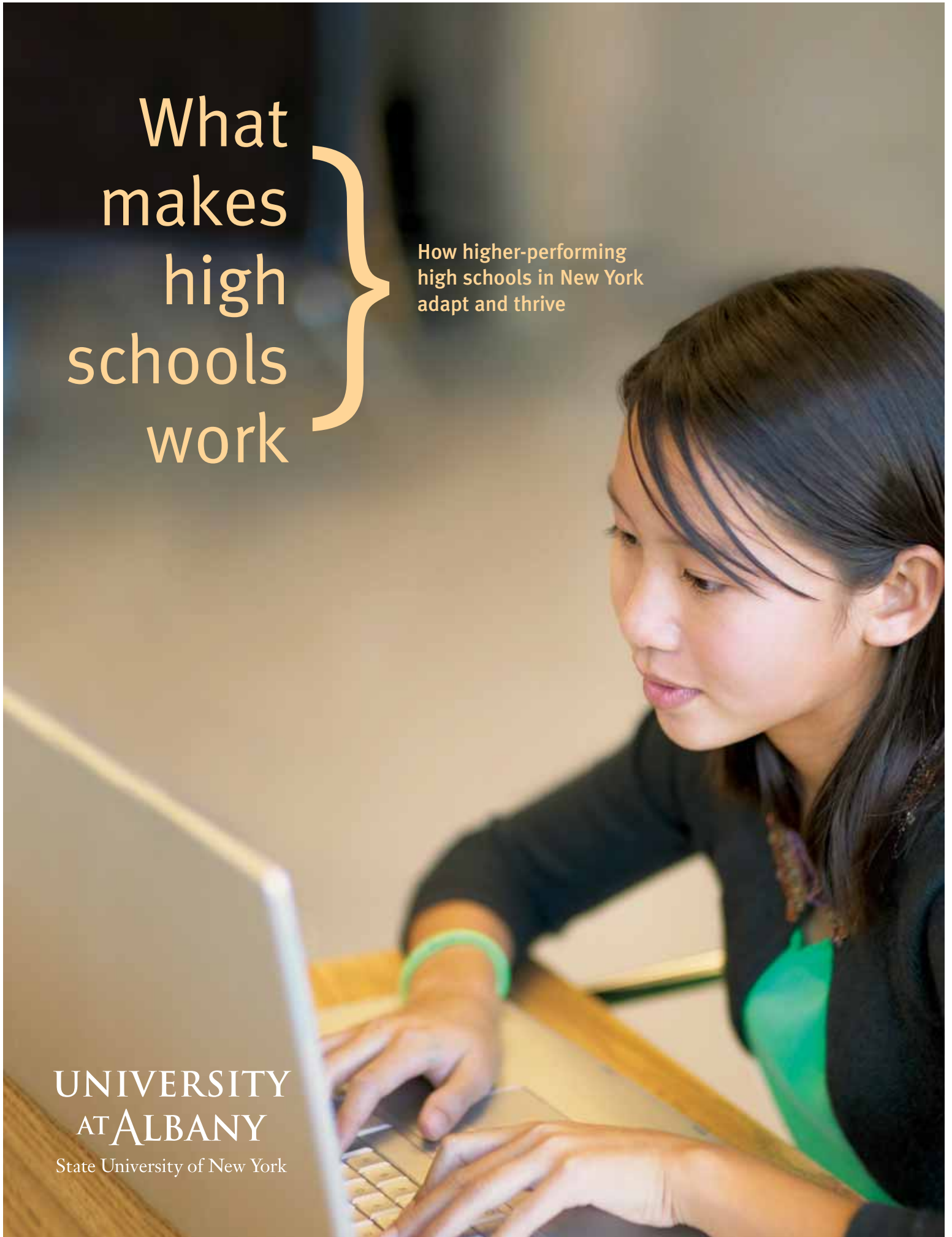


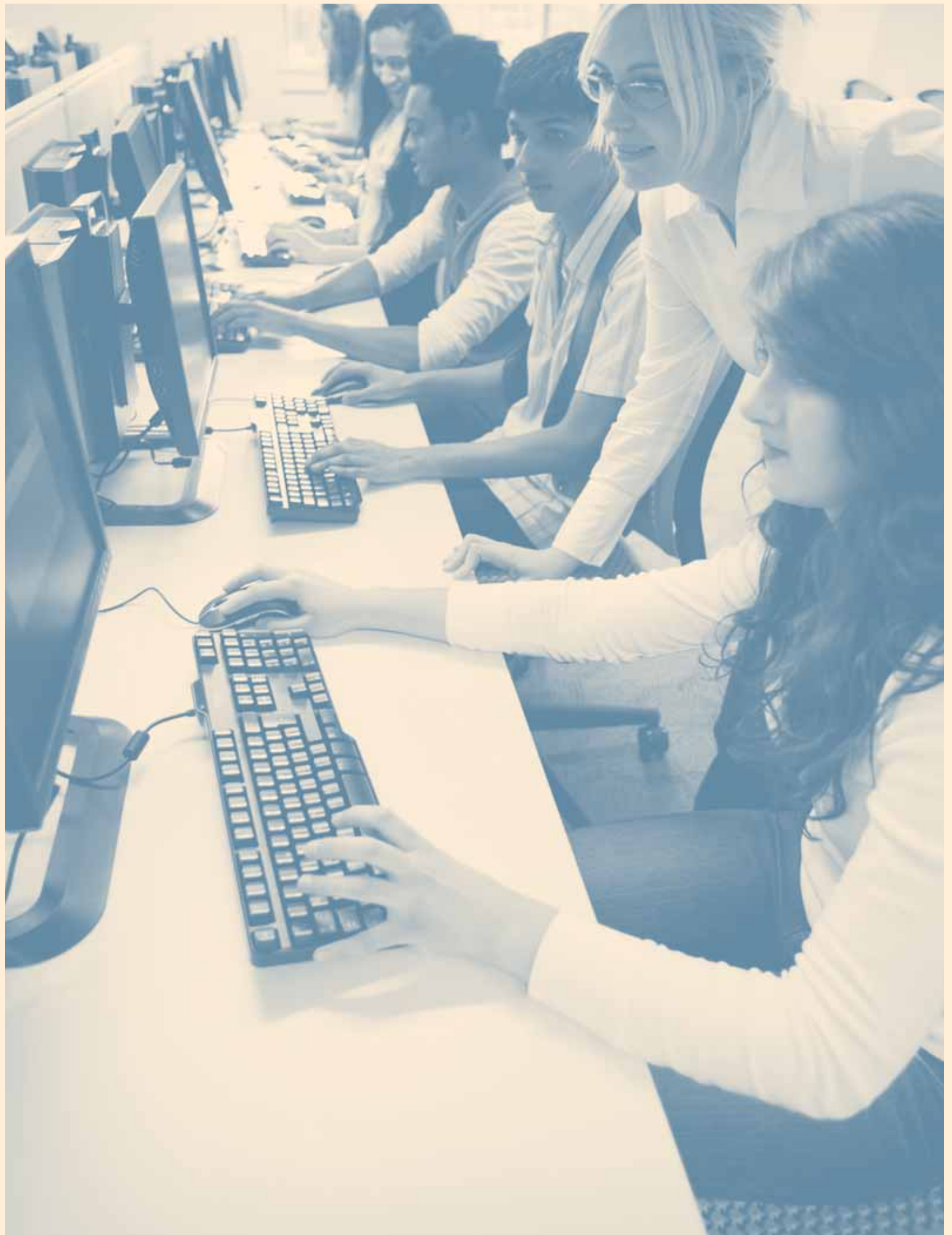
# What makes high schools work

How higher-performing  
high schools in New York  
adapt and thrive

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**2008 Kristen Campbell Wilcox**

