), two instructional aides assist in the prekindergarten classroom. When prekindergarten enrollment exceeds the district's recommended class size, the district decides whether a school will receive an additional classroom aid or a second class.

Teachers reported a high level of loyalty to and satisfaction with teaching at Bel Air Elementary. The teacher turnover rate is very low. Over half of the interviewed teachers have been teaching at the school for 10 years or more. This stable staff contributes to a sense of community and facilitates teamwork. The staff is close-knit and supportive of each other. They reported having frequent informal conversations about students, lessons, and curriculum. In addition, the teachers noted the strong support they receive from their principal, who they say has high expectations and encourages them in maintaining a standard of excellence. The principal's expectation is that every teacher is also a learner and is continually improving his or her practice. Teachers are expected to collect data and use them to inform instruction, differentiate to meet the needs of every student, design and meet student learning objective (SLO) targets, and implement relevant and effective instructional strategies.

The support staff and specialists are important parts of the school community as well. One full-time instructional aide supports the kindergarten classes, and there are two full-time special education instructional aides, one of whom works specifically with an individual student.

The small support staff at the school is scheduled carefully to meet the needs of students. The kindergarten aide moves between the two kindergarten classes, which share a large open-space classroom area. The special education teacher and instructional aide construct a schedule to ensure they are in each classroom as needed to provide support to special education students. They also work with those students who, while not officially identified as special education, have learning challenges. This year, students identified for special services are grouped in one



classroom per grade (except for speech-support students) so that the special education staff can provide the necessary support. The reading intervention teacher works with small groups of students and assists teachers with assessment and intervention. In addition, both the principal and the school counselor work daily with small groups of reading students to provide extra support. Time built into the schedule provides a common time for grade-level teachers to plan together and work with specialists.

Ten years ago, Allegany District provided a school counselor for every elementary school. The school counselor plays a central role in building a positive school culture, supporting students and staff members alike. At Bel Air, the counselor teaches classes every day<sup>2</sup> on topics ranging from personal and emotional skills, to study habits and test-taking skills, to career awareness. The counselor's flexible schedule allows her to add lessons if a class-wide issue arises. She also works with small groups of students to discuss behavior-related topics such as fairness and anger management. These groups change frequently, and she tries to include every student in a group at least once between grades two and five. The school counselor also supports the principal in discipline matters, attends individualized education program (IEP) and parent meetings, and serves as the testing coordinator.

Some support staff are shared with other schools in the district. Reading and math specialists visit Bel Air once or twice per month to deliver professional development, share resources, and discuss curricula with teachers. A pupil personnel worker spends one day per week in the school to address attendance, outreach, and family-related issues, and the district provides an occupational therapist, speech pathologist, and school psychologist as needed.

Bel Air Elementary is a Professional Development School (PDS) for Frostburg University. The school regularly hosts interns for field experiences and full-time student teaching. This is a mutually beneficial partnership, as the school's efforts to reach every student are enhanced by having extra educators in the classroom, and interns can learn a great deal about effective practices and professionalism from the experienced Bel Air staff.

While staff members have successfully helped students achieve high outcomes, they expressed concern about increasing workloads, the changing demographic characteristics of their student body, increasing student mobility, and additional assessment and evaluation demands. As the number of FRPM students and the number of students with behavioral and mental health issues increases, the staff anticipates challenges and the need for more personnel to meet students' needs.

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<sup>2</sup> Teachers typically have student-free time for planning or meetings when the school counselor is teaching their classes. Although the counselor has a regular schedule of classes, which is created with teacher input, she is not considered an elective teacher because there is no substitute provided when she is out of the building or in meetings.

### *School Goals*

Bel Air's school goals for the 2014-15 school year focus on improving performance of special education and FRPM students. The principal has also set goals for improving proficiency rates for grade five science and for increasing writing proficiency in grades three and four.

