

# What makes middle schools work

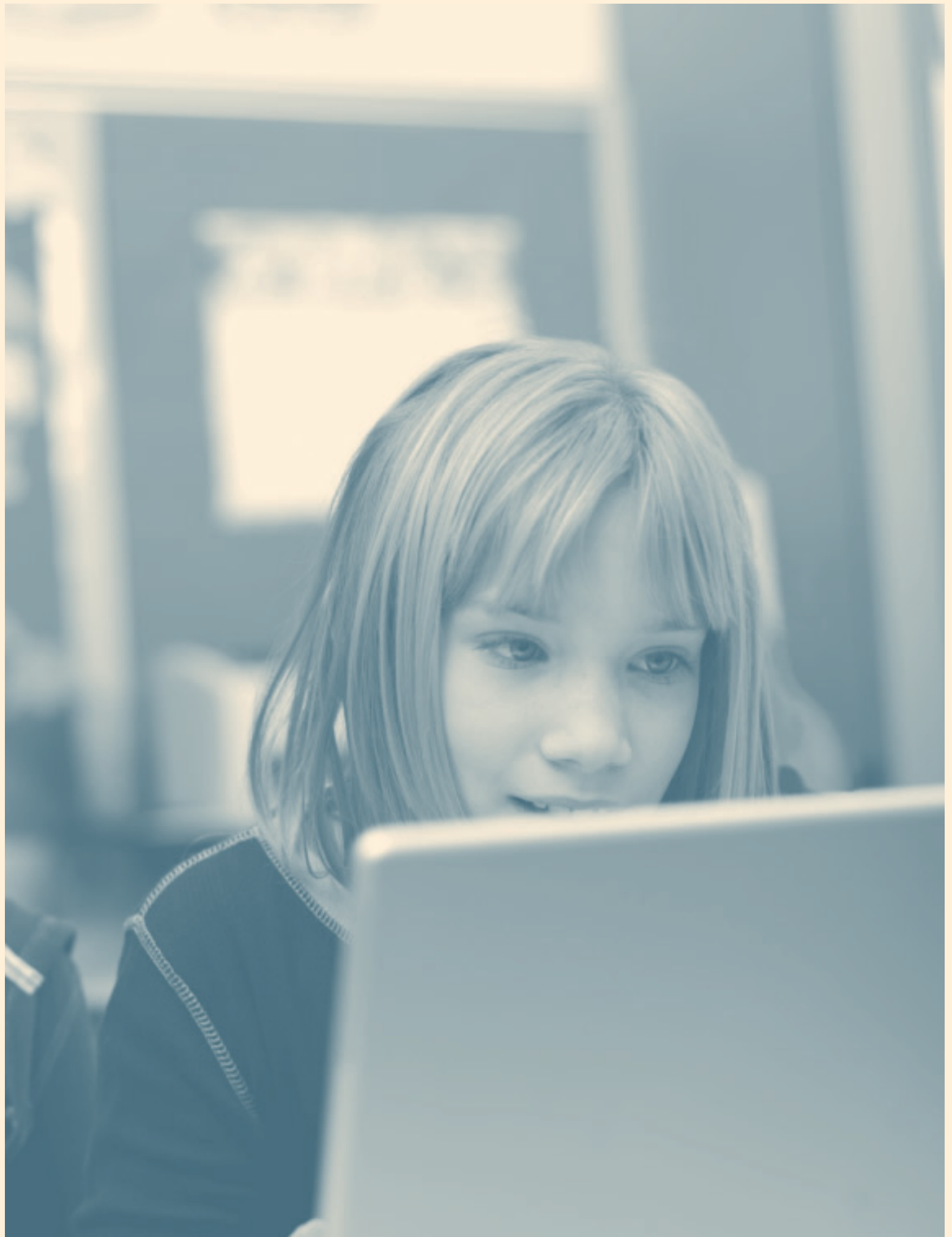


A report on best practices  
in New York State middle  
schools. Part of *Just For  
the Kids—New York*.



UNIVERSITY  
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State University of New York



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**2007 Kristen Campbell Wilcox with Janet I. Angelis**  
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Our special thanks to the teachers and administrators of the ten higher-performing schools we visited:

**J. Taylor Finley Middle School, Huntington Union Free School District**  
**Holland Middle School, Holland Central School District**  
**John F. Kennedy Middle School, Utica City School District**  
**Albert Leonard Middle School, The City School District of New Rochelle**  
**Niagara Middle School, Niagara Falls City School District**  
**Port Chester Middle School, Port Chester-Rye Union Free School District**  
**Queensbury Middle School, Queensbury Union Free School District**  
**Vernon-Verona-Sherrill Middle School, Sherrill City School District**  
**West Middle School, Binghamton City School District**  
**Westbury Middle School, Westbury Union Free School District**

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K. Wilcox  
J. Angelis  
August 2007

# The ten higher-performing middle schools studied

**J Taylor Finley MS,**  
Huntington



**Holland MS,**  
Holland



**J F Kennedy MS,**  
Utica



**Albert Leonard MS,**  
New Rochelle



**Niagara MS,**  
Niagara Falls



Photo: Niagara Gazette

A diverse population enriches this 650-student school. Embracing “what is common among us and not what is different,” staff work together to be sure that all students gain the knowledge and skills they need. Teams collaborate daily on student issues, sharing information and resources. They are expected to follow the teacher-developed curriculum maps and teach to the stated objectives, but no single instructional approach is mandated. Teachers as well as community members serve on key decision-making committees; the administration goes out into the community and also invites parents in. The school makes a special effort to reach parents of minority students and of children who are underperforming, offering strategies for them to help their children succeed.

With fewer than 400 students, this rural school is the center of its community. Respect and responsibility—including the responsibility to do one’s best—are twin goals that staff constantly model and reinforce to students, as they strive to build character as the basis for student success. Teachers work together in learning communities and use common meeting time for professional development, which includes work on curriculum, instruction, assessment, and student needs. The administration seeks to hire teachers who give personal attention to students and never give up on any student. Communication and trust between and among teachers and administrators support their efforts, where the goal each year is to improve performance 5%.

Educators compete to work in this large school (more than 1000 students) because of its “can do” attitude. Like the students, they feel safe and supported as they strive to meet the personal and academic needs of every student, many of whom are recent immigrants. Limited resources and high poverty levels increase the challenges, which are met with a curriculum aligned with state standards and constantly assessed and updated. Progress and achievement are monitored, and adjustments to instruction and/or schedule made in response. For example, when block scheduling didn’t lead to student achievement gains, the school tweaked the schedule to add more instructional time in smaller groups in mathematics and English language arts.

This 1200+ student school strives for excellence and equity amid a changing demographic. Despite increasing prosperity in the city, more of its students’ families are not sharing in the economic growth. Nevertheless, it continues to maintain very high expectations for performance by all on the same core curriculum. To accomplish this, the school organizes teachers and students into clusters that enable teachers to know students well and to offer integrated instruction with arts as a focus. The curriculum is articulated, monitored, and evaluated constantly. Classes are grouped heterogeneously, with instruction differentiated. This instruction takes place within a safe and nurturing culture that strives to make all students believe that they can be learners at a high level.

Collaboration within the school as well as with community partners characterizes this 600-student school. Teachers strive for deep understanding, providing instruction that allows students opportunities for personal choice, group problem solving, and independent decision making. Both teachers and the principal pay close attention to student work to “be sure they get it”; if not, they adjust instruction accordingly, working with their teams as well as with specialists. Also assisting and supporting teachers is ongoing, job-embedded professional development, including with district-based literacy and mathematics coaches. Teachers report being “treated as professionals” and are involved in decision making, problem solving, and sharing successful practices at conferences and meetings.