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My special thanks to the teachers and administrators of the ten higher-performing schools we visited:

**Batavia High School, Batavia City School District**

**Cambridge Junior–Senior High School, Cambridge Central School District**

**Greene High School, Greene Central School District**

**Huntington High School, Huntington Union Free School District**

**Honeoye Falls–Lima High School, Honeoye Falls–Lima Central School District**

**MacArthur High School, Levittown Union Free School District**

**Saunders Trades & Technical High School, Yonkers City School District**

**South Kortright Central School, South Kortright Central School District**

**Warrensburg Junior–Senior High School, Warrensburg Central School District**

**White Plains High School, White Plains City School District**

I also want to express special appreciation to the five average-performing schools that opened their doors to us and whose efforts are reflected in this report. Our promise of anonymity precludes our listing them by name.

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K. Wilcox  
August 2008

# The ten higher-performing high schools studied

**Batavia High School,**  
Batavia



Located in a “city with small town characteristics,” this high school features state-of-the-art technology to support instruction. Faculty are encouraged to use that technology to enhance instruction and to take advantage of other professional development opportunities, as well. Collaborative goal setting and use of data to determine progress lead to further refinements in instruction. Teachers examine state standards to find the “power standards”—those concepts that are most important for success in life after school or are the foundation for the next grade level. Overall the school strives to offer rigorous core courses and a wide array of electives in modern facilities to prepare their students for success in the 21st century.

**Cambridge Junior-Senior HS,**  
Cambridge



In a community north of the state’s capital, Cambridge sets high expectations for students and itself—e.g., 100% graduation rate, 70% Regents diplomas — and flexibly focuses resources to support achieving those goals. Thus, the school may change the schedule mid-year, match teachers to student need by assigning or reassigning them — e.g. strong content area teachers to Academic Intervention Services (AIS) classes. The overall goal is an environment in which excellence is not mandated but is intrinsic to everyone’s thinking. Student progress is closely monitored, with interventions such as weekly meetings to focus on the particular progress of students at risk and an in house GED program to ensure the high school completion of those students.

**Greene High School,**  
Greene



Formal structures support communication between teachers within each grade (focused on students), between teachers in departments across grades (focused on curriculum and instruction), between special and regular education teachers, and generally across all levels and areas of this rural school southwest of the Catskills. Constant informal communication contributes to the resulting collaboration in this c. 450-student school whose performance generally tops all others in a four-county area. Teachers, administrators, and parents display a willingness to innovate to meet changing needs while providing consistency for students.

**Honeoye Falls-Lima HS,** Honeoye Falls



This school district blends rural, suburban, and small town populations and serves c. 2500 students from three western counties. The high school serves c. 850. Board members, administrators, teachers, and community members participate in developing the Strategic Plan, which includes Commitments and Strategic Intentions. Goals focus on more students achieving at the mastery level, and specific targets are in place for meeting those goals, with regular program review cycles in place to monitor progress and adjust as needed. A student-centered attitude has led to a modified block schedule and informs decisions about instruction and course offerings.

**Huntington HS,**  
Huntington



This 1200-student school on Long Island’s north shore provides a structured environment for an ethnically diverse population. Students come from the extremes of the economic continuum as well as the middle. Strong academic departments led by directors shape curriculum, support teacher collaboration and professional development, and vertically align curriculum. An ever increasing focus on student learning for all has resulted in efforts such as teaming in the ninth grade and special, smaller, and more supportive classes for ninth and tenth graders who have performed poorly in the previous year. Teachers, administrators, and social service personnel also pay special attention to breaking down social and cultural barriers between different groups of students.

**MacArthur HS,  
Levittown**



One of two high schools in Levittown, MacArthur serves nearly 1500 students in this close-knit community. Current graduation and Regents diploma rates are the result of an ongoing effort by the district to prepare students for the world of the future and to raise their aspirations. Higher than state-mandated graduation requirements keep students fully scheduled in a wide variety of core and elective courses designed to push them academically and capture their interest. All students are encouraged to take challenging courses, and more than 25% of students are enrolled in at least one AP class. Department chairs play a key leadership role, and the school has instituted a new evaluation program in which tenured teachers can engage in peer coaching and evaluation of each other's work.

**Saunders Trades &  
Technical HS,  
Yonkers**



The oldest vocational school in New York State serves c. 1350 diverse students organized into 13 magnet programs in three academies — Technological, Occupational, and Vocational Sciences. Each magnet provides a small learning community for students in grades 10-12, where they spend a 3-block time period each day. The ninth-grade curriculum provides an overview of each academy. All students take core academic courses and must meet Regents requirements; the school offers 10 AP courses. “Saunders Pride” is evident in the building and its inhabitants and is often expressed through competitions or other displays of student expertise. Faculty and administration share a commitment to excellence and an ethos that failure is not an option for any student.

**South Kortright  
Central School,  
South Kortright**



The heart of South Kortright is its K-12 school serving 380 students, c. 150 of whom are in grades 9-12. In a shrinking agricultural economy, the school faces high student poverty levels and limited exposure to the wider world. They strive to achieve their mission of providing students “diversity of experience to gain the skills and attitudes necessary for the lifetime acquisition of knowledge, aesthetics and ethics” by expanding horizons, raising expectations, and supporting performance with tutoring and structured study halls. In addition, they've added a tenth period that provides this support while also giving teachers time to collaborate. Extensive grant writing by teachers and administrators helps support some programs. The school has increased its Regents diploma rate by 30% in recent years.

**Warrensburg  
Junior-Senior HS,  
Warrensburg**



Inspired by a long-time former teacher/coach and principal of over twenty years, teachers in Warrensburg Junior-Senior High School promote and support academic achievement despite the challenges of limited resources. This small, rural school is an important part of this southern Adirondack town in providing students with a variety of opportunities to prepare for the world of work and college. It strives to maintain close community ties as well as strong relationships within the school. A pragmatic approach dominates, with structures in place for holding students accountable that are consistently applied. Teachers describe a balance between freedom and discipline that helps them sustain high achievement.

**White Plains HS,  
White Plains**



Large and diverse, White Plains High School embraces diversity and integrates it into the fabric of the school — seeking to hire teachers who reflect it, reaching out to community organizations, and reducing tracking, in part by encouraging and supporting students traditionally under-represented in the most challenging courses to enroll. The district carefully monitors overall performance as well as that of targeted subgroups and strategically allocates resources to interventions to insure success. Differentiated instruction is expected districtwide. Department coordinators oversee curriculum and its ongoing mapping and adjustments. The district strategic plan spells out objectives as well as “delimiters” to keep resource allocation focused and effective.