Writing has become integral to both school-wide and individual teacher goals. Every core teacher has a writing-related student learning objective (SLO). The school adopted the 6+1 Writing Traits program by Ruth Culham to create consistency and rigor in the writing curriculum across grade-levels. Bel Air adopted this program in 2012 and teachers participated in school-based learning communities and professional development. Since then, the program has been more widely implemented across the district, and the district has provided additional professional development. Part of the motivation to focus strategically on writing came from the increased emphasis on writing under the Maryland College and Career-Ready Standards (MCCRS). Bel Air's early implementation of the 6+1 Writing Traits program demonstrates the innovative and proactive stance of the principal and teachers.

There is a school-wide theme of reaching excellence, which means doing one's best in every way. When the current principal came to the school eight years ago, Bel Air Elementary lacked a vision. Under her leadership, the staff developed the theme of a School Centered on Reaching Excellence (S.C.O.R.E.), and since then, this vision has influenced teachers, students, and community members as it is woven into curricular, extra-curricular, and professional development activities. Teachers discuss the meaning of excellence with their students, and school activities are designed to explore and promote excellence. The key to reaching excellence is making sure students know what is expected of them and providing the supports they need to reach their goals. The school also recognizes students for doing well. For example, an Eagle Board (the school's mascot is an eagle) displayed "feathers" that faculty, staff, and students earned when they demonstrated excellence (i.e. through positive actions or words, academic achievement, good citizenship, etc.). The principal noted that such incentive programs are designed to make students know that their actions matter and that they are cared for. The Reaching Excellence mission is not only a school goal; it is part of the day-to-day character of the school that contributes to the warm and purposeful community environment.

### *School Schedule and Collaborative Planning Time*

The 390-minute day is organized as described in Table 5.

**Table 5**  
**Daily Distribution of School Day at Bel Air Elementary School**

Class or Activity	Kindergarten	Grades 1-3	Grades 4-5
Language Arts	120	120	120
Mathematics	40	60	70
Science/Health/Social Studies	40	45	60
Spelling/Handwriting	-	25	-
Intervention/Enrichment	30	30	30
Literature	10	10	10
Morning Meeting	20	-	-
Centers	30	-	-
Resource (Elective) Classes	40	40	40
Lunch/ Recess	60	60	60

The teacher workday is 8:10 a.m. to 3:40 p.m. Students may arrive at 8:15 for an optional breakfast. The school day begins with announcements at 8:50 and ends with dismissal at 3:20.

Core teachers provide instruction for five of these six-and-a-half hours. In addition, core teachers perform lunch or recess duty twice each week. In addition to teaching their content areas, elective teachers assist with lunch or recess duty once each week.

All teachers have daily planning time, common to grade-levels, while students attend electives, and additional student-free time in the morning (8:10 to 8:40) and during lunch or recess when they are not on duty. This time can be used for individual or grade-level planning, planning with specialists (such as the district reading or math specialist or the school’s reading intervention teacher), and principal-led meetings. For example, the special education teacher plans with a different grade-level team each morning, and the principal holds grade-level meetings bi-weekly. Teachers reported that these regular times for collaborative planning and formal and informal discussions about students and curriculum are critical to creating a sense of community and to supporting each student’s success. Teachers use planning time to share ideas and resources, review data, and to discuss student progress and needs. However, teachers also noted a need for more time to explore new resources, particularly online resources, and curriculum materials provided by the district, school, or specialists. As they continue to adapt to the new Common Core curriculum, teachers feel pressed for time to identify and explore fully the supplemental instructional resources to support the implementation of the new curriculum and to prepare students for new assessments.

## *Curriculum and Instructional Program*

Bel Air Elementary teachers follow the Allegany County Public Schools (ACPS) curriculum. ACPS revised the reading and math curricula to align them with the MCCRS, and the district was in the process of developing a new science curriculum at the time of the site visit. The principal and teachers noted the flexibility the district provides them in selecting supplemental resources to meet the instructional needs of students; the principal said teachers are encouraged to branch out to find resources to enhance the curriculum. The district's reading and math specialists have helped teachers learn the new curriculum, and the state-sponsored CCSS Summer Academy workshops provided additional professional development opportunities.

