



# Louisa May Alcott Elementary School

Cleveland, OH

Principal: **Eileen Mangan Stull**  
Superintendent: **Eugene Sanders**  
School type: **District**  
Grades served: **K-5**

- 236** Student enrollment
- 100.0** Percent economically disadvantaged
- 55.8** Percent non-white
- 34.3** Percent of students with disabilities
- 16** Teachers' average years of experience
- \$70,036** Average teacher salary
- \$12,980** Total expenditure per pupil

- When educators hear the word *collaboration*, they immediately think of lesson-sharing, open discussions about curriculum and instruction, and (if optimistic) a common educational vision that their colleagues embrace. Yet at Louisa May Alcott Elementary in Cleveland, one only has to observe the school's approach to reading instruction to realize that here, collaboration goes at least one step beyond the pale.

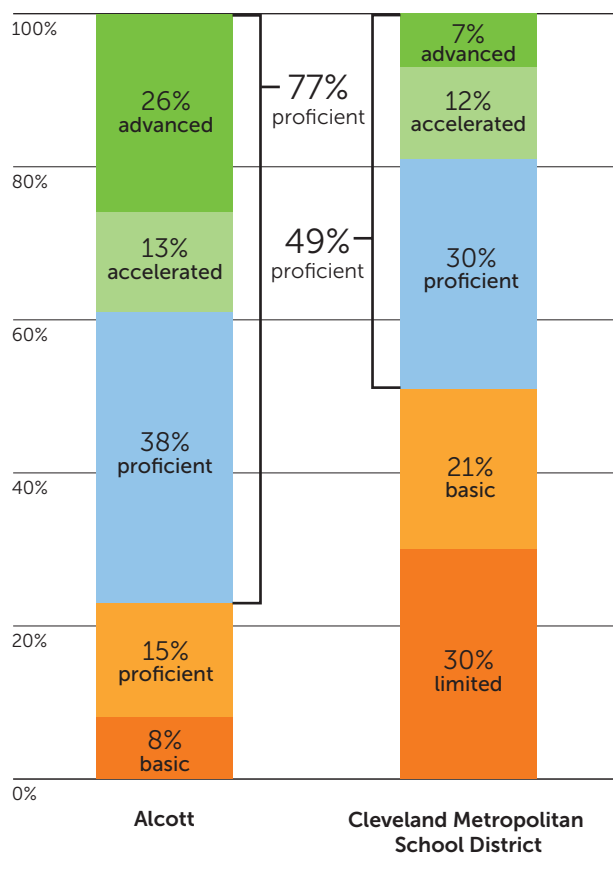
- Alcott teachers use the Direct Instruction (DI) reading program, a curriculum that groups students by reading ability and then provides consistent, highly scripted lessons for systematically improving reading skills and comprehension. During Direct Instruction time, teachers and instructional aides fan out amongst small groups

- SOURCE FOR CHARTS: Ohio Department of Education interactive Local Report Card, 2008-09; reading and math calculations performed by Fordham Institute, see endnote 11.

of students (who are assigned to groups according to their reading progress) and lead them through the prescribed lessons. Hallways, conference rooms, classrooms, and any other available space become havens for these flexible reading groups. Each teacher and aide is assigned a reading group, sometimes made up of students from different grade levels. For the block of time allotted to DI, the school's faculty is united both within and across grade levels to ensure the program's effectiveness.

This level of teamwork—as well as the shared vision that accompanies it—has paid dividends in terms of student achievement. Alcott's scores on the Ohio

## Reading



Percent of students by reading proficiency level, 2008-09 (Alcott vs. district)



Achievement Tests far outpace the Cleveland Metropolitan Schools average—by double-digit percentage points. On the 2009 tests, 77 percent of Alcott's students were proficient in reading and 75 percent in math, compared to the district averages of 49 percent in reading and 41 percent in math. Principal Eileen Mangan Stull credits the hard work of the staff for the success. "These teachers don't sit down—they're constantly working."

## An Evolution

Alcott occupies an historic building on the west side of Cleveland near Lake Erie. Though it has existed since the 1920s, the school's current configuration dates back to 1997 (Alcott housed a vocational center for many years). Many of the staff members have worked at Alcott since the school's reopening, and remember that its success wasn't immediate.





—● *“Once the school got a taste of success, we wanted more.” – Ryan Head, fourth- and fifth-grade math teacher*

“It took a good two to three years before we saw it [success],” noted Ryan Head, a fourth- and fifth-grade math teacher. According to Mr. Head and other original staff members, Alcott’s first principal (Principal Stull is only the second) tightly managed the staff—and was exacting about curriculum choices and instruction. The school employed Direct Instruction for reading and the equally prescriptive Saxon Math. “We needed that structure and toughness at first,” said Head. “Once the school got a taste of success, we wanted more.”