# Demographics of the ten higher-performing high schools studied

School Name	District	Total Enrollment	F/R Lunch Eligible
Saunders Trades & Technical High School	Yonkers City SD	1395	76
South Kortright Central School	South Kortright CSD	126	52
Greene High School	Greene CSD	453	43
Warrensburg Junior-Senior High School	Warrensburg CSD	457	38
Batavia High School	Batavia City SD	819	30
Cambridge Junior-Senior High School	Cambridge CSD	598	25
Huntington High School	Huntington UFSD	1175	25
White Plains High School	White Plains City SD	2164	25
Honeoye Falls–Lima High School	Honeoye Falls–Lima CSD	840	7
MacArthur High School	Levittown UFSD	1347	7
<b>New York State</b>		<b>2,772,669</b>	<b>45</b>



% of Students					PPE*	% Proficient on NYS Assessments, 2006		% of Students
ELL	African-American	Hispanic/Latino	White	Other		ELA	Math	Graduating
3	17	45	31	7	\$18,876	79	74	87
0	1	2	95	2	\$18,853	79	85	85
0	0	1	98	0	\$13,161	91	90	88
0	1	1	97	0	\$18,947	78	79	78
0	9	2	87	2	\$15,550	83	85	80
0	0	1	97	1	\$13,812	93	92	88
7	13	18	67	1	\$21,452	83	88	78
11	22	40	35	3	\$23,092	81	88	80
0	0	1	97	2	\$12,782	94	93	93
2	1	5	90	4	\$19,389	91	95	95
<b>7</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>\$16,212</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>67</b>

\* District-wide total expenditures per pupil

# What makes high schools work?

This report shows how some of New York’s high schools consistently succeed in achieving higher academic performance than demographically similar schools. With the rapid development of methods and technologies to more closely monitor student achievement, new instructional models to adapt to the increasing diversity in schools, shifts in understanding teaching and learning, and changes in the way educators think about the purposes and processes of secondary schooling, the most successful high schools have been able to adapt, and they and their students are thriving.

Previous research findings about effective high schools point to the importance of close monitoring of student progress, the development of particular “habits of mind” in and across content areas, the use of master teachers and innovative scheduling to offer quality and variety of course offerings, and the importance of consistent and coherent programs<sup>i</sup>. In addition, several recent studies have spotlighted the effectiveness of structural changes drawn from middle school models, such as small learning communities, and the interdependent nature of broad contextual skills, content knowledge, and cognitive strategies in ensuring students’ readiness for college and work<sup>ii</sup>.

In New York specifically, a few recent reports have highlighted the variability in the quality of educational experiences in some high schools<sup>iii</sup>.

The purpose of the study described in this report was to identify key elements that contribute to consistently higher performance, particularly by schools facing unusual challenges.

To conduct the study, our research team investigated 15 New York high schools—ten whose students consistently achieve at higher levels on State Assessments and five similar schools that get consistently average results. The study was part of the national *Just for the Kids* (J4TK) project and followed a research design developed by the National Center for Educational Achievement (NCEA), which has been the national sponsor of *Just for the Kids*.

Our study sought first to describe in individual school case studies the practices that teachers and administrators identify as most critical to their consistently higher performance and then to distinguish the differences in activities between consistently higher-performing and average-performing schools. This cross-case report, which follows similar reports about best practices in New York elementary schools and middle schools<sup>iv</sup>, characterizes the practices that administrators and teachers in the higher-performing high schools in New York State identify as most salient to their success.

## Research Methods

Using three years of New York State Assessment data, NCEA identified higher- and average-performing high schools in New York State through the use of regression analyses that estimated performance based on 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 English language arts, mathematics, social studies, and science Regents exams. In consultation with a statewide advisory board, our research team then selected a set of ten higher-performing schools based on their performance relative to other schools with similar demographics to include in the study. This set was selected to be representative of the diversity of schools in the state.

The schools selected have the following characteristics:

- They serve high school grades, typically grades 9-12 (see pp. 6-7).
- In most schools, from one- to three-quarters of students qualify for free or reduced lunch.
- The schools are public and have open enrollment policies.
- District per pupil expenditures cluster near the state average (see pp. 6-7).
- The schools represent a variety of school sizes, communities, geographic locales, and student populations.

Five average-performing schools were matched as closely as possible in terms of location, school characteristics, and students served.

Once the schools were selected and agreed to participate, two-person research teams conducted the fieldwork, primarily through face-to-face interviews during two-day site visits to each school. They also collected samples of documents. 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. The researchers audio recorded each interview and also took notes on laptop computers or on paper.

Following each visit, the lead researcher for each site wrote an 8-12 page case study based on analysis of interview transcripts and documentary evidence. These cases and examples of documentary evidence are available at <http://www.albany.edu/aire/kids>.

With the other members of the research team, I analyzed the interview transcripts and documentary evidence to identify practices that were typical of the higher-performing schools but not of the average-performing ones. This process included coding more than 160 interview transcripts resulting in 96 codes that were grouped into categories. Higher-performing cases were compared with all average-performing cases to identify in which cases particular categories/themes were present. I developed a matrix to record whether particular practices were present, absent, or “in process” and throughout this analysis wrote memos regarding details of particular practices in each case.

Although study participants identified a variety of factors as important to success, I have included as best practices in this report only those factors that were present in the majority of higher-performing schools and less than half of the average-performing schools.

# Higher-performing high schools foster consistent success through these five elements



## 1. Rigorous curriculum and expectations

These schools expect high performance from both teachers and students; furthermore, they explicitly focus on providing typically lower-performing students with opportunities to succeed in higher-level (honors and AP) courses.

## 2. Innovative instructional programs and practices

Higher-performing schools welcome the integration of new instructional programs and practices that best use resources to impact student performance.

## 3. Transparent communication

From the development of plans and goals to the reporting of student performance data, higher-performing schools invite participation and share information openly.

4.

## Evidence-based decision making

Decisions around new initiatives are based on analysis of evidence from a variety of sources.

5.

## Strategic targeting of resources

These schools target resources, including personnel, where they are most likely to best increase academic performance.



Higher performing high schools



# Key Findings

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

**A set of five elements** stand out as most salient to the success of the higher-performing schools in our study. Like many of the previous studies of high schools around the nation, our study identified a rigorous curriculum and expectations with an explicit focus on providing typically lower performing students with opportunities to succeed in higher level (honors and AP) courses as best practice. Our study also identified the importance of innovative instructional programs and practices to best use teacher expertise and technologies where they are most likely to have the greatest impact; transparency in the reporting of student performance data and development and articulation of goals and strategic plans; evidence-based and strategic decision-making around new initiatives; and targeting of resources to best enhance academic performance. Rigorous, innovative, transparent, evidence-based, and strategic (RITES)—these are the best practices identified in our cross-case analysis and described in the remainder of this report.

# 1.

## Rigorous Curriculum and Expectations

All students and teachers are challenged to exceed expectations

A climate of rigor infuses challenge into higher-performing high school classrooms for both teachers and students. Teachers are strongly guided by state standards, curriculum, and Regents exams in their subject areas; however, they also exhibit a sense of ownership over adapting the curriculum and their instruction to help students achieve at the highest levels possible. Teachers know what is expected of them in terms of expertise in their content area and instructional skills; students are also clear about what is required of them and are consistently monitored to ensure they are placed in the most demanding courses they can handle.