Instruction at Bel Air is data-driven. Teachers continually monitor reading and math progress with classroom assessments and quarterly district benchmark assessments. They review data with the reading intervention teacher, grade-level teachers, and the principal, and use results to group students and inform instruction. The principal noted a need for assessments that align with the new PARCC tests, and teachers anticipate some challenges during the transition to PARCC, both because of the online format, which will be new to students, and because of the lack of benchmarks to help with preparation.

### **Reading**

Distinguishing features of the reading program are the use of a variety of curriculum materials, a focus on individual learning needs, early intervention, and flexible grouping practices. These practices are supported by targeted professional development on strategies to differentiate instruction and common planning times when teachers can work with the special education teacher, the reading specialist, and other grade-level teachers to review data, reorganize groups, and plan targeted instruction. Small class sizes facilitate the ability of teachers to provide instruction tailored to individual student learning needs. Writing and reading are integrated across subjects, with teachers using the 6+1 Writing Traits program described above.

### ***Curriculum Materials and Individualized Instruction***

The school-wide reading curriculum is based on *Houghton Mifflin Reading*, which incorporates Leveled Readers by Irene Fountas, anthologies for reading groups, and a variety of supplemental resources for supporting readers at all levels. Although this series provides the core for the reading curriculum, the principal emphasized that reading instruction focuses on finding a way to help each student become a more proficient reader.

To supplement the district's curricular materials, teachers seek additional resources, often recommended by the district's reading specialist, to individualize reading instruction and support all learners. For example, the staff worked together to fund and create homemade "whisper

phones,” phone-like devices that allow students to hear themselves read aloud without disturbing the rest of the class. Teachers also draw on their knowledge of students and assessment data to select texts that are both developmentally appropriate and engaging for groups and individual students. Teachers noted that the small class size in the early grades is key to their ability to meet the needs of each student.

### ***Early Intervention***

Early intervention is critical to helping all students become proficient readers, so Bel Air directs resources to supporting kindergarten through grade three students who need extra help in reading. Students who are identified for reading intervention receive daily pull-out, small group support with the reading intervention teacher. These groups are comprised primarily of kindergarten to grade three students, but sometimes grade four students are included based on need. Reading intervention curricula include Wilson’s Foundations, a phonemic awareness, phonics, and spelling program; Early Reading Intervention (ERI), a letter-sounds review used mostly in kindergarten; and Voyager, an intensive study of first sounds. A trained instructional aide assists with students placed in Voyager groups. The reading intervention teacher meets regularly with classroom teachers to align their goals for each student and to review data.

### ***Flexible Grouping***

Small flexible groups are also a key element in building the reading success of Bel Air students. The reading block includes whole group instruction followed by small group instruction and independent reading time. The reading intervention teacher and the classroom teachers use DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills) reading assessments to assess students and create reading groups. Teachers provide input into the placement of students, and groups are flexible, so students can move in and out of groups or to different groups as they progress or need more support. Students are grouped with peers with similar reading levels and instruction and materials are tailored to each group’s needs. In order to provide additional support for reading groups, the principal and counselor each lead a daily small group in the grade three classes. The special education teacher and the special education instructional aide provide additional individual and small group reading support in classrooms with students with IEP in reading.

### **Math**

As with the reading program, the math program at Bel Air focuses on meeting the needs of individual students. Key strategies include integrating a variety of curriculum materials and instructional approaches that are customized and adjusted for individual learning needs. The experience of the staff and the small class sizes contribute to the teachers’ ability to differentiate and support all students.

### ***Curriculum Materials***

The ACPS elementary math curriculum is based on Pearson’s enVisionMATH program and textbook series. Teachers reported using the core textbook as a resource rather than the central part of their math planning and teaching. District administrators and the principal have encouraged teachers to go beyond the textbook and find resources that address MCCRS.