Alcott’s story, like that of several other schools profiled in this report, supports the notion that success breeds success. When Alcott’s first principal retired and Ms. Stull took over, the school’s environment evolved. The intense, early management was no longer necessary as staff members had progressed professionally, turnover remained low, and the positive yet demanding culture was firmly established. Principal Stull allowed the staff to develop curriculum pieces on their own. Saxon Math was later replaced by a blend of materials that focused on higher-order problem solving skills as well as the basics.

Yet the high academic expectations for students and the expectations for staff collaboration remained. In terms of academic achievement, Principal Stull noted

the school's goal to raise its Performance Index from 95.1 to 102.2 – an increase that would also earn the school an “Excellent” rating under the state’s accountability system (of 144 schools in Cleveland, only nine have an “Excellent” rating). As for collaboration, all of the staff interviewed remarked on the continuous dialogue regarding instruction that takes place at Alcott. Principal Stull has an “open door” policy and works hard to create consensus about major decisions at the school. The district’s regional superintendent for Alcott, Cliff Hayes, Jr., described the school as having adopted a “culture of ‘we.’”

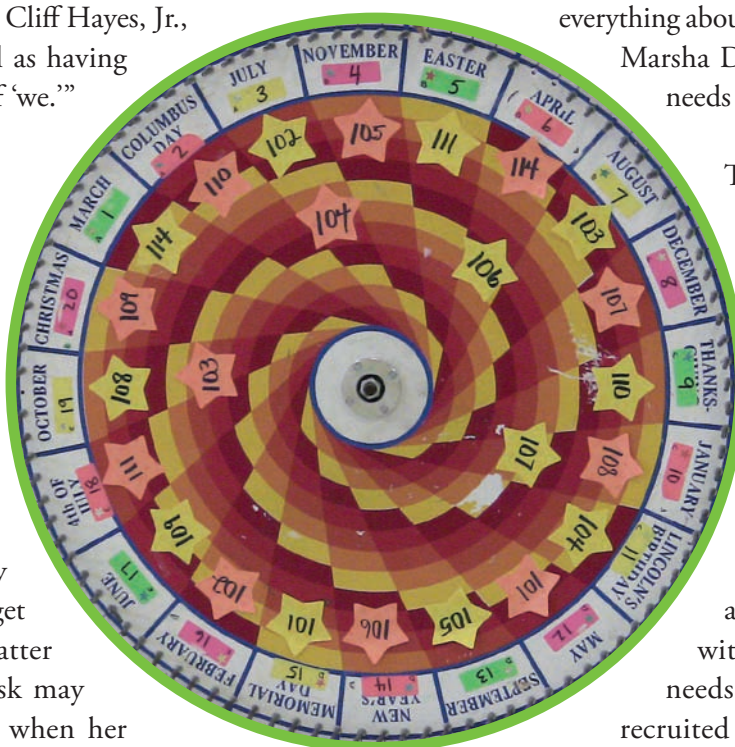
### Leading by Example

It doesn't take long to see what a critical factor leadership plays at Alcott. A former Catholic school leader, Principal Stull exudes both a positive energy and a willingness to get things done no matter how difficult the task may seem. For instance, when her staff needed updated (and expensive) Direct Instruction materials outside her budget, Principal Stull recognized the staff's investment in the program and negotiated a deal with the publisher to obtain the materials. That deal even included her traveling across the state to pick up the materials, in order to save shipping costs.

Similarly, it is likely that parents of students with attendance issues will find Principal Stull at the door of their house or apartment. She has been known to go and pick up absent students for school herself.

Neighborhood families (Alcott enrolls a mix of intra-district choice and neighborhood students) will also get a visit from Principal Stull—just to touch base and build those ever-important relationships. And more than a couple of parents interviewed marveled at her knowledge of and care for the students.

“This principal pulls kids aside if they’re not having a good day,” remarked Maurice Sledge, a father of triplets attending Alcott. “Ms. Stull knows everything about every student,” added Marsha Dumas, Alcott’s special needs bus driver.



The results of this type of proactive leadership are twofold. First, Alcott benefits from high levels of parental and community engagement, and second, the efforts of staff members are simultaneously recognized and encouraged. To help students with additional reading needs, Principal Stull has recruited several retired nuns, who meet one-on-one with targeted children. Parents, too, are present and welcomed at Alcott—whether they are talking with staff or helping with the morning assembly. As for staff, instructional aide Gail Anderson perhaps stated it best: “We all work as a team in this building. If we see a child who needs help, we help her.”

### Special Needs at Alcott

One component of the federal No Child Left Behind Act insists that schools be held accountable for the





achievement of special needs students. Thus, it's not unusual for many educators to view these students as a liability when it comes to school performance. Such educators would not fare well at Alcott, where one-third of students (34 percent) have a disability. Yet Alcott's faculty and staff are emphatic that a student's special needs are just that, and not an excuse for low expectations. Driving this point home is the incredible success Alcott has in educating its special needs students. In 2009, 59 percent of students with disabilities at Alcott achieved proficiency in reading and 54 percent in math on the state tests. In comparison, just 23 percent of district students with disabilities were proficient in reading, and only 19 percent were proficient in math.