**Port Chester MS,**  
Port Chester-Rye



This award-winning school is not yet satisfied with its results, but a long-standing and committed staff continue to make learning “come alive” for their 800 students. They attribute their success in helping to close the achievement gap to working together for success for all students; ensuring a safe, secure, and nurturing environment for everyone; committed leadership; and a “family” atmosphere that expects and values the contributions of everyone. Academically, they co-teach, work in teams, stay with students over more than one year, and integrate language and literacy skills throughout the curriculum. They differentiate instruction and challenge students to do and be their best while striving to help students find joy in the process.

**Queensbury MS,**  
Queensbury



Approximately 1000 students attend this suburban school. A culture of continuous improvement pervades in an atmosphere of trust and collaboration that makes it safe to confront, admit, and discuss weaknesses and take risks. Self-improvement is expected. The curriculum map is a “living document” that is tweaked to address needs. Student achievement is the school’s primary focus, but the school attends to the whole child through character education, a variety of extra-curricular activities to capture the interests of and engage students, peer tutoring and other academic supports, and “guide” rooms that provide a small setting of approximately 12 students with an adult staff member throughout the students’ three years at the school.

**Vernon-Verona-Sherrill MS,** Sherrill



Connections are key. In striving to get “all kids to the point where they can succeed,” the school tries to ensure that every student feels connected. Teachers in teams loop with students from grade 7 to 8. They pay close attention to each child each day to pick up and address academic or social/emotional problems while they are nascent; teams are empowered to consult specialists, parents, and others in order to address problems. They strive, too, to offer a connected and consistent curriculum that matches students’ needs, interests, and resources, and special and regular education. A variety of activities provide yet another way to connect to students’ interests. All this takes place within a unified vision for student success and a plan for achieving it.

**West MS,**  
Binghamton



This school is on a quest for continuous improvement. Strategic planning and management guide decisions about curriculum, instruction, and professional development. Teachers tailor instruction to meet each student’s needs so that all can gain the knowledge and skills essential for current and future success. They push students hard while encouraging all students to see their potential to be successful. Faculty members strive to make classes fun, engaging, and relevant. Positive relationships among the staff and administrators (including the teachers’ professional association), widespread collaboration with a sense of meaningful agency, and an ethos of hard work and determination build a culture of accomplishment.

**Westbury MS,**  
Westbury



850 6th-8th-graders, many of them recent immigrants from Central America and the Caribbean, find academic success here. The school tries to keep the American dream alive for all students and parents by setting clear expectations for student performance and behavior, and establishing high academic goals and continually measuring progress toward meeting them. A variety of activities and programs support students needing it, teachers receive support when asked to make changes to curriculum or instruction, and community involvement is a major focus of the district and school. All notices to parents are provided in three languages, and the school also offers English language classes for immigrant parents.

# Demographics of the ten higher-performing middle schools studied

District	School Name	Grade Span	Total Enrollment
Westbury Union Free School District	Westbury Middle School	6-8	849
Utica City School District	John F. Kennedy Middle School	6-8	1025
Binghamton City School District	West Middle School	6-8	790
Niagara Falls City School District	Niagara Middle School	6-8	573
Port Chester-Rye Union Free School District	Port Chester Middle School	5-8	790
Sherrill City School District	Vernon-Verona-Sherrill Middle School	7-8	387
Huntington Union Free School District	J. Taylor Finley Junior High School	7-8	634
New Rochelle City School District	Albert Leonard Middle School	6-8	1237
Holland Central School District	Holland Middle School	5-8	387
Queensbury Union Free School District	Queensbury Middle School	6-8	945
<b>New York State</b>		<b>P-12</b>	<b>2,772,669</b>



F/R Lunch Eligible	% of Students					PPE*	% Proficient on NYS Assessments, 2006	
	ELL	African-American	Hispanic/Latino	White	Other		Gr. 8 ELA	Gr. 8 Math
74	14	46	51	1	2	\$19,956	58	52
70	10	21	13	62	4	\$11,934	48	37
57	0	19	5	72	3	\$12,578	58	54
55	0	32	1	61	6	\$15,410	50	61
52	14	11	68	21	1	\$16,048	66	73
35	0	1	0	97	2	\$11,075	58	79
32	7	15	18	65	1	\$20,610	63	80
23	0	32	14	49	5	\$17,349	70	68
22	0	0	0	100	0	\$12,502	56	79
13	0	2	2	95	1	\$10,448	72	88
<b>45</b>	<b>7.2**</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>\$15,035</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>54</b>

\*2004-05 district-wide total expenditures per pupil

\*\*2004-05 ELL; data not available for 2005-06

# What makes middle schools work?

As schools and their communities take on the challenge of increasing academic achievement for all students regardless of their special needs or linguistic or socioeconomic backgrounds, identifying how unusually effective schools help students to improve performance is of great interest and central concern. This is particularly true for the middle level of schooling, where student achievement results, especially in literacy, have been flat for many years, and the gap in performance between majority and minority students stubbornly persists<sup>i</sup>. The purpose of the study described in this report was to identify key elements that contribute to consistently higher performance, particularly by schools serving large numbers of students in poverty. To conduct the study, our research team investigated 16 middle schools in New York State—ten whose students consistently achieve at higher levels on New York State Assessments and six similar schools that get consistently average results.

The study is part of the national *Just for the Kids* (J4TK) project and follows a research design developed by the National Center for Educational Accountability (NCEA), national sponsor of Just for the Kids. This design includes five organizing themes that encompass the primary teaching and learning activities undertaken by school systems. These themes, drawn from investigations conducted by NCEA in 128 schools in 20 states between 1999 and 2002, are:

- Curriculum and Academic Goals
- Instructional Programs and Practices
- Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building
- Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data
- Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustments<sup>ii</sup>.

The themes are organized into a framework that further delineates district-, school-, and classroom-level practices within each theme. Previously, researchers had shown that best practices at the middle-school level emerge from a complex web of technical, institutional, and managerial factors that go beyond common planning time, teaming, and block scheduling<sup>iii</sup>. Our study sought first to describe the practices that teachers and administrators identified as most critical to their consistent higher performance and then to distinguish the differences in activities between consistently higher-performing and average-performing schools. In doing so, we took into account student demographic factors that effect school performance<sup>iv</sup>.

This report, which follows a similar study of New York elementary schools in 2005<sup>v</sup>, seeks to characterize the practices that administrators and teachers in the higher-performing schools identify as most salient to their success.

## Research Methods

NCEA identified higher- and average-performing middle schools in New York State through the use of regression analyses adjusting for a combination of demographic factors that include the school-wide percentages of low-income students, the enrollment of the school, the percentage of students with limited English proficiency, and the ethnic composition of the school population. In identifying the schools, NCEA examined performance on New York State eighth-grade English Language Arts and Mathematics Assessments over a three-year period (2003-5). In consultation with a statewide advisory board, our research team then selected a set of ten higher- and six average-performing schools to include in the study. This set was selected to be representative of the diversity of schools in the state. The 16 schools selected have the following characteristics:

- They serve middle grades, typically grades 5- or 6-8 (see pp. 6-7).
- Half the higher-performing schools met or exceeded the state’s poverty rate as measured by eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch for the most recent year for which data were available (2006); average-performing schools were as closely matched as possible in terms of school characteristics and students served.
- The schools are public and have open enrollment policies.
- District per pupil expenditures do not vary significantly from the state average (see pp. 6-7).
- The schools represent a variety of school sizes, communities, geographic locales, and student populations.

Two-person research teams conducted the fieldwork primarily through face-to-face interviews; they also collected samples of documents during two-day site visits to each school. Within each school, they interviewed two to five administrators (the school principal, district superintendent, and other administrators who chose to participate) and five

to ten teachers (representing different grade levels, subject areas, and special services). The interview format followed the J4TK design, and the researchers audio recorded each interview and also took notes both on laptop computers and paper. After each visit, the lead researcher for each site wrote an 8-12 page case study describing “best practice” as it had been described in the individual school. These cases are available at [albany.edu/aire/kids](http://albany.edu/aire/kids) as well as at [just4kids.org](http://just4kids.org).