Teachers noted that teaching the new standards is quite different than the traditional skills-based curriculum used under the previous standards. In order to accommodate the change, teachers seek out and develop cross-curricular lessons that encourage problem solving and critical thinking. In addition, teachers integrate Number Talks, a district initiative, into their daily instruction. These mini-lessons help student think through and articulate problem solving, use math vocabulary, and increase math literacy. Teachers reported a positive impact on students’ learning since implementing Number Talks.

### ***Individualized Instruction***

Bel Air teachers have received professional development in Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which emphasizes strategies for identifying the needs of individual students and tailoring instruction to those needs. Teachers spoke extensively about the strategies they use to differentiate math instruction, including using flexible small groups and Choice Board. Upper grade-level teachers described using peer tutors to help provide individualized support. All teachers integrate a variety of online, subscription-based math resources such as IXL and Sokikom, personalized math programs that align with MCCRS and help scaffold students toward more and more rigorous problem-solving skills. The teachers reported that these programs engage students in learning and have helped improve student performance. The programs also produce individualized progress reports, which teachers use to monitor growth and inform instruction. While these online resources have proven beneficial, the school cannot afford individual subscriptions for each student, which would allow students to continue their work at home. Teachers must be creative in how they use their limited subscription numbers so that students receive the support they need.

### **Science**

Bel Air uses a science textbook from McGraw Hill, but at the time of the site visit, there was no district science curriculum. ACPS is developing a curriculum guide that will align with Next Generation Science Standards. For now, teachers work to integrate science into reading and math lessons through informational texts and inquiry activities. Emphasis is placed on cross-curricular lessons, including connecting the content in elective classes to what students are learning in their regular classroom. For example, the physical education teacher incorporates a science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) vocabulary word, such as velocity or force, into every lesson.

One of the principal's SLOs for 2014-15 was to increase science proficiency among students in grade five. In order to improve performance, special education and FRPM subgroups receive small-group instruction on the testing technology. Teachers will focus on UDL strategies for science lessons to meet the needs of all learners, and STEM lessons will continue to be emphasized in the grade five curriculum.

### *Assessments*

Bel Air uses a variety of state, district, and school/classroom-based assessments to monitor student progress and identify individual learning needs. There are district-wide, quarterly benchmark tests in reading and math, and science benchmark tests for grade five students. Data from these tests are supplemented with classroom-based assessments, which inform instruction and instructional grouping in math and reading. As mentioned above, the school is preparing for the transition to the PARCC tests this year (2014-15). While there are concerns about the online format and the unfamiliar nature of the content and structures of the exams, teachers noted that they have been working hard to prepare students for the PARCC tests by familiarizing them with the technology and by implementing lessons that align with MCCRS.

Teachers regularly review data from standardized and classroom-based assessments. The principal leads grade-level and school-wide meetings to discuss data and compare Bel Air data with other district schools. These school-level data inform professional development and School Improvement Goals. Teachers meet with grade-level teams and specialists to discuss class and individual student data produced by district assessments. These data, along with classroom data, inform lesson planning and grouping strategies. Teachers also use these data to develop their SLOs, which require a pre-conference, mid-point conference, and a post-conference with the principal to discuss student performance data.

Looking forward, teachers voiced apprehension about how students would perform on the PARCC tests this year (spring 2015), since the assessments are new and the online format will be a change for students. Also, they noted that there are few scientifically-based benchmark assessments to help inform instruction and measure how students are progressing towards PARCC readiness. Teachers have been adapting to the Common Core curriculum and working to prepare each student for success, but many unknowns remain as the PARCC test is rolled out this year.

### *Extra Help Strategies for Students at Risk of Academic Failure*

Bel Air teachers place great emphasis on meeting the needs of every student and providing extra support for students at risk of academic failure. Each teacher uses UDL principles to differentiate learning, a process that is made more effective because of the small class sizes and enhanced by an experienced staff. A variety of supports are available for students who need extra help.