We mirror the state curriculum and then expand beyond this. Our district shows you can teach to test and beyond and be successful. –Cambridge, Teacher

Students have to understand when they are in school there's a certain way you have to behave, to act. This school is great at letting students know, if you do the wrong thing, there are consequences. –MacArthur, Teacher

We just don't leave the middle kids. We put the middle kids in the most challenging classes. We try to hit kids early on in honors track to get motivation. Even if they falter, they can pick it up again later. [Higher-level classes] are always open to kids who want to accelerate. –Cambridge, Teacher

How do higher-performing schools promote a culture of rigor? Three themes stand out: First, in higher-performing schools, meeting state-determined Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) targets, as measured by Regents passing rates, is perceived as not sufficient. Rather, exceeding state-determined targets for performance is the focus. Rigor is embedded in the school culture, and ownership over upholding high standards is shared. This differs from schools in our average-performing group, where individuals are more likely to focus on constraints to higher performance.



Higher-performing schools emphasize offering honors and AP courses to a larger variety of students through explicit efforts to reduce tracking. They also provide more inclusion classrooms—classrooms that include regular and special education students, with the regular education teacher assisted and supported by an aide or special educator, sometimes in a coteaching arrangement. The idea that all students need to be challenged and everyone is invited on the path to reaching their potentials in high school, college, or work pervades. Providing the right balance of rigor is artfully designed with the support of data and, moreover, close interpretation of data to help place students in the classes that will best challenge them and support their learning. Rigor is seen as different for every student, yet high expectations are explicit and pervasive for all students. Supports are put in place to ensure students succeed in school, participate in their communities, and are prepared for their futures beyond high school—whatever their choices might be—whether a technical/vocational route or college.



#### One way Greene High School does it

### Equal Opportunities for All

In Greene High School, one teacher says, “We treat everybody equally. Everybody has the same opportunity; everything is available to every kid who wants to take advantage of it.” This approach transcends academic instruction, as providing each “kid with the right opportunities” and the chance to be “well rounded” is deemed to be equally important. Thus, ample opportunity in the arts, sports, community service projects, and vocational training exists for students. Helping to point them in the right direction is the guidance department, which is credited with doing “a good job working with the strength of each student.” One look at the course offerings listed in their “Gateway to Education” handbook reveals a wide array of needs and interests being met. This includes college credit and competitive opportunities for the gifted and talented, apprenticeships and BOCES services for the vocational minded, and a variety of interest-specific in-house courses as well as the traditional core and remedial curriculum. (Ranado, 2008a)

**Exceeding state-determined targets.** In higher-performing schools rigor is built into explicit goals and norms of behavior that support higher performance. In Warrensburg, for example, 70 has been the minimum passing score for decades, compared to the more common 65 in the average-performing schools; and MacArthur teachers, like others in the higher-performing group, take it upon themselves to consistently uphold a higher standard for behavior and performance.

Instead of comparing their performance to state averages, the higher-performing schools set their own standards and compare themselves to the cream of the crop—the highest performing schools in the state or region. Honeoye Falls-Lima places emphasis on students studying multiple languages and for 75% of them to reach mastery in a foreign language; Cambridge has set a 90/40 goal (90% passing the Regents exam; 40% attaining mastery at 85% or more). In general, it is typical in these schools to focus on mastery, not proficiency.

**Including more students.** Another common theme in successful high schools is an emphasis on offering a wider range of students AP and honors courses, and increasing the use of inclusion classrooms. Cambridge, for example, is one of the few schools in its geographic vicinity to strive for over 70% of its students achieving an advanced Regents diploma (they achieved 64.5% in 2005-6), and the school continues to purposefully

We’re proud of [our inclusion rate]... We’ve decreased our classification rate significantly. The numbers of students that are truly in an inclusive environment are right here in high school and are thriving. They have resource room support, consultant teachers (who go into the classrooms), plus paraprofessionals and aides. –Batavia, Administrator

We integrate inclusion students in our classroom. [The district’s] priority is [that] any student, no matter what their difficulty or weakness—they want to find a way for them to succeed.

–MacArthur, Teacher

I would say that the standards here are a lot higher.... A kid from another school will sometimes have trouble in this school—with some exceptions—because in all the different major subjects they’re held to higher standards.

–Warrensburg, Teacher

increase the numbers of students participating in AP classes. They do this by encouraging typically average performing students to take AP courses early and keeping options open throughout their high school years even if they weren't successful at an earlier time.

In MacArthur, keeping a “rich and balanced” curriculum and providing a range of choices for students is paramount. Along with expanding their AP offerings, MacArthur has added robotics and cuisine programs so that students can find a niche in which they can succeed. Part of this emphasis on promoting a rigorous yet relevant educational experience for students has been at the foundation of MacArthur's efforts to integrate more inclusion classrooms. In general, providing students classified for special education services more inclusion options is seen as one of the ways to ensure rigor for all.

In schools with the greatest ethnic diversity, specifically targeting those students who typically do not take AP and honors classes is a focus. This effort is facilitated by analyzing data for particular socioeconomic, ethnic, and linguistic groups and offering avenues for their entry into higher-level courses. White Plains provides an example. The district has developed a process by which students are identified at the 8th-grade level to participate in an “Emerging Scholars” program that provides summer support and smaller group instruction with a core of teachers who work with them throughout 9th grade.

#### One way Huntington High School does it

### A Structured Environment

A prevailing theme among Huntington educators is the need for high expectations in a structured environment. They voice the concern that students need to be taught to behave appropriately in order to “have the ability to perform beyond the high school setting.” One educator states, “We want students to achieve mastery and be able to behave appropriately and be kind.” Another says, “It's a problem when teens don't delineate between adults and their peers.” Many teachers appear to believe a structured environment with behavioral goals benefits the students of Huntington High School. (from Nickson, 2008b)

**The right amount of challenge.** Keeping a healthy balance between a possible first job, a social life, and academics is a challenge for many high schoolers. Higher-performing schools help students strike that balance through policies and supports to catch them early enough to avoid failure and open their eyes to ways they can use their unique talents. In several of the higher-performing schools, students who are failing two or more subjects are prohibited from participating in extra-curricular activities until their academics improve. These policies are backed up with the support to help them achieve this.

Teachers in these schools take pride in teaching a rigorous curriculum and feel they can do so because of a balance between school policies that support high academic performance and clear expectations in terms of quality of instruction. Yet, they also feel freedom to adapt their instruction to enhance the relevance of their content to their students' lives.

Rigor is different for every student. In the higher-performing schools, teachers and administrators point to how they promote a nuanced view of rigor—defined by “promoting students' involvement as much as you can” (Huntington), through opportunities to have a “voice,” express a talent, and take part in service projects in their communities.

Students failing two or more subjects or one block subject can't participate in athletics. What we've done is provide a forum for them after school every day 5 days a week. They can still participate in activities if they're showing progress. Extra help is paid ... some teachers, some TAs [Teaching Aides]. Any kid who wants after school can stay for two hours a day or one if [they] have a ride.