With the other members of the research team, we analyzed the interview transcripts and documentary evidence to identify practices that were typical of the higher-achieving schools but not of the average-achieving ones. Those practices are highlighted in the present report in several different ways: Part I details the most salient characteristics of the higher-performing schools as identified through a constant comparison method<sup>vi</sup>. Part II provides findings according to the organizing themes of the J4TK Framework and teases out some of the differences between the higher- and average-performing schools. In addition, you’ll find a brief profile of each school as well as illustrative examples from some of the schools. These examples—sometimes novel or unique to a particular site—offer a sample of actions that the schools have taken as they strive to reach the goals they have set within the context of their district and community. We hope that this material paints a picture of what higher-performing middle schools in the state are doing to support all their students’ academic achievement.

Since the study design included little observation of classroom practices and was conducted over just two days, some topics important to middle school improvement (e.g., observable reforms to classroom practices such as differentiated instruction) are included only as reported or documented rather than observed.

# Higher-performing middle schools build a culture of success by consistently maintaining these five common elements



## 1. Trusting and respectful relationships

Relationships based on mutual trust and respect among administrators, teachers, students and parents are fundamental to all of the common elements in the findings. Nurturing these relationships provides the backbone for successful learning.

## 2. Students' social and emotional well-being

Higher-performing schools recognize that creating a sense of security for middle school students provides them with a support network and a connection to their school, removing significant barriers to learning.

## 3. Teamwork

Higher-performing schools establish a collaborative environment and organizational structure that support teamwork between and among teachers, school leaders and administrators. Groups of teachers, administrators, and specialists meet frequently and focus on specific instructional strategies and student performance within and across grades.

# 4.

## Evidence-based decision making

Sharing and using data from a variety of sources to make decisions is critical to helping schools achieve success. Data are frequently gathered, analyzed and used in decision making regarding the impacts of new programs, instructional practices and interventions.

# 5.

## Shared vision of mission and goals

When teachers and administrators build a vision of success and share goals, this leads to better communications, mutually agreed-upon expectations and more long-term success.



# Higher performing middle schools



# Key Findings

The five common elements found in New York State's higher-performing middle schools

**Part I.** Teachers and administrators in the higher-performing middle schools point to “respectful” and “trusting” relationships as forming the foundation that enables them to enact the best practices that occur in their districts, schools, and classrooms. They characterize these relationships as committed to acknowledging and honoring whatever resources students, community members, and staff bring to the school; and they are nurtured through ongoing dialogues about teaching and learning. Furthermore, these relationships make possible four other key elements: practices that support staff and students’ emotional and social well-being, ongoing collaboration, evidence-based decision making, and a clear and shared vision.

These findings are consistent with both New York State and national recommendations for effective middle schools. For example, the seven “Essential Elements of Standards-Focused Middle-Level Schools and Programs,” promoted by the New York State Education Department, defines the over-arching goals of middle-level education as “intellectual development and academic achievement of all students, and the personal and social development of each student”<sup>vii</sup>. The seven essential elements include not only academic programs and classroom instruction, but also leadership and professional development, as critical to achieving the overarching goals. In 2003 the National Middle School Association (NMSA) updated and re-released its position paper, “This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents,” which addresses issues of both culture and the academic program<sup>viii</sup>. Our findings echo the NMSA recommendations and reveal some of the innovative ways schools have changed to better serve all students and meet increased accountability requirements.

It is important to note that a key distinction between the higher-performing and average-performing middle schools in the study is the consistency and/or extent to which the two groups have been successful in addressing all five of the key elements we identified. The five elements are synergistic: each is necessary but not sufficient in and of itself or with only a few others to make the difference between average and exceptional performance. Some of the features were found in all of the average performers; what marks the difference is the way that the higher performers paid attention to and were able to achieve all five to a sufficient degree, whereas average performers were focusing on some of them but not others or were not as far along in working toward all of them.

The sections that follow further elaborate each of the five key elements and provide examples of best practices from the higher-performing schools.

## 1.

## Trusting and Respectful Relationships

Relationships that foster higher performance are based on mutual trust and respect.

All schools encounter challenges and must adjust plans as they work to meet their goals; the approach to challenges taken by schools that promote consistently higher achievement among their students is rooted in positive relationships. These relationships lay the foundation for the other key elements and encompass several important features: trust, respect for and from all, clear expectations of students, and shared responsibility.



**Trust.** Leaders in the higher-performing schools and districts create an environment in which struggles and successes are shared. They place a top priority on developing and nurturing trust between colleagues as a way to enhance instruction for the better good of all students. As a Holland Middle School Administrator advised, “The single most important thing... is to build trust with your faculty.”

We can say, ‘What’s a better way to do this?’ and not be penalized. Taking risks is okay. It is okay to talk about weaknesses, to put them out there, to make self-improvements. –Queensbury Middle School Teacher

We can’t do it alone... parents are involved here. The faculty makes decisions collectively and the PTA is very involved. They want the best for all the students, not just theirs. They see the bigger picture. –Westbury Middle School Administrator

I do more than observation. I look at the whole picture... in the hall, in class, how students react to the teacher, interactions in the whole environment. –John F. Kennedy Middle School Administrator

The whole faculty treats each other with respect. –Albert Leonard Middle School Teacher

The other teachers are good professionals—there is no backstabbing or anything like that. –Holland Middle School Teacher



**Respect for and from all.** Higher-performing schools send the message, both explicitly and implicitly, that everyone—teacher, administrator, student, parent, legal guardian—is held to high expectations for respect for others. They infuse the schools with this expectation, so that typical behavior is conducive to teaching and learning. Parents are seen as important members of the community and are regularly brought into conversations on how to best meet children’s needs. Administrators go beyond focusing on instructional strategies in their observations and look closely at how teachers relate to students.

This climate of respect is apparent in teachers’ relationships with each other. Teachers in higher-performing schools typically view their relationships with colleagues as respectful and supportive.

**Clear expectations of students.** Respect is multidirectional and reciprocal and affects how teachers and administrators view success. It is facilitated by clear expectations for what respect looks like and sounds like, with each individual held responsible for meeting those expectations. Students are made fully aware of expectations, and those expectations are typically consistent from teacher to teacher.

High expectations for behavior don’t mean rigidity and stale authoritarianism, however. Once a foundation of trust and respect becomes part of the school culture, teachers and administrators report feeling that they can have fun with students.

#### One way Vernon-Verona-Sherrill Middle School does it.

### Sharing Responsibility with Parents

When the teachers at Vernon-Verona-Sherrill Middle School receive a request from a parent for a weekly report on their child, they send home a form that the student and his or her parents must complete to initiate the process. The form asks the student to tell how much time she spends on homework each day and if he has sought extra help or gone to Study Center. The parent completes a short section stating that s/he has been monitoring student homework and studying. Only when this form is turned in to the team leader do the teachers complete their section. The form was developed by a team that had received many requests for weekly reports but were not sure that what they sent home was being seen or made use of. The form is intended to reinforce the shared responsibility that all—student, parent, teacher—have for student success.

**Shared responsibility.** When things don’t go as well as expected or hoped, teachers and administrators in higher-performing schools report little finger pointing. Rather, professional development is offered in the use of evidence-based programs and instructional practices; student performance data are shared, explained, and used to make changes as necessary; and new goals are crafted in line with the district vision. In this way, the responsibility for raising student performance is shared by many, preserving a sense of well-being for all.

According to teachers and administrators in the higher-performing schools, trusting and respectful relationships are a key factor in their sustained success and form the foundation of what they do. These relationships are nurtured through explicit and implicit expectations for behavior for students, community members, teachers, and administrators; and they promote a climate in which trying out new ideas and strategies to enhance student learning is encouraged.