Intervention teachers (reading and special education) provide support for students at risk of academic failure during the school day. Intervention teachers work closely with classroom teachers to identify learning needs, interventions tailored to those needs, and resources to support instruction. The school's three full-time instructional aides work with individuals and small groups to provide additional help. Students at risk of academic failure are grouped for instruction according to their needs, and because groups are flexible, students can move into and out of groups as their instructional needs change. Grouping is facilitated by additional hands in the classroom, be it the principal, counselor, instructional aides, and even interns.

There are specific interventions in place for students who struggle with reading. The reading intervention teacher works with small groups of students in kindergarten to grade three to provide daily support. She uses programs such as Foundations, Voyager, and ERI (described above) to help students build strong foundations in phonics and literacy, and increase reading proficiency. Early intervention is an important part of this work, so the reading intervention teacher works closely with the classroom teachers to assess and monitor students in the early grades.

Supporting students who struggle in math is more challenging, since there are no math intervention teachers in ACPS. Teachers work with the special educator to meet IEP math requirements, and they use small group and individual instruction to help students at risk of academic failure. Online, personalized resources such as Sokikom and IXL (described above) were identified as key math support and enrichment strategies. Efforts have begun to do more parent outreach regarding math instruction. Many parents have expressed confusion or frustration with the new MCCRS math curriculum, so Bel Air staff and administration are reaching out through workshops and sending information home so parents are better able to support their children.

Families can take advantage of several local or district initiatives to receive additional academic support. There is a district-wide summer school program, but it is not held at Bel Air. The principal said that not many Bel Air students attend summer school. Some Bel Air students attend an after-school program at the local YMCA, where they receive homework help. This program is not affiliated with the public school, but it is a helpful resource for some families.

According to the principal, having the time to communicate and collaborate among the staff is key to supporting students. For example, the special education teacher plans each morning with different grade-level teachers. The principal explained, "We've had 100 percent of special education students passing. This is pretty amazing, given our limited staff and resources." She said good communication is essential because classroom teachers must help in the work of meeting the IEP.



Many of the interviewed teachers also noted the importance of having time for communication and collaboration. Collaborative planning time as well as informal collaborations allow the staff to work as a team to solve problems and identify resources and strategies to meet students' academic and social/emotional needs. The open design of the school and the small staff size were also conducive to communication and collaboration.

The principal foresees more students requiring extra help in math as curriculum and testing changes occur and the number of FRPM and special needs students increases. Meeting those needs will require more funding for personnel and resources.

### *Behavior and Attendance Support*

Bel Air has a full-time school counselor who provides support for both students and teachers. She is the attendance coordinator, and calls the home of each absent student every day. She also meets with individual and small groups of students to develop interpersonal and personal skills. She also attends to any behavior, social and emotional issues they may have. This work contributes to the students' individual growth and helps them build positive relationships with peers and staff. She also works with teachers to develop behavior intervention plans and attends all IEP meetings when behavior is part of the plan. The counselor also serves as the testing coordinator and works with students on test-taking and study skills.

The principal noted an increase in the number of students requiring emotional, social, or behavioral support as student mobility increases and the demographic characteristics of the student body change. She anticipates a need for additional personnel and supports to adequately address these issues. For example, with the State's move to reduce suspensions, many schools rely on a Learning Assistance Room (LAP), staffed by an instructional aide, to address behavioral issues. Bel Air does not have these resources, or an assistant principal to assume responsibility for in-school behavioral interventions.

### *Professional Development*

The school provides ample time for professional development. Professional development occurs formally and informally, according to the interviewed teachers, as teachers share and collaborate. Sometimes teacher-to-teacher professional development occurs formally during a school-wide or team meeting, when someone shares information about strategies he/she learned at a workshop. More often, though, such collaborative learning occurs during planning periods and between classes as teachers discuss challenges, seek advice, share strategies, and review data with one another.