—South Kortright, Principal

The teachers are the best resources. There is a willingness of the teachers to gear their classroom instruction to the kids that they have. Not everybody is at the same level. —Batavia, Teacher



# Saunders Trades & Technical High School

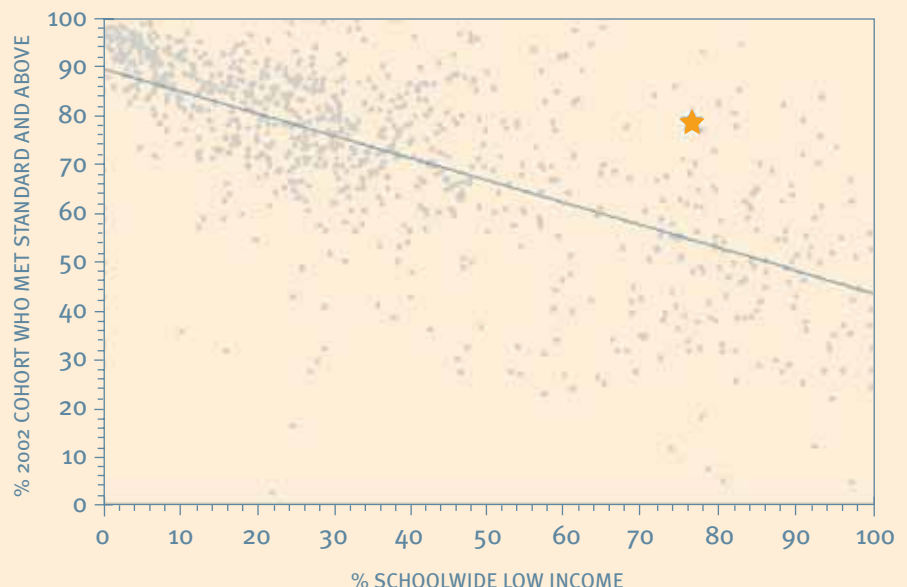
## Rigorous expectations with support

An example of a school that embodies a culture of rigor is Saunders Trades & Technical High School in Yonkers. The school is part of the Yonkers City School District, which sits on the urban fringe of New York City. The demand for excellence runs through all layers of the Yonkers School District, which strives to stay on the cutting edge by using research-based practices in the academic and magnet curriculums. For example, the district supports literacy initiatives across all content areas and relies on partners in private industry to help them think beyond what they do every day.

The district also cultivates and expects the best of its leaders, who undertake professional reading each year. They support teachers to do the best they can do through recognitions like “the WOW Factor” (Wonderful Outstanding Work) celebration at which teachers were met with a red carpet, stars with their names on the school ceiling, and awarded “Saundies” (Oscars) to celebrate a particular talent.

Students in grades 9-12 at Saunders are required to complete Regents and other college preparatory courses (e.g., two years of a foreign language) together with a three-year major selected from the 13 technical and trades programs in three Academies. Although Saunders is a big city school, it is able to create small communities that personalize instruction and nurture connections between students and teachers. The magnets like to encourage students into post secondary education, though some students choose to claim jobs straight away. Whatever the choice, students know they are well equipped with the skills they need to succeed. (from Helmar-Salasoo, 2008)

Saunders Trades & Technical High School students consistently outperform students in schools with comparable demographics on NYS Assessments, for example, the 2006 Regents English Exam.



## How Average-Performing Schools Differ

### Average Performing

Focus on meeting state-determined targets for performance.

Tracking and self-contained classrooms prevalent.

Expectations implicitly lower—the idea that students come with significant challenges and are limited by life circumstances is shared and guides teachers’ beliefs about student potential.

### Higher Performing

Meeting state-determined targets for performance seen as not sufficient; all strive to exceed state-determined targets for performance; “rigor” drives practice.

Emphasis on offering higher-level classes (honors and AP) to larger variety of students and providing more inclusion classrooms.

High expectations explicit and pervasive for all students. All students challenged to seek opportunities for contribution to the larger society and fulfill their own potentials in high school and beyond.

### Key Points and the Unexpected

It is helpful to clarify how the ethic of higher performance/rigor that we saw prevalent in higher-performing schools differs from an ethic of care, something we saw in both higher- and average-performing schools. In higher-performing schools the care and respect are still there, but there are also clear and consistent messages around expectations for students to reach their highest level of performance. To consistently achieve higher performance requires embracing rigor in expectations for all students and teachers and backing these expectations up with consistent monitoring, challenging placements, and aligned allocation of resources.

### What we didn’t expect:

Despite recent reports on high school reform pointing to smaller class sizes as key to improved student performance, we did not find this to be prevalent in our data (although this was present in some schools and beginning to take root in others in our study sample). Rather, many of the higher-performing schools point to a more nuanced approach to “smaller” whereby they increase some class sizes and decrease others depending on the content area, level, and characteristics of student cohorts.

Our high school objective is 70% of students getting an advanced Regents diploma. We are defining success very specifically. You have to be firing on all cylinders to get that 70%. –Cambridge, Administrator

[We have a] co-curricular code—if they are failing two or more subjects or not getting to school on time, then they’re barred from extra curricular activities and sports. It is all part of the bigger program. –Cambridge, Administrator



One thing that is interesting is that this district had been comparing itself to the New York State average over the last couple of years. This year we’ve started to compare ourselves to Nassau County, which is a higher standard—and our focus is on mastery rather than proficiency [on the New York State assessments]. –MacArthur, Administrator

## 2. Innovative Instructional Programs and Practices

### Innovation and risk taking serve to improve programs and practices

In this study, innovating in high schools can be characterized as involving a sensibility or mind-set that is at the same time both expansive and disciplined. It is important to clarify that as a best practice, the high schools in our study do not haphazardly experiment with new schedules, programs, instructional strategies, or instructional technologies. Instead they foster innovation within and seek out new ideas and approaches to meet challenges they believe are critically important to their students' achievement and the meeting of their district goals. In this way they practice “disciplined innovation.”

Innovating is inherently a distinctive activity emerging from particular, local circumstances; therefore, the innovations themselves are unique in each of the schools we studied. However, we found that higher-performing schools share a pattern whereby innovation is made possible through a dynamic interplay of freedom and focus: Freedom takes shape in the ways new ideas are discussed freely and frequently—informally and in committees, with teachers oftentimes leading the way to moving from idea to a specific and feasible plan of action. As opposed to average-performing schools, the higher-performing schools promote a climate of trust in which taking risks is possible and is encouraged through open dialogue and administrative support. Focus takes shape in the alignment of those “risks” with strategic goals.

**Trusting new ideas.** For teachers in higher-performing schools, the sense of burden associated with the extra work involved in implementing new ideas is offset by the sense of satisfaction when their ideas are recognized and given an opportunity to be implemented.

Innovation goes hand-in-hand with flexibility and is reciprocal. In an environment in which thinking of new ideas is responded to with openness and willingness to make changes, teachers and administrators are inspired to innovate even more and are willing to sacrifice routine to support change.

Innovative thinking in these schools is ultimately grounded in “getting over fears,” as one teacher explains, but also in curiosity and fun. “What if...?” questions thrive and are at the root of innovative practices. These ideas flourish because they are acknowledged and encouraged among teachers and between teachers and administrators. Teachers in the higher performers characterize their curriculum coordinators and other administrators as being good listeners, flexible, and willing to try something different, which they credit with supporting the development and implementation of new ideas.