Good citizenship, respect, responsibility. When you have set that culture and have expectations in terms of behavior and academic success, students generally meet them. –Vernon-Verona-Sherrill Middle School Teacher

The students know what to expect in every class; there are no surprises. They look at the daily agendas. There are no questions about what to do. They have readiness for the work. Teachers across the curriculum have the same expectations. Students understand it’s not enough just to do the work; they have to connect to something in the real world. We work on trust, responsibility, courtesy, respect, fairness... –Niagara Middle School Teacher

The school’s big goals keep us focused... We create a culture of learning. We are concerned with safety and fun. We do things to allow students to feel like school does not have to be a dreaded chore. We have a lot of things for kids to do—a wide range of activities. There are a lot of little extras to help the students get along—and all the extras for academic success. –Holland Middle School Teacher

For example, the scores on last year’s ELA were lower than we wanted. Rather than a reprimand or finger pointing, the assistant superintendent asked what more the administration could do to help us be more successful—consultants, materials, data? As a result, we have some new materials, and we worked more on prioritizing and focusing. –Vernon-Verona-Sherrill Middle School Teacher

# 2.

## Students' social and emotional well-being

Nurturing emotional and social well-being is a central goal.

Although it is a challenge, higher-performing schools see instilling respect in the middle school years, which are typically characterized as wrought with emotional and social turmoil, as extremely important. Teachers and administrators perceive students' emotional and social well-being as having a significant impact on teaching and learning and thus make every effort to help every student find a connection to school and to remove barriers to learning.

In fact, part of how they define success is in how well students are developing emotionally and socially.

**Removing barriers to learning.** Several of the higher-performing schools report using programs whereby adults take responsibility for connecting with at-risk students. They use before-school and after-school time to reach out to students with the greatest needs and provide clear expectations throughout the school day for everyone.

**Taking care of transitions.** Determining and preparing students for what they need to do to succeed at each level of schooling is also a top priority in some higher-performing schools. They ensure that students understand expectations as they advance from elementary to middle and middle to high school, and that teachers are aware of students' needs as they enter middle school so that they can put appropriate supports in place.

One way Westbury Middle School does it.

### For Students Most in Need

In addition to inclusion programs, some of the higher performers also provide non-mainstream options for some students. In Westbury, a MARS (Maximum Achievement Results in Success) program is offered to students experiencing difficulty in their mainstream classes and in danger of repeating an academic grade. Additional support, including a low teacher:student ratio, county and state social support services, and a focus on behavior modification are designed to help students achieve academically and remain part of the school, with the goal of rejoining the mainstream.

**Ensuring safety.** In diverse communities and those with high poverty or violence, creating a welcoming environment where students can feel safe and successful within the school can be a particularly daunting challenge, but it is one into which higher-performing schools pour their efforts.

Teachers and administrators in higher-performing schools see a direct connection between emotional and social well-being and higher performance. They work together to make expectations for behavior clear and consistent and attend to individual students' needs to create the conditions necessary for academic success. They take proactive steps to ease transitions and tensions for students as they move from grade level to grade level and community to school.

I think we define success at this middle school with a combo of academic success, not necessarily that everyone has level 3 or 4 [i.e., the level of proficiency on the State Assessments]... but also social and emotional growth, the ability to work in a group, be a member of a team and be a good citizen. –Vernon-Verona- Sherrill Middle School Teacher

Each starfish [on the guidance bulletin board] represents a kid with some attention needs or other special needs. Teachers come in and pick one or two and focus on those kids. Students don't know who has been chosen. –West Middle School Teacher

Students [for an after-school program] are chosen based on academic performance and students who need a place to be; if we can keep students off the street and in a safe environment, [they have] a chance for success. Guidance may suggest students; it's not just for A students, more for students who are challenged academically. –Westbury Middle School Teacher

To ease transition[s], both from 6th to 7th and 8th to 9th, I meet with the grade 6 teachers, special ed teachers, other social workers. They identify kids with high needs, kids at risk, kids who might have home issues. They provide lists of recommended honors, extra help, AIS, kids taking music. We try to get the best picture of sixth graders that we can without meeting them all face to face... For high school transition, guidance comes down and describes block scheduling and talks about middle vs. high school and what to expect. They collect the same data—honors, AIS, what they need to know next year—who to watch out for right away. –Vernon-Verona-Sherrill Middle School Social Service Personnel

We... focus on what's common among us and not on what is different. –Finley Middle School Administrator

# 3.

## Teamwork

Consistent collaboration is expected, frequent, and focused on student achievement/learning.

Respectful relationships encourage a sense of freedom to try out and share new ideas to improve practice. Teachers attribute consistent and productive collaboration with their peers to this underlying sense of trust and respect. This climate of professional respect travels across grade levels and is seen as a major contributing factor to the school's success.

**Teaming to collaborate.** Teachers and administrators in higher-performing schools meet frequently by grade level and department and engage in productive work around student learning during those meetings. These focused dialogues about particular initiatives or curricular or instructional issues are facilitated by scheduled planning times whose purpose is to communicate about student learning. Participating in those meetings and working together is expected and embraced.

Grade-level teams in higher-performing schools typically meet for a 40-45 minute period, sometimes as often as daily, during a common planning time. In those meetings, discussions focus on student learning; they are not, as one teacher described it, "gripe sessions." Special education teachers, social workers, and parents or legal guardians are also included in team meetings when needed, and the responsibility for meeting every student's needs is shared. Teachers attribute their ability to focus on the individual needs of a child to the discussions they have in teams.

In higher-performing schools, in addition to team time, teachers are provided with a variety of opportunities to participate in meetings, projects, and committees centered on curriculum and instruction. In committee work and special projects, they engage in conversations and decision making around important curriculum, instruction, and program adoption changes. Teachers and administrators are also encouraged to attend conferences and share their work in workshops for colleagues.

Respect makes you unafraid to speak and creates buy in. –Albert Leonard Middle School Teacher

If you go to any teacher in the building... and ask for something, she/he gets it [for you]. That's also true of the administration. It's professional respect. It's really good to see. –Port Chester Middle School Teacher

We share information about students or materials – no one says I have a patent on this and you can't touch it. –Finley Middle School Teacher

We communicate from one grade level to the next. We respect teachers in the grades below. –Vernon-Verona-Sherrill Middle School Teacher

You need to work as a team; there's nothing a teacher can accomplish alone. –Port Chester Middle School Teacher

We were identified for [having] too many minority students in special ed. We had to work in teams and bring people together to bring into the culture the idea of "we can do it together." ...The age where a teacher can just close the door is over. We have inclusion teachers and you need them. They are getting to the point where they know they need to work as a team. –John F. Kennedy Middle School Administrator

### One way many of the schools do it.

Most of the higher-performing middle schools are organized into teams, with core academic subject teachers teaching the same group of approximately 100 students. These teams are not just instructional units, they are also the first line of intervention for students with academic, social, emotional, behavior, or other challenges. The team consults with social services, devises a plan to try to address the need within the team, and brings in additional resources, if needed, before sending the student out for instruction, disciplinary action, etc.

In order for teachers, administrators, and specialists to work this way, the schools build common meeting time into their schedules. Common meeting time is necessary, but not sufficient. For the time to be effective, the schools have put other conditions in place:

- All teachers faithfully and consistently meet during the designated times. This is the expectation throughout the school.
- Teachers focus their discussion on instruction, student progress and needs, and curriculum. Initially, they may need a facilitator to help them do this.

- Teachers are empowered to make changes to address the needs they have identified.

- Teachers consult with other experts—administrators, specialists, and parents.

- Some teams also include special education teachers and/or academic intervention services (AIS). In addition to the regularly scheduled team meetings, other, less frequent meetings are scheduled to enable teachers of each discipline to meet across the grades, and, sometimes, with their colleagues at both the elementary and high school levels.

## 4.

## Evidence-based decision making

Decisions are made based on student performance data and teacher experience.

Sharing and using data to inform decision making on an ongoing basis is another way higher-performing schools explain their success. In these schools and districts, data are typically gathered and analyzed on the impacts of new programs, instructional practices, and interventions to inform decision making across the district. Instruction is aligned with state test schedules to ensure students are well prepared.