The principal and school counselor serve as the instructional coaches at Bel Air. The SLO process has provided opportunities for individual coaching as the principal meets with each teacher to discuss goals and encourage rigorous data collection and analysis. The school also has cross-grade-level team leaders in math, STEM, and English Language Arts. These staff members

attend district-sponsored training sessions and then deliver professional development (PD) to their colleagues at Bel Air. Time allotted during monthly faculty meetings and bi-weekly grade-level meetings allows teachers to share, learn, and discuss around specific topics and issues. The principal also seeks opportunities to have outside speakers provide training. Recently, they have had speakers from the local library and Frostburg University.

Teachers have opportunities to participate in district-wide professional learning communities with other elementary teachers and attend annual district-led PD sessions. The district often sets general guidelines for school-based professional development, but the principal continually surveys her teachers to discover their needs and tailors professional development accordingly. In recent years, a lot of emphasis has been placed on identifying individual student needs, differentiation, and finding strategies and resources to help support a variety of learners. Several teachers mentioned the need for more time to fully explore and embrace the new curriculum changes and materials.

Teachers expressed concern that recently there has been more professional development time devoted to teacher evaluation preparation and other procedural matters. While they acknowledge the importance of these topics, they also noted that they have had less time to focus on curriculum and instruction topics during professional development sessions.

### *School Culture and Leadership*

Bel Air is a school that balances professionalism, warmth, hard work, and fun. The school's open design allows voices and laughter to carry throughout the building in a way that is engaging but not distracting, setting a friendly and energetic tone. Teachers and parents work to make the school visually appealing with colorful bulletin boards and displays of student work. Evidence of learning and personal touches that capture the personality of the teachers and students can be seen everywhere.

Every staff member interviewed remarked about the positive relationships that exist between staff members. They said things such as, "We genuinely care about each other and about the students," "We have each other's back," and "We all work together. We really all get along." Such relationships set a positive tone in the school, and the teachers noted that students respond to this tone and act accordingly. It is also a welcoming environment for parents. Even bus drivers, cafeteria workers, and custodial staff are part of the family-like culture. Teachers and support staff tend to stay at the school for many years, deepening the sense of community. The close-knit, supportive, and positive staff relationships are certainly one of the school's greatest assets and an important, if intangible, element of its success.

Teachers report that students want to be in school, and records show high rates of attendance. The positive school culture and the supportive staff create an environment that is enjoyable for students and conducive to learning. The school counselor's work to address social, emotional,

and interpersonal needs also helps build relationships and a positive environment. Teachers noted that students feel safe and cared for when they are at school.

Bel Air is also characterized by strong and caring leadership. Teachers noted that the principal has high expectations and holds them accountable, but she supports them in meeting these expectations. They feel like the principal understands their work and cares about them and the students. There is mutual respect, trust, and openness between the principal and staff.

The school's mission and vision of being a "School Centered on Reaching Excellence" undergirds the academic work and social interactions at the school. Hard work, respect, and care are openly encouraged, modeled, and recognized as part of the excellence focus. Student learning and growth are taken seriously and assumed to be the shared responsibility of the administrators and teachers. Outreach efforts welcome parents to share in this work and provide encouragement and resources to help them.

In addition, Bel Air has small class sizes, a dedicated support staff, and strong parent involvement. These factors contribute to the school's success and students' high achievement levels.

### *Summary and Future Challenges*

Bel Air has achieved impressive student achievement results. There are multiple, interrelated components that have led to the impressive results, including the following:

1. School-wide emphasis on meeting the needs of each student. Teachers use UDL strategies, flexible groups, and a variety of resource materials for differentiating instruction and engaging students. They regularly collect and review data and adjust instruction accordingly. Early intervention and ongoing monitoring have resulted in success for all students.
2. Small school and a homogenous student population.
3. Small class sizes. The average class size at Bel Air is 20 students. Small classes facilitate differentiation and small group instruction. Teachers are able to attend to each child.
4. Support personnel. The school support staff includes a special education teacher, reading intervention teacher, and instructional aides that address students' needs and facilitate small group instruction. These support staff members work closely with teachers to plan instructional interventions and assess student learning.
5. Time for collaboration and communication. Grade-level teachers share common planning times every day, and additional planning time before-school allows teachers to meet with others in the building. Formal collaboration occurs during common planning time, faculty meetings, and principal-led team meetings. Informal collaboration is continuous,

occurring throughout the day and before and after school. Every teacher interviewed identified the school's collaborative culture as a critical part of its success.