We're not afraid to be creative within our limits. –Greene, Administrator

Micro-managing stifles innovation. You need to develop a culture of participation throughout the school. –Huntington, Teacher

Overcome the fear. When I was approached about [developing a new course], it was a natural appointment for me but I was initially hesitant because I had to put the curriculum together. It takes trying to get over doubts and fears and giving it a try. –Saunders, Teacher

We insist on maintaining flexibility with the master schedule. When we need to move kids around and reassign teachers midyear, we have done it. We weigh a number of factors before we make this decision: Do the students need this? If the answer is yes, we will do it... The master schedule is organic and living. It can change weekly. –Cambridge, Administrator

You can come up with ideas, be creative, go to administration about problems or an idea. It's a very free and open environment. –South Kortright, Teacher

### One way White Plains High School does it

## Support to Innovate and Initiate

Although district initiatives such as differentiated instruction have been implemented throughout White Plains High School, teachers express a feeling of freedom to experiment with different approaches in their classrooms and cite supportive stances toward teaching, learning, and participating in leading the school to do so.

*My failure is not negative. It can be my greatest teacher. By encouraging teachers to experiment, and not to be afraid to fail, we become much better teachers.*

*I've always felt supported as long as there's academic integrity and a community commitment to providing academics to all kids. The district's never penalized me for trying. Ultimately, every class has its own dynamic. The district encourages that kind of experimentation.*

(Wilcox, 2008)

**Testing new programs and technologies.** In the most successful schools a variety of innovations are cited as related to increasing student performance; these range from scheduling to the use of instructional technologies. For example, in Greene, administrative support of teachers' ideas through "listening, but also from responding to suggestions," resulted in a collaborative effort with the guidance department to adjust the schedule and hire a new teacher in a subject where teachers felt it was needed. Greene is also the site of an evolving work/study program for special education students. The higher-performing schools also cite experimenting with teaming and smaller learning communities based on what other schools are doing, and the latest research.

Higher-performing schools embrace new technologies, willingly adopting and integrating them—but in a decidedly disciplined and focused way. It is typical in these schools to make sure the "horse is in front of the cart" with respect to providing training and identifying a need for the use of technology before purchasing it and expecting teachers to use it. In these schools, sharing new ideas about how to best use new technologies is part of the school culture.

These schools see the path toward higher performance as directly connected to a spirit of innovation that affords them opportunities to test out new programs, schedules, instructional practices, and technologies and to look to all teachers, including those new to the profession, for ideas.

We have an environment that allows people to feel the freedom to do things that are different and try some different things. If it doesn't immediately work out, we allow people the freedom to try something again. That's how things stay fresh, and teachers feel that what they do is valued. –Batavia, Administrator



We seek input from all of the parties involved. Ask teachers what it is that they need to be provided to be more successful. We look at what other schools are doing.... We involve students, parents, teachers, support staff, administrators. If everyone is involved, they are more willing to accept change and new initiatives. If people know that they are encouraged to take risks and if they can feel safe knowing they can take risks, that's a big positive. –Batavia, Teacher

# South Kortright Central School

## Bringing good ideas to fruition

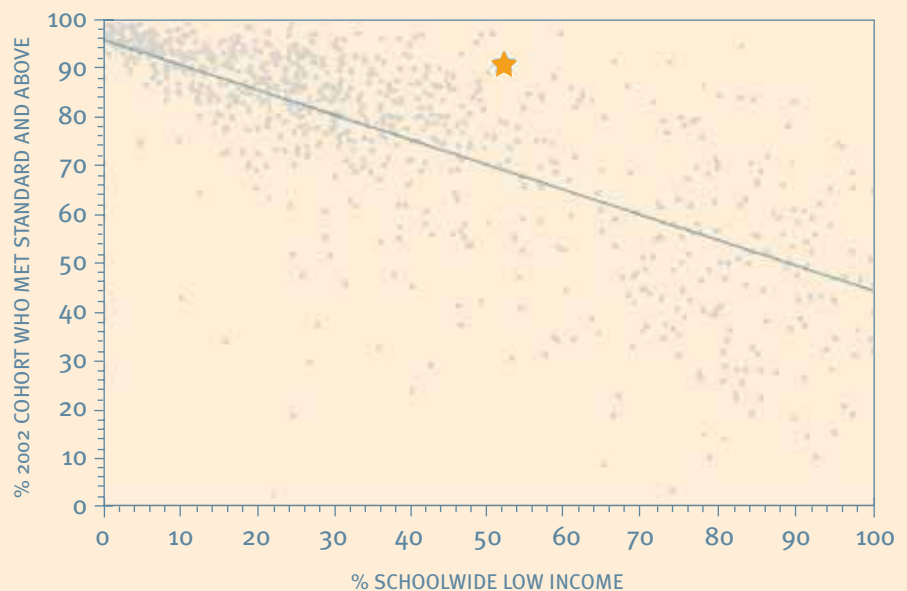
In South Kortright, the relationship between faculty and administration is characterized as a “free and open environment.” Administrators try to encourage teacher to pursue new ideas and training. In return, teachers say, “You can come up with ideas, be creative, and go to the administration about problems or ideas.”

The superintendent, a former science teacher in the district, says “When I was teaching, I felt I was teaching in the poorest school in the country. Now that’s not the case. A lot of teachers secure grants. We have access to technology through grants. One of my major areas of success is helping teachers dare to dream.” As a result, the principal says that the district in the past six years has undergone “a systematic infusion of technology.” Now they have computer labs, mobile presentation carts in constant use, and a distance learning center used for multiple purposes, including by the guidance counselor, who takes students on “virtual field trips.”

Grant writing also funds GEAR UP, a federal program designed to encourage students to go on to college after high school. The program “has worked well for us,” says the superintendent. It allows the district to assign a tutor to a particular grade to follow those students through and beyond high school. “It gets them out to colleges so they know what’s out there and that they can afford it.” Four classes have been involved so far, and the “percent of students going on to college has risen dramatically.” He credits this program with the fact that last year nearly 100% of those who applied to college were accepted.

The schedule, with its “hybrid block schedule” and complex five-day rotating tenth-period activities, has been shaped by two teacher-generated innovations: In the case of the hybrid block schedule, English and social studies teachers desired longer time frames for instruction, so their classes were blocked into two-period sessions. All others, by preference, remain on a traditional schedule. The “tenth period” came about as the need rose for more AIS (Academic Intervention Services) and academic tutoring time. Since all students must be present during tenth period, specific days were also set aside for student mentoring, teacher collaboration, and enrichment activities. In each case the process was the same. It began as ideas from teachers, discussed first in a large group format, then implemented by the administration. (from Ranado, 2008b)

South Kortright Central School students consistently outperform students in schools with comparable demographics on NYS Assessments, for example, the 2006 Regents Science Exam



We demonstrate what [technology] we use ... we go beyond and share with coworkers what we have learned.

–Batavia, Teacher

In order to get an interactive white board you're required to take a course. A standard of performance is expected for anyone who uses white boards in order to ensure that it's used properly.

–White Plains, Administrator

## How Average-Performing Schools Differ

### Average Performing

Schedule inflexible, based on “how it’s always been done.”

Work from failure backward: traditional intervention programs offered after failure.

Technology available, but without adequate training or instructional strategies to use it.

### Higher Performing

Flexibility key to developing and revising the schedule and allocating resources (time and staffing) where data show the most need; thinking outside of the box helps match students’ needs to resources.

Innovative and proactive interventions focus on keeping students on-track before AIS needed; use of grants and outside resources.

Technology available, supported with training, and integrated into the school in a variety of ways.