**Beyond state assessments.** Higher-performing schools make efforts that go beyond state test scores to assess how well materials, programs, and instructional approaches are working. They collect and analyze a variety of data formally and informally; they share these data generously and use them to inform innovations in instructional approaches and use of new materials.

**Ongoing, formative assessment.** Although evidence from state tests is used to inform decisions in higher-performing schools, teachers also report they feel empowered to make decisions based on their shared vision and what they and their fellow teachers experience in their classrooms. Collecting data consistently and from a variety of sources provides the evidence on which programmatic and instructional changes are based.

The board developed specific metrics to evaluate existing programs and potential research-based programs. We test them out as pilots to make sure they're working. –West Middle School Administrator

We use [student performance data] often—looked at last year's results and found out where they were weak on a particular topic. In the following year, we add more materials and teach differently; we analyze the state exam—kid by kid, question by question; since the state exam is so early we know where kids are weak and can gear for that; we have pre-March and post-March standards. –Finley Middle School Administrator

[The model we chose] expects teachers to make professional choices and provides strong job-embedded professional development. –Niagara Middle School Administrator

Here teachers feel they can make the decisions; people here collaborate with each other. –Niagara Middle School Teacher

We invite students back after a semester or two at college and ask what was most helpful to the transition. We also ask what wasn't so helpful. They are amazingly candid and very helpful. They identified some things we could do better; for example, Effective Communication (EC) grew out of those meetings. For a number of years, they were telling us that the technical writing skills required of them in college were more rigorous than what they had experienced here. Our literature based writing was wonderful, but the technical writing skills were not so strong. Now we use EC in grades P-12. It's interdisciplinary and implemented district wide. –Vernon-Verona-Sherrill Middle School Administrator

### One way Queensbury Middle School does it.

#### Tailoring Instruction to Specific Needs

When Queensbury's analysis of their students' performance in coursework and on the Grade 8 NYS English Language Arts Assessment pointed to a need for stronger vocabulary knowledge, the grade 8 ELA team worked together to create a unit on understanding and using context clues to figure out the possible meanings of unfamiliar words. Lesson plans, activities, and student projects were provided to and used by each grade 8 ELA teacher, with the goal of helping students enhance their overall reading ability.

To address the needs of specific students, the principal provides all English and mathematics teachers a table containing an item analysis for each student based on tests given quarterly that are intended to mimic the state assessments. It has been dubbed the "Lucky Charms Chart" because items are coded using different colored symbols indicating levels of mastery. Teachers find it a valuable tool to focus their instruction on essential skills and knowledge students need to succeed on state assessments.

## 5.

## Shared vision of mission and goals

A clearly articulated and shared vision of student success informs practice.

**From the board to the building...** As if on the same metaphorical train, teachers and administrators in higher-performing schools clearly articulate a vision of which direction they are heading and how they are going to get there. They speak of a shared vision of raising achievement for all students and refer to that vision when they talk about why they do what they do and how they do it. In these schools, building-level goals are usually developed with input from a variety of stakeholders through Shared Decision Making teams; these goals are aligned with district and board goals and are part of a larger strategic plan.

**...to the classroom.** The district-level vision is clearly articulated in terms of what it looks like in classrooms and how it will affect student achievement. Teachers from different disciplines share the kinds of strategies they use to help students succeed so that they are aware of what students need to know and be able to do in all the subject areas.

We have a big picture of district-wide planning. Each school refines and works with Shared Decision Making groups and/or a consultant facilitator. The big goal has been to close the academic achievement gaps... As we evaluate administrators, they have to write annual goals which align with board and district goals. –West Middle School Administrator

Everyone should know the strategic plan for the district and their building. Everything we do is centered on students achieving, improving, and closing the achievement gap. –Westbury Middle School Administrator

The district establishes the focus and the mission, but teachers have an open door to the ideas. The one question we ask about every bit of curriculum and program: Does it improve student achievement? –Albert Leonard Middle School Administrator

We developed learning teams; we did training by department. We were only limited by what we could afford. We developed lesson banks. We felt the teams had to be interdisciplinary. We even had sessions after school for foreign language teachers. Then teachers modeled for each other and that modeling had different components. There might be a subject area team or a grade-level team doing the demonstration. –Albert Leonard Middle School Administrator

You never arrive, you are always becoming. –Niagara Middle School Administrator

When is good not good enough? Where can we improve? Complacency bothers me. –Queensbury Middle School Administrator

### One way Niagara Middle School does it.

#### Enacting the Vision

Performance evaluations in higher-performing districts are tailored to the district's specific mission and goals. Thus the evaluation of principals and vice principals is based on leadership qualities that are collaborative, community based, and focused on effective instruction. Actions that are consistent with the district's vision, mission, and goals, including working in partnership to do "whatever it takes" to ensure "learning for all," are emphasized.

The principal, in turn, uses "focus walks" to provide feedback to teachers around the vision. The "focus" for the walk is planned by the leadership team (principal, assistant principal, math and literacy coaches, and the librarian). Teachers are told explicitly in writing what they are expected to "focus" on and provided the record forms and the dates of the walks in advance.

**A never-ending process.** The vision in these schools is developed through dialogue with a variety of stakeholders. It is clearly articulated through a plan of action, then assessed and revised through monitoring of performance measures; it is embedded in instructional practices and is guided by a "never good enough" stance.

Higher-performing schools are inspired by and inspire others by being deeply rooted in trusting and respectful relationships, which in turn support their shared vision of raising student achievement. In Part II, we show how these practices take shape in terms of the five themes that guide the state-comparable J4TK studies.



# Key Findings



New York State middle schools within the national *Just For the Kids* framework

**Part II.** Since the mid 1990s, the National Center for Educational Accountability, national sponsor of *Just for the Kids*, has been promoting the use of state assessment data to inform school improvement. As part of that effort, they have supported the conduct of studies in 20 states, using a common research design so that results across states can be compared. The goal of these studies has been to identify practices that make the difference between schools that get average results and those whose students beat the odds to higher achievement over time. These state-comparable studies, including New York's, are organized by and reported on within a five-theme framework, each theme being a dimension of school improvement found to be important in earlier research.

The five themes of *Just for the Kids* are:

- a. Curriculum and Academic Goals**
- b. Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building**
- c. Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements**
- d. Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data**
- e. Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustments**

The following pages share our findings within each of these five themes and show some of ways in which the higher- and average-performing schools differ.

a.

## Curriculum and Academic Goals

The New York State Standards determine the curriculum for all schools studied. For the most part, the higher-performing schools are further along than the average performers in establishing goals and articulating a curriculum that is aligned both horizontally and vertically to the State Standards. Higher performers make decisions about academic programs, professional development, and other essential areas in light of their goals and progress toward achieving them. School and district staff report that from the board of education to the students, members of the school community pull together and generally see themselves moving in the same direction. Curriculum maps and goals documents are developed by a cross-section of individuals, including teachers and, often, community members; these groups usually work with someone at the district level with responsibility for curriculum oversight. Curriculum documents are “alive”—constantly consulted, revisited, and revised in response to student performance and progress in meeting State Standards. Overall, the stance of the higher achievers toward curriculum and academic goals is proactive rather than reactive or complacent.

When the state changed the state standards, we sat down with our curriculum and evaluated each strand. We put it on a calendar and estimated the time it would take to do each unit. It is a sweeping and comprehensive curriculum. —Holland Middle School Teacher

As we evolved, we saw the need to work [on curriculum] every single year. —Niagara Middle School Administrator

We tore the tests apart and took the core curriculum apart and began to see what New York State was looking for. We prioritized the curriculum and created our curriculum folder. At end of every year, we update. It is considered part of the end of the year work. —John F. Kennedy Middle School Teacher

### One way Vernon-Verona-Sherrill Middle School does it.

#### Deciding What to Teach

In Vernon-Verona-Sherrill, subject-specific grade 5-8 “congruency teams” meet annually to share practice and goals. This helps all teachers know what part of the curriculum they are responsible for, and particularly serves to bridge from the three feeder K-6 elementary schools to the middle school. These congruency teams have also prioritized the curriculum in each unit in each subject according to a 50-30-20% rule: 50%—what every student should know and be able to do in that subject; 30%—what it would be nice for every student to know; and 20%—what perhaps only 10% of students will learn. Special educators are involved in these teams and appreciate knowing specifically what every student must learn; in general, teachers credit the 50-30-20 goals with helping them differentiate instruction.