6. Strong leadership. There is mutual respect between the principal and staff. The principal sets high expectations and provides abundant support to teachers. She understands the many demands on teachers' time, so is strategic in how she implements initiatives. She said, "I don't pressure them with 'busy work' or work not related to their students' learning." The principal gives teachers a great deal of independence and support in their teaching, and teachers respond with dedication and creativity.
7. Positive school culture. It is a place where students, teachers, and staff members want to be. There is a genuine sense of caring and support within the school, which is continually strengthened by the proactive efforts of the principal and counselor. A school-wide emphasis on excellence sets high expectations for students and teachers.

The principal and staff have worked hard to achieve strong student achievement results. When asked about challenges that will affect continued improvement, they identified four things:

- 1 Changing student populations. Bel Air has seen an increase in the number of FRPMS students it enrolls, and also in the number of students who require emotional and behavioral support. The principal and staff anticipate that these patterns will continue based on the demographic changes in the district and community, and a district-wide economic downturn. Additional resources, both physical and in personnel, will be needed meet these needs.
- 2 Staffing. As a small school, Bel Air must maximize the staff available to them. The teachers that offer extra support (i.e. special education and reading intervention) are extremely busy each day. If the changing student population means that more students will need support, additional staff will be needed.
- 3 Financial Resources. Individualized instruction requires that teachers have access to a multitude of resources. Additional funding for resources such as universal subscriptions to online math programs like Sokikom would facilitate continuous improvement.
- 4 New initiatives, assessments, and curriculum. There are many unknowns related to the new PARCC tests, and teachers expressed concern about how best to prepare students. While they look forward to having the data from this first year of testing so they can begin shifting instruction as needed, there is a sense of anxiety about how the new exams will impact the students and the school. Teachers also noted that parents struggle to help their children with the new math curriculum. Overall, teachers felt they needed more time to learn and adjust to the many curricular, assessment, and evaluation initiatives that are being implemented.

### *Alignment with EB Model*

The strategies and structures in place at Bel Air Elementary align with several aspects of the evidence-based model.

Areas of alignment include the following:

1. Clear measurable goals. School-wide goals and individual teacher goals relate to student performance. Data are used to measure progress.
2. Sufficient staffing. The school employs enough core teachers to keep class sizes fairly small and enough elective teachers to provide adequate student-free time for core teachers to plan and attend regular meetings.
3. Effective curriculum and instruction program. The district curriculum provides helpful structure, and teachers are encouraged to supplement and modify the curriculum as needed. A school-wide emphasis on UDL and differentiations addresses the needs of all learners. Kindergarten to grade three emphasizes learning reading basics including phonics.
4. Interventions for students at risk of academic failure. The reading specialist, along with classroom teachers, provides early intervention in reading through a variety of curricular programs and resources. A school-wide commitment to individualized instruction promotes success for all learners.
5. Collaboration. The small, close-knit staff regularly shares ideas and resources. Grade-level teams share common planning time each day. Specialists regularly consult with and/or co-plan with core teachers.
6. Strong leadership. The principal sets high expectations for teachers and provides the supports they need to reach their goals. There is mutual respect between the principal and teachers;
7. Deliberate and ongoing professional development. The principal at Bel Air surveys her staff to determine professional development needs. PD is provided at the district-level and also at the school-level.
8. Data-driven decision making. Teachers are trained and supported in using disaggregated data to inform instruction.
9. Accountability. Teachers and administrators work together to meet school and student needs. The principal meets regularly with each teacher to plan and discuss SLO goals.