### Key points and the Unexpected

Whether modifying research-based best practice or developing new ideas from scratch, higher-performing high schools exhibit an innovative spirit that inspires the use of effective and relevant programs and practices. They differ from average-performing schools in asking and being able to pursue “What if?” questions with administrative support. In average-performing schools, a variety of constraints (e.g. lack of financial, administrative, community support) are cited for stopping innovative ideas before they can take shape into an actionable plan.

### What we didn’t expect:

The central importance of teachers supporting other teachers is remarkable in promoting innovation. Building trust within departments under the guidance of a curriculum coordinator who is both respected, yet “one of us,” was also key in many higher performers and conspicuously absent in some average-performing schools. As one higher-performing school administrator asserted, building support for innovation can start even with two people who are committed to a new idea. If they are supported to take that idea and run with it, it can inspire others to do likewise. An innovative spirit is infectious if it is given a trusting environment in which to thrive.



If the administration is a presence and provides a work environment that allows people to do different things, that makes for teachers an exciting place to be, and their lessons will be exciting for the students. When administration comes down too hard and heavy, it lowers performance. –Saunders, Teacher



# 3.

## Transparent Communication

Plans, challenges, successes, and failures are openly shared

Transparency and trust—these are intertwined and part of what makes some high schools achieve a synergy that positively impacts student performance. In schools where transparency is paramount, it exists in a reciprocal relationship with trust and cooperative, ongoing dialogue. Continual dialogue around issues important to the success of students and the school also builds trust; and as trust builds, the willingness to be transparent about successes and challenges also grows. With this comes a sense of shared ownership in meeting challenges and coming up with solutions.

In some districts, trust has been hard won and born of deliberate and consistent efforts to be transparent within the district and schools and with community members. In other districts a strong tradition of trust and transparency has long been at the foundation. Either way, this trust is always in the making as conditions change in schools and communities, reporting performance data becomes increasingly public, and the data transparent.

How do some school districts promote transparency and use it to achieve consistently higher performance? At the foundation, these schools place themselves firmly at the heart of their communities by promoting a collaborative and cooperative environment of transparency inside the school and with the community and by sharing both successes and challenges. They co-construct the curriculum (and other important documents), with many teachers taking part, and make the products of their work transparent to parents and other community members, oftentimes providing them on-line. They also consistently revise strategic plans aligned to goals, sharing this effort with teachers, parents, and other community members.

**Transparency and humility.** In higher-performing schools, transparency between school and community is fostered by history and humility. In some schools, like MacArthur, many teachers grew up in the community themselves and feel invested in promoting the future of the school. They have a history together and bring insider perspectives on what is important to that community and what expectations it holds for the school.

In addition to being informed by the district's history and invested in promoting the success of its future, teachers and administrators in higher-performing schools often take a humble stance toward problem solving. Rather than a “we’ll take care of it” or “trust us” message, which could potentially isolate them, they relate that they are not the only “experts,” don’t always know the answers, and are listening for ideas. Problem solving in these schools comes from clarity about what is known and not known and inviting collaboration across departments and from parents and school board representatives.

Know your teachers, students, and parents. Take the temperature and pulse of your school every day. The key is visibility, commitment, advocating and problem solving. But it starts with visibility. –White Plains, Administrator

Our best practice is communication between departments and grade levels, administrators and teachers. Another component is the home-school connection. Each building has really modeled and supported an effective home-school communication piece. Teachers are really good about connecting with parents. I think that’s crucial. –Greene, Administrator

We have parents at the table with [the instructional support teams] at the very first sign of a problem about a child’s needs. It builds an inclusive, collaborative mind-set. We don’t want adversarial relationships with the parents. We acknowledge our mistake, but focus on course-correcting and move ahead. We don’t assume that we are the experts. It wasn’t always easy to get teachers to allow others in to observe a classroom. Now parents are invited in and teachers admit they may need help in meeting a child’s needs. Teachers should be willing to say “I don’t know” as well as “I’m sorry.” –Honeoye Falls-Lima, Teacher

### One way Greene High School does it

## Constant Collaboration

The heart of capacity building in Greene High School is in-house collaboration and sharing. This occurs formally at department meetings, which are curriculum focused and where teachers present lessons to share, or at grade-level meetings, which are more student focused and where they “can discuss what’s going on in the classroom and share concerns about any issue” or individual student. As one teacher put it, “Meetings with my colleagues are almost always productive.” Teachers also speak of constant informal collaboration through daily conversations about what they are teaching, what’s effective, what’s not and say, “If we find something students are enthusiastic about, we share it.” This sharing extends from teachers “letting people look through [their] stuff,” to the principal “always offering videos and things,” to the librarian being “real good about trying to work with us.” (Ranado, 2008a)

The schools foster open dialogue with their boards of education and look to them as sounding boards for new ideas and to reflect on their practices; by and large, they see them as supportive in aligning budgets with plans.

In general, there is little face-saving behavior in these schools: The naked truths about what has worked and what has not are aired. This kind of free-flowing communication could mark disaster if turned to bashing and complaining, but instead these schools turn to the power of the “team” — to make what might seem impossible in other schools — possible.

**Knowing students and parents well.** Pursuing transparency also involves making all students “your business.” When students don’t seem to be succeeding or things don’t seem quite right for a particular student, teachers and administrators in higher-performing schools take note and take action. Becoming close enough to high school students to know when things are headed in the wrong direction for them can be emotionally draining for both students and the adults trying to help them. In average-performing schools the feeling of “exhaustion” with students’ seemingly endless needs seems prevalent. However, when the school climate overall supports teachers and administrators to share the responsibility of relating to their students, the effect is a sense of being “in tune.”

Keeping close relationships with students and their families in large schools is a particular challenge. This is where using technology such as automatic dialing and resources like bilingual staff helps teachers and administrators keep in touch with families.

**Planning together.** Transparency in discussions around curricula and strategic planning is perceived as an important factor in sustained success in the higher-performing schools. Curricular discussions are frequently ongoing, inclusive, and often led by K-12 coordinators or “directors” to ensure vertical alignment. In Huntington, for example, eight K-12 curriculum directors head up curriculum mapping and share the effort with teachers, the “Educational Development Committee,” assistant superintendent, and board of education.

Higher performance in some schools is also attributed in part to the transparent process by which teachers’ individual plans for growth and the school’s and district’s strategic plans are shared and co-constructed.

We started off with letting people know about the strategic plan—what we were doing. [We used] surveys and world cafes. We ended up with hundreds of people in the cafeteria talking about the schools: Listening to people about our schools—what they liked—didn’t like. We kept a log about what those things were. After the survey, we invited people to be on a core planning team, followed up with action teams, and measurement teams. There were about one hundred people on all of those different committees.

–White Plains, Administrator

The kids know that if they need something in this building...they can turn to somebody.... We have teachers who want these kids to succeed. They don’t turn their backs on the kids. I know every single senior in this group. I know their parents and I know the kids.... I make it my business to call the parents if I see a concern or I see something’s wrong with the child or the child is not functioning. We don’t leave the kids alone.... So if anyone sees that a child is struggling with a problem, at home or something academic, teachers come straight to us. –Saunders, Administrator

There is an academic report done every year.... In this report, we document for the board what we have done during the year. We give it to all the teachers in September. It is what we are about. If I were a parent, I would want to know what is happening and how the school is responding. –Cambridge, Administrator



# White Plains High School

## Listening and learning

Constantly planning how to achieve high academic goals for all students is part of the culture in White Plains. In the most recent round of strategic planning, for example, a wide net was cast to gain insights regarding core values and the future direction of the district from as many constituencies as possible, including teachers, students, and parents. This process included gathering survey information and hosting discussion forums around the priorities in the district and ways of strategically implementing and monitoring reforms.