## What This Looks Like

### In the higher-performing schools:

- District, school, and classroom goals focus on students, particularly those whose achievement lags behind their peers or who need other special services, including acceleration. In many schools, the move to inclusion and differentiated instruction was prompted by the goal of better serving those students and closing the achievement gap, especially after investigation showed differentiation and inclusion to be effective.
  - Everyone shares responsibility for setting and achieving curricular and academic goals.
  - Strong efforts are made to teach beyond the State Assessments—to focus on the standards or other broad curricular goals, despite the tendency for parents, the media, sometimes even educators, to key in on the State Assessments.
  - Programs are selected and used thoughtfully to address identified needs; thus many materials (including “test prep”) are developed in-district or in-school rather than purchased “off-the-shelf.”
  - Curriculum alignment is both horizontal and vertical and is supported through formal structures as well as informally. In some schools, cohorts of teachers within a discipline



voluntarily coordinate their instruction, sharing resources and giving the same tests; in others, it is school policy to give the same quarterly exams or unit tests. Often interdisciplinary teams initiate curriculum integration.

- Curriculum maps include standards, content knowledge, and skills, as well as units, lesson plans, and assessments. Across the schools, pacing guides vary in length from day-to-day lessons to units to month-long blocks. Districts with more than one middle school tend to have tighter curriculum timelines so as to better serve students who move between schools.

- Teachers report a wide variety of integration and cross-disciplinary work—not just the more common English with social studies, but English with mathematics or art, social studies with science, etc.

- Challenges are met with creative solutions. For example, with the NYS Mathematics Assessment now administered in March, at least two of the schools in the study have rearranged their mathematics curriculum to run from March to March; students begin the next year's curriculum as soon as the assessment is over, sometimes even changing teachers.

**Some differences between higher- and average-performing schools:** All the schools have made efforts to improve student literacy. In the majority of the higher-performing schools, this includes integrating reading, writing, or literacy instruction across the curriculum. Teachers in the average-performing schools point to the need for stronger reading and writing skills but seemed to struggle individually with helping students in those areas. The integration that did take place was more likely in special education or AIS, but writing was spoken of as something to get to after students had grasped the content rather than as a vehicle for helping students think about and learn content.

Teachers in the higher performers are aware of, use, and are part of the development and revision of curriculum maps. Their districts have provided time and resources to support formal curriculum mapping. Teachers in average performers might have a curriculum “in the cupboard,” but it was more likely handed down from above rather than teacher-developed. Average-performing districts are generally aware of the need for curriculum maps but have not yet found the means to get that work completed and/or intimately involve teachers in the process.



## b.

### Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building

Higher-performing schools and districts hire new employees based on a clear vision of the kind of learning environment they strive to create. Their collaborative environments are characterized by an emphasis on recognizing and tapping whatever strengths individuals bring with them. District- and school-level leaders build leadership skills and promote a climate of continual improvement in a number of ways, including hiring teachers who show the potential to actively participate in discussions and projects on student learning and providing opportunities for teachers to share work and take on facilitator roles in committees. Teacher meeting time is built into the schedule, and these meetings emphasize successes and brainstorming solutions, drawing on support from other specialists as needed. Teachers and administrators are encouraged to share their work in workshops for colleagues and to attend conferences. In higher-performing schools, teachers use the strategies they learn in grade-level team meetings, district department meetings, and professional development workshops. Teachers in these

My role now is to find the best administrators, create the team, and share the responsibility of providing very strong leadership to schools and communities. I see the pool and try to bring teachers early into facilitator roles to develop their leadership skills. —John F. Kennedy Middle School Administrator

schools report being on the “same page” when it comes to instructional strategies. They see the relationship of what they teach to what other teachers within their grade and across grades teach. They use interdisciplinary and differentiated approaches toward teaching their content to meet all students’ learning needs.

One way Port Chester Middle School does it.

### Cell Phones to Team Leaders

An administrator at Port Chester Middle School provided all team leaders with cell phones to call parents. This administrator reports that although a call can be seen as “a simple action, it’s had a profound effect.” The number of teacher contacts with parents has increased about 1000% and has also facilitated recording the parent communication component more in teacher evaluations.

You have to have staff involved in decision making. –Port Chester Middle School Administrator

## What This Looks Like

### In the higher-performing schools:

- Committees of specialists from higher education, parents, high school students, and other community members come together to develop and implement projects with the priority of increasing the performance of every student.
- Techniques to meet the needs of English Language Learners (ELLs) and special education students are shared and used to enhance learning for all students.
- Efforts are made to purposefully develop teachers’ leadership skills through special projects and facilitator roles (e.g., on shared decision-making teams, curriculum projects or textbook selection committees). This is linked to creating an environment in which teachers will grow professionally, want to stay, and become future leaders.
- Over summer and during other professional release time, teachers collaborate within and across grade levels within the district and draw from outside specialists’ knowledge on projects directly related to instruction.
- Team meetings are built into the schedule, occur regularly, are focused on student learning and instructional issues, and sometimes include conferencing with parents, guidance counselors, and other specialists.
- In addition to grade-level meetings, understandings of expectations across grades are facilitated by department meetings both within the schools and across grades K-12.
- Department heads and directors of curriculum and instruction periodically meet with teams to explore student performance data. Teachers have access to department heads throughout the school day and perceive them as instructional leaders and mentors.
- Department and school leaders strive for consistency in instruction through ongoing communication between and among departments and between elementary and secondary schools.
- Developing and continually revising a “living” curriculum and analyzing assessment results consistently bring teachers into discussions of what is to be taught and how.
- Discussions around adoption of new materials and programs occur among as many stakeholders as possible, with department heads providing leadership and facilitation of these discussions to promote consensus building.
- Professional development activities are sometimes determined by administration but are also guided by teachers’ concerns and questions. They are aligned to the overall mission and vision for the district and emphasize differentiated instructional approaches as well as teachers’ differential needs.
- While formal mentoring programs exist and are used, teachers are also encouraged and take opportunities to share ideas and observe each other teaching throughout the school year.

I want my faculty to take risks and try new things. I want it a priority that teachers really care about their students and that they demonstrate that. I think this empowers teachers to make decisions. –Holland Middle School Administrator

Even the board is always learning, too. –Queensbury Middle School Administrator



**Some differences between higher- and average-performing schools:** In the higher-performing schools, collaboration within teams and across grade levels is expected, built into the schedule, focused on student performance, and occurs regularly, while in average-performing schools, collaboration is typically inconsistent and less frequent.

In higher-performing schools, time constraints are acknowledged but managed through scheduling common team meeting and department meeting times, while in average-performing schools, teachers and administrators are more likely to point to these constraints to explain why more collaboration does not occur across the district and within the schools.

A team atmosphere pervades higher-performing schools. Newer teachers in higher-performing schools are mentored informally and formally and inspired by more veteran teachers to take on leadership roles, while in some average-performing schools a “wait your turn” stance is reported to inhibit teachers’ and administrators’ professional development.