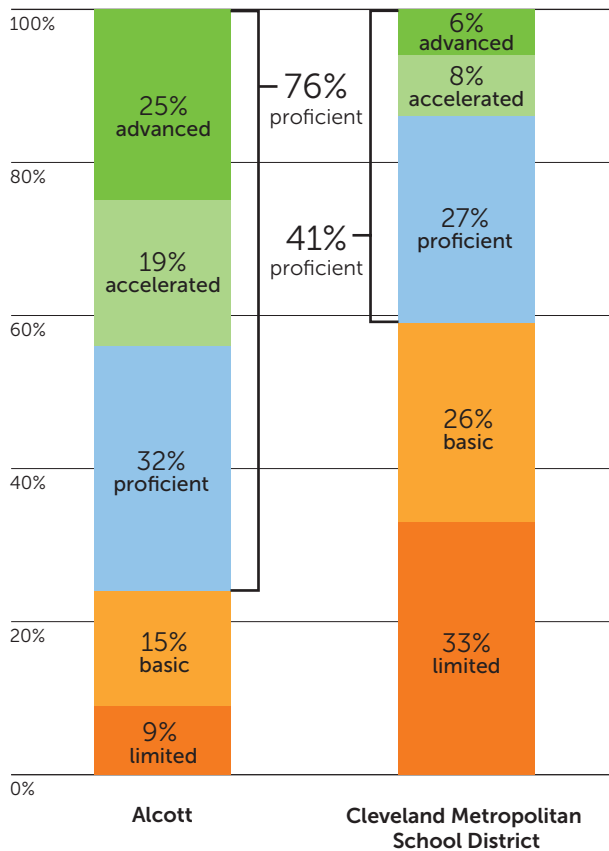
The large population of special needs students at Alcott plays an important role in focusing the faculty's efforts to deliver individualized instruction. Most special needs students attend inclusion classrooms,

which are staffed with an inclusion teacher to help the traditional subject area teachers. The emphasis on small group work helps both the regular and special education teachers attend to all students. "In this setting, you can barely even tell who the special needs students are," Principal Stull pointed out during a class visit.

— *"In this setting, you can barely even tell who the special needs students are." – Principal Eileen Stull*

Parents of special needs students at Alcott can attest to the school's success in educating their children. Lisa and Tom Teti, whose son is a second grader, cited the learning environment and constant communication with teachers as two factors that set Alcott apart from other schools. Principal Stull was another. "I feel like I could trust Eileen with anything," said Lisa

## Math



Percent of students by math proficiency level, 2008-09 (Alcott vs. district)

Teti. During the interview with the Tetis, Principal Stull burst in and called everyone into the hallway: a boy with severe disabilities at the school was walking in a gait for the first time with the help of a physical therapist. Lisa Teti smiled and added, “That’s what makes this school special.”

## Low-Income, Not Inner-City

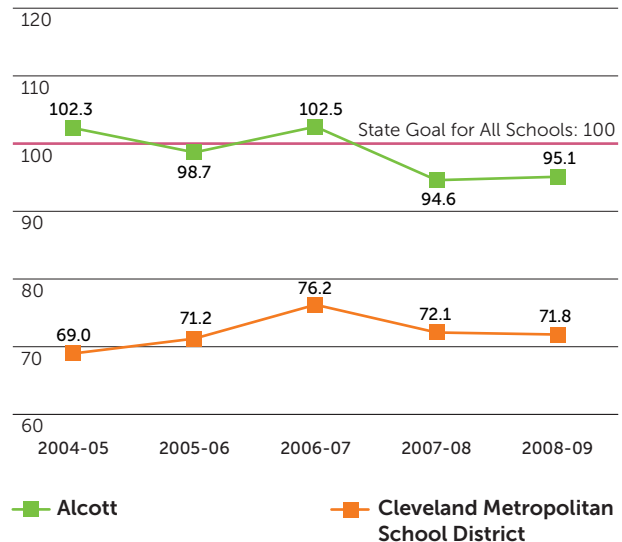
Like the other schools profiled in this report, Louisa May Alcott educates predominantly low-income students (in 2009, 100 percent of its student population was “economically disadvantaged”), a fact that makes it all the more impressive. Alcott is not what one would

describe as an “inner-city” school. The neighborhood in which it is located isn’t completely impoverished. Some parents are homeowners, most hold jobs.

However, the challenges students bring to Alcott are no less difficult to tackle than at other urban schools. Many students bring problems from home, arrive behind grade level academically, and enroll lacking basic social or emotional coping skills. However, the strength of the school’s culture—along with a core of stable students and faculty—enable new students to be quickly assimilated into the routines and way of life at the school. As more than a few teachers noted, newly enrolled or transfer students who misbehave are quickly corrected by both teachers and students. Achievement, respect, and self-discipline are the standards, not aspirations.

Chantelle, a fourth grader who recently transferred from another local school, explained it this way: “There was too much talking [at my old school]. This school is more educational.”

## Performance Index



Performance index scores over time (Alcott vs. district)