## C. Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements

In the higher-performing schools, students are engaged with the material, with their peers, and with the teacher. The schools have established safe and secure environments with well-understood expectations for behavior; classroom management is not an issue. Teachers facilitate learning using differentiated instruction to ensure that all students have equal opportunity to learn the required knowledge and skills. Students who need less support are provided enrichment or are placed in accelerated classes. A special educator may share the classroom to help support the learning of inclusion students and, sometimes, to co-teach all students. Depending on their level of proficiency, English Language Learners may also be in the core academic classes, sometimes with bilingual aides. When students show a lack of understanding, the teacher seeks to address the root cause rather than move on too quickly. Although a wide variety of national programs are in place across the higher-performing schools, overall, few programs are mandated. The curriculum has been mapped so that all teachers know the content all students must learn, but they are expected (and supported) to be experts not just in the content but in multiple ways of presenting that content, often making changes in instructional strategies day-by-day or moment-by-moment. While many average-performing schools also differentiate instruction and include special education students in the regular classroom, their teachers are more likely to either have more leeway in deciding what to teach as well as how, or have been mandated to use a particular approach or program. The higher-performing schools that have adopted a school-wide improvement model have selected one whose broad goals match the district’s own and that is non-prescriptive but allows flexibility and encourages and provides opportunities for teacher learning and growth. When implemented, these programs have been supported with professional development for teachers.



We don't stop instruction for test practice. –Niagara Middle School Administrator

One way Port Chester Middle School does it.

## Bringing Resources into the Classroom

Port Chester has used grant funding to hire graduate students to work directly with teachers and identified students. They sit in class with the students, doing whatever they need to help the teacher and students be successful. Thus students are not pulled out of class. They also call parents when students miss assignments. An administrator reports a profound effect on the failure rate.

## What This Looks Like

### In the higher-performing schools:

- Teaming, looping, and/or block scheduling foster more integrated instruction and provide the flexibility to meet diverse student needs.
- Extra instructional time and support within class (differentiation, inclusion) as well as outside (Academic Intervention Services, after-school, summer programs) are designed to meet diverse student needs and close achievement gaps.
- All students have equal opportunity to access instruction—for example through extra sets of materials on hand, school-supplied materials for those whose homes might not have them, efforts to provide background knowledge and experiences (e.g., field trips to broaden the horizons of impoverished students, both urban and rural).
- An attitude of continuous improvement prevails—always wanting to do better and working together with colleagues to figure out how.
- The state assessments are kept in perspective and seen as the minimum—this includes ensuring that all students are familiar with and comfortable with this “genre” but aiming instruction at knowledge and understanding beyond what is expected to be on the assessment.
- Literacy is the focus. Arrangements to increase literacy instruction may include doubling the ELA period for some or all students, but more often include teaching literacy skills as an integral part of all subjects.
- Effective classrooms are believed to be lively ones in which students are actively and excitedly engaged—hands on and minds on.
- Teachers share materials, co-develop tests and other assessments, and constantly collaborate about instruction.
- Teachers are involved in text selection but use texts as just one of many resources to enact the curriculum.
- Rituals and routines provide consistency for both behavior and academics so that students know exactly what is expected of them. Instructional examples include daily agendas, standard formats for students to record homework or other assignments, expectations that each class post the learning goals of the lesson (e.g., the essential questions), and teaching skills like note-taking or graphic organizers across subjects.
- Safety and security are seen as essential—for students to be able to learn as free of distractions as possible, as well as for teachers to share concerns about problems, to suggest changes, and to admit difficulties without fear of recrimination.
- Concern is for students across the spectrum—not just “moving the 2s to 3s” (on the NYS Assessments)—but for those scoring the lowest and needing the most support, as well as challenging and accelerating the 3s and 4s.
- Teachers and administrators are concerned about the requirement to test all English Language Learners after only one year in this country, but with a “can do” attitude they provide the programs to best prepare them for the tests, monitor progress, and move them to the next level as language milestones are reached.



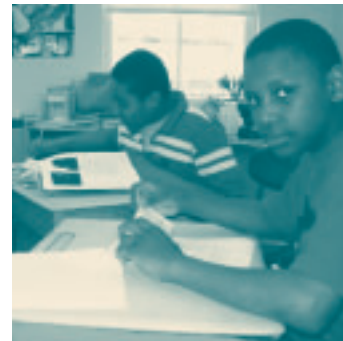
The principal persuaded the teachers to buy into ELA activity in every class. Lesson plans are required to include ELA standards and bundled skills. All lessons incorporate the skills. ELA comes first. We had professional development across the subject areas. —Port Chester Middle School Administrator

- Teachers actively use evidence from a variety of sources, including their own observations, to inform instructional decisions for both the near- and long-term.
- Teachers and administrators are willing to try—and evaluate—new approaches (e.g., placing more students in accelerated mathematics with the necessary support; piloting an ELA class for boys only).

**Some differences between higher- and average-performing schools:** In general, the higher-performing schools are further along in establishing the conditions that seem to be responsible, at least in part, for their successes. The average performers are still working on ensuring safety and security as an essential foundation on which to build greater academic success; they are moving toward differentiated instruction but not all teachers are “on board” yet; teachers complain that the professional development provided isn’t always what they need (e.g., they want specific suggestions and model lessons rather than consultation).

All schools focus on individual students. In the higher performers, this focus is more intense and pervasive—someone connecting with every kid every day, not just a few times a week; a team acting immediately at the sign of a problem (e.g., lack of understanding in class, a behavior problem); teams empowered to initiate and take action without needing to clear it with an administrator.

The teachers in the higher-performing schools seem to be in agreement as to what constitutes effective instructional practices to ensure success for all students, or what they think effective preparation for state assessments looks like.



## d.

### Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data

In higher-performing schools, monitoring, compiling, analyzing, and using data to inform better instruction is central to the day-to-day activities of teachers and administrators. Making assessment data transparent and digestible to teachers, students, and parents often is facilitated by the use of data warehousing and analysis services from outside agencies in addition to in-house software programs and expertise. Assessment data are seen as inextricably linked to ongoing improvement of the curriculum and instruction to better support student learning.

[The state assessment system] has given us a good reason for making sure we are consistent, and it has helped us focus.

–Vernon-Verona-Sherrill Middle School Administrator

Every year we look at what has been working and what hasn’t been working—constantly modifying [our] exams. We analyze the data; it’s nice to see growth from the beginning of the year to the end. –Finley Middle School Teacher

#### One way Queensbury Middle School does it.

##### Assessing Teacher Performance

In striving to close achievement gaps, meet the individual needs of students, and engage adolescents in high-level learning, many middle schools, including the higher-performing schools in this study, differentiate instruction. Thus teacher performance is assessed, in part, on how well a teacher is able to provide such instruction. Some administrators focus on the students during classroom observations, observing and talking with them about their learning. In Queensbury, they use rubrics to observe and provide detailed reports to teachers about their performance in meeting the diverse learning needs of their students.

## What This Looks Like

### In the higher-performing schools:

- Teachers are always in “assessment mode,” observing, recording, and reflecting on their observations so that they can modify instruction.
- Frequent feedback on performance is provided to parents and students in five-week reports, phone calls, and on-line access to grades and assignments.
- Teachers—sometimes by department and grade level—also give frequent formative assessments and look for patterns of strengths and weaknesses in individual students, classes, and identified groups in order to influence instruction to address identified needs or gaps. This analysis is facilitated in some cases with computer software programs that track and display levels of mastery.
- Quarterly assessments and final exams in most core subjects are used consistently across schools and from teacher to teacher.
- Yearly goals align with board and district goals on which administrator and teacher performance is evaluated.
- Teachers receive formal and informal continual feedback from administrators and teacher-leaders, who use observations and student performance data and encourage self-reflections.
- District-wide diagnostic tests inform allocation of services and instructional strategies.
- Teachers have opportunities to learn to analyze and use assessment data. Test score data are continuously used to modify formative assessments and inform instruction.
- Subject area exams are aligned with state tests and standards, with attention to sequencing based on the state assessment rather than the school-year schedule. Attempts are made to mimic the state tests in type of task as well as vocabulary used in questions and answers.

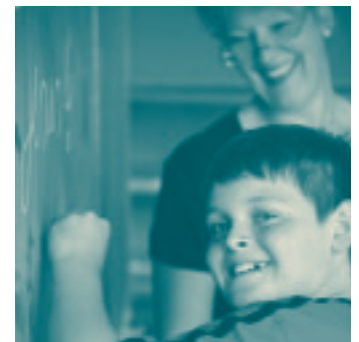
**Some differences between higher- and average-performing schools:** Higher-performing schools make more consistent and frequent use of district-wide benchmark tests in core subject areas, whereas average-performing schools benchmark once or twice a year, typically only in ELA, and tend to rely more on individual teacher developed assessments.

State-assessment-like tasks, questions, and vocabulary are integrated into the higher performers’ benchmarks and other assessments consistently throughout the school year, whereas average-performing schools use state test-like assessments as pre-tests at the beginning of the year or as preparation close to the time students will take state assessments. Frequent contact with students and parents regarding student performance that go beyond five-week reports to include weekly reports on request, phone calls, on-line access to assignments and grades, and student and parent conferences is typical in higher-performing schools.

In higher-performing schools, administrators and teachers use computer software programs to analyze and display student performance data for patterns of strengths and weaknesses to inform practice, while in average-performing schools data are analyzed by and shared with teachers less frequently. Diagnostic tests in math and ELA are given to all students to inform the allocation of resources, while in average-performing schools diagnostic tests are typically given only in ELA and to students identified for interventions.

Administrators and teachers in the higher performers are provided with feedback on their performance based on goals connected to district goals. Student performance data, observations, portfolios of products, and self-reflections constitute some of the data used to monitor teacher performance, while average-performing schools primarily focus on a few formal observations for untenured faculty, with little focus on connecting with district-level goals.

A strategic plan...drives the direction of the district; we meet at the end of the year, go over what was accomplished and continue to work on goals. They remain until completed.  
–Westbury Middle School  
Administrator



Fair may not mean equal.  
Youngsters get what they need.  
–Vernon-Verona-Sherrill Middle  
School Teacher

e.

## Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustments

Another feature that distinguishes the higher-performing middle schools in the study is a consistency between what is recognized, acknowledged and rewarded and the school's mission and goals. For both students and professionals, formal and informal recognition tends to be for enacting the lived mission; this recognition becomes part of the ongoing dialogue about the mission, which has been mutually developed and is widely known—by policymakers, professionals, parents, and students. Part of this mission includes creating a caring atmosphere in which all individuals—faculty, staff, students, administrators—feel safe and can succeed. Expectations of students are made explicit to them, and disciplinary standards are consistently applied throughout the school, but especially within each team. The schools provide ample opportunities for students to succeed both academically and socially and constantly monitor progress in order to intervene early. Interventions to address barriers to student learning take place first by the teachers' efforts to alter instruction in the classroom before placement in special services. Both special education and Academic Intervention Services are tightly connected to the regular academic program.



### One way Queensbury Middle School does it.

#### Guide Rooms

Guide rooms are used in Queensbury Middle School as places where students will have a consistent “home,” a stable adult figure to turn to throughout their middle school years, and a place to “start their day feeling good.” Guide rooms differ from homerooms in that they have only up to 12 students and are staffed by teachers as well as other adults in the building—librarians, clerical and maintenance staff, principal.

**Success:** When a student is able to work at their ability level and progress and grow and take it to the next step. Part of our success—especially with ESL—is that we tailor schedules to various levels of acquisition; tailor to strengths and try to place them appropriately in ESL or mainstream. Our guidance department is absolutely open and will change a student's level at teacher's request. —Finley Middle School Teacher

## What This Looks Like

### In the higher-performing schools:

- Social services, sometimes including on-staff social worker(s), are focused on removing barriers to learning, whatever they are.
- The schools/districts offer summer programs, Saturday programs, after-school, and within school programs for homework or tutorial assistance—and ensure that students are able to attend by providing transportation, eliminating conflicts with athletics, etc. Although some students may be required to attend, all students are welcome, and generally students do not know each other's status.
- Looping enables teachers to know students well and keep a close eye on attitude, behavior, and learning over an extended period of time.
- Mentoring for students is provided through formal structures as well as informal interactions. Structures for students include advisory groups, guide rooms (in place of homeroom), and mentors (teachers, support staff, college students).
- Students can demonstrate success (individually and collectively) in the classroom, in art, music, community service, academic competitions, improved behavior or performance, or on the field.

- Character education focuses on fostering students' emotional and social well-being and their abilities to make wise decisions for themselves currently and in the future.
- Teachers try to “catch them [students] doing something good” and acknowledge that with a note or call home. Administrators try to do the same for teachers.
- Administrators encourage and support teachers to share their work at external conferences as well as with colleagues in the district during professional development sessions.

**Some differences between higher- and average-performing schools:** In the higher-performing schools, recognition and rewards for teachers and students are tied to the school's mission and goals and are specific; for example, students might win a poster contest about good citizenship or receive an award for completing 100% of their homework over a five-week period. In the average-performing schools, rewards are more general and not specifically tied to the central mission; for example, teachers might receive holiday gifts or flowers, and students might be recognized for “general improvement.”

Special education and regular education in the higher performers are coordinated and connected, with as many students as possible included in a regular classroom with differentiated instruction and/or supportive services (inclusion); special and regular educators often co-teach, and special educators know curriculum (by content and day) to be able to support students also served in a resource room. Although both sets of schools express a desire to provide a successful learning environment for all students in the classroom, in the higher-performing schools this is intrinsic to the mission. In the average-performing schools, the goal to declassify more students seems prompted more by extrinsic pressure (e.g., from the state).

While many of the average-performing schools are striving to establish a climate of mutual respect and responsibility, the higher-performing schools have come closer to achieving that ideal.



[The school] rewards success with breakfast for achievers... the school newspaper comes out monthly; and the area newspaper gives credit for the right thing.  
—Westbury Middle School Teacher



# Conclusion

As school administrators and teachers tackle the challenge of improving the performance of middle school students, particularly of closing the achievement gap for students with special needs and/or from underperforming linguistic or socioeconomic groups, identifying and understanding the ways that higher-achieving schools achieve consistent success is important.

Findings from this study suggest that relationships characterized as trusting and respectful lie at the foundation of a set of successful practices made possible and nurtured by a supportive climate and culture. Practices derived from a focus on the emotional and social well-being of all students; facilitated by consistent and frequent collaboration among teachers, administrators, students, and community members; supported by evidence-based programs and practices; and rooted in a shared and clearly articulated vision of raising student achievement are most salient to the success of the higher-performing middle schools. These practices permeate activities in all areas of the J4TK Framework that framed the study: curriculum and academic goals; staff selection, leadership, and capacity building; instructional programs, practices, and arrangements; monitoring: compilation, analysis, and use of data; and recognition, intervention, and adjustments.

Building relationships within middle schools, across districts, and with communities fosters a shared vision of optimal achievement for all students and collaborative efforts toward achieving it. Drawing on the expertise within as well as outside of school (e.g., evidence-based instructional programs, ongoing analysis of and response to student performance data) also helps establish a climate able to meet the social, emotional, and academic needs of adolescents, making possible their higher performance.

# About *Just for the Kids—New York*

The goal of *Just for the Kids—New York* is to help schools learn from other schools that are performing well. On the national website, [www.just4kids.org](http://www.just4kids.org), visitors are able to easily view how any school in New York is doing on New York State Assessments and how other schools with similar or greater challenges compare. With 20 additional states taking part in the project, the national site also shows best practices that have been found across many states and schools over time and provides concrete examples of how these practices have been implemented across the country and in New York State.

*Just for the Kids—New York* is a collaboration among the University at Albany School of Education, The Business Council of New York State, Inc., and the State of New York. This Report on Best Practices in New York State Middle Schools was conducted by the University at Albany (SUNY) School of Education under the leadership of Dean Susan D. Phillips. An Advisory Board of top leaders of all major statewide education associations advises the project.

What Makes Middle Schools Work:

A report on best practices in New York State middle schools.

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