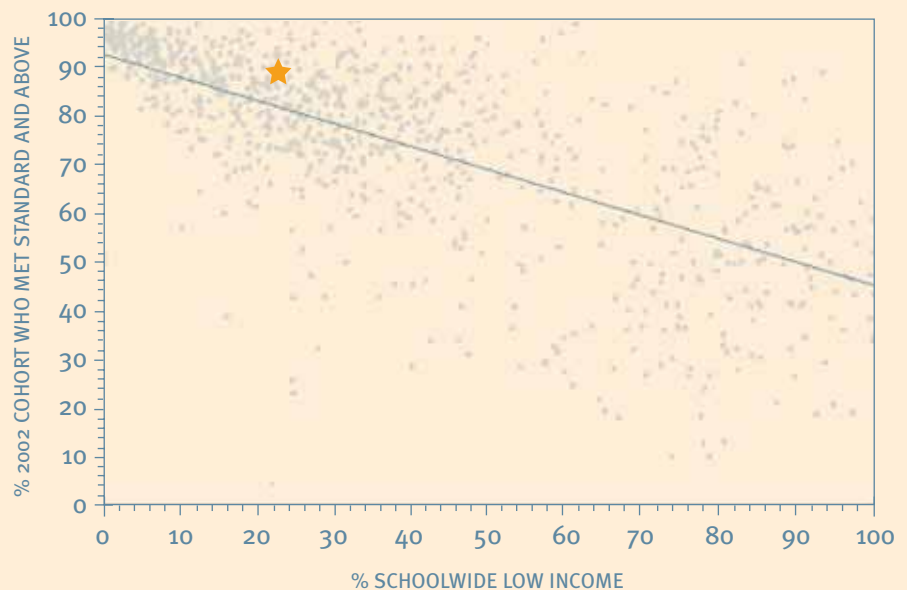
Ultimately the strategic plan—seen as a “blueprint” for the future of the district—included core values, the mission statement, strategic objectives, methods for reaching those objectives with a “list of results” by which they could be measured, and “strategic delimiters” to make clear what is within and outside of the plan.

*Strategic Objectives: By 2012: All students will achieve challenging district standards of literacy across all disciplines. All students will continually choose to explore and enrich communities. All students will choose to apply their knowledge and skills to solve problems meaningful to them.*

*Strategic Delimiters: We will not: Adopt any new program or service unless it is: consistent with and contributes to our mission; accompanied by an analysis of the resources and the staff development needed for its effectiveness; accompanied by a plan to assess its ongoing effectiveness.* –White Plains District Strategic Plan Adopted Dec. 3, 2007

(Wilcox, 2008)

White Plains High School students consistently outperform students in schools with comparable demographics on NYS Assessments, for example, the 2006 Regents Mathematics Exam





## How Average-Performing Schools Differ

### Average Performing

Top-down approach to developing and articulating goals and vision for school and district, generally not based on input from broad spectrum of school and community.

No curriculum map, just starting process of mapping, and/or just beginning to share the curriculum map within schools and with community; little transparency with public and within school of curriculum and academic goals across departments and grade levels.

Tensions between school and community; lack of processes to include students, parents, and community members, inhibiting transparency and productive discussions around improving the school.

### Key Points and the Unexpected

Where open dialogue around goals, plans, and student performance exists along with the other key elements of best practice discussed in this report, schools are able to build off the combined effort of many. This impacts the diversity of ideas produced and the probability that those ideas will be embraced and supported by the broader school community.

### What we didn't expect:

We didn't expect transparency to arise at all in our data. Transparency is often an overlooked feature of best practice, perhaps because it is a bit difficult to characterize. What we found was convergence around a democratic sensibility that requires transparency to thrive. Transparency as a practice is really about "not mincing words," "not pretending," and believing that with the combined effort of many better ideas will be inspired and supported.

### Higher Performing

Consistent dialogue around goals and vision; breadth of input in developing and articulating a shared vision for student success.

Curriculum transparent to parents, community members, and teachers, often provided on-line and seen as "living."

School the heart of the community, a place that provides students, parents, and community members abundant information regarding school initiatives and invites them into discussions and processes to improve.

We do a lot of parent contacts. By 7am today, we made twenty plus phone calls with the nurse about kids' vaccinations. We are there for the teachers. We call the parents because the nurse speaks no Spanish. Parents know that someone [who speaks their language] is here to answer the phone. There are four counselors who are fluent in Spanish and some who are almost fluent in Spanish. –White Plains, Community Outreach Counselor

One of our best practices is 'Connect Ed'—something the superintendent introduced. It gives us the capacity to communicate with parents on a daily basis. [We can send a] message to every student using auto dialing. That has proven to be a huge success and an opportunity to bring the community at large much closer to the schools. It can be narrowed down to a small group or classroom or a particular group of students working on a project. –Saunders, Administrator

Having the curriculum framework that is prepared by the teachers giving them ownership creates an atmosphere of responsibility. –Huntington, Teacher

# 4&5.

## Evidence-Based Decision Making and Strategic Targeting of Resources

A variety of data are used to monitor progress, prioritize, and address needs

Knowing where you're going, what you need to get there, and using your resources strategically to reach your goals might seem like simple logic, but this kind of evidence-based and strategic activity is a critical element of best practice identified in our study. What is striking in higher-performing schools is their systematic use of a variety of evidence to target resources to where they are most needed. This involves not only looking at data, but more importantly interpreting those data to inform focused action: asking, "What do the data tell us about areas calling for attention? What do the data tell us about our allocation of resources? What do the data tell us about where we are heading?"

This kind of thinking impacts curriculum revision, the focus of professional development, staffing, and a multitude of other decisions so that efforts address students' and teachers' needs and are coherent with the district's and school's goals and plans. Like average-performing schools, higher performers align their instruction with the state curricula; however, they enrich and enhance the clarity of curricula through continual revision across grade levels, oftentimes through the use of electronic mapping software, and making available web-based supplementary resources for students, parents, and other teachers. Also, although at times they draw on outside resources that offer packaged professional development programs, higher-performing schools balance what outside resources can offer and what teachers and administrators in their own buildings say they need and want to help students learn.

Higher-performing schools are also distinctive in their proactive targeting of resources to where they are most likely to have the greatest impact on student performance in the future. Through close analysis and interpretation of data they look at student performance and community demographic trends to position themselves ahead of the curve. This proactive and constantly revitalizing spirit supports their ongoing higher performance.

**Embracing data.** The degree to which systematic analysis and interpretation of a variety of data are widely accepted and even embraced in higher-performing schools is remarkable compared with average-performing schools. By 2008, any negative feelings toward looking at data to inform practice that is associated with state regulations and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 had largely shifted in the higher-performing schools. This shift was related to a broadening in the scope of the definition of "evidence" to more than test score data and to a related systematic dialogue around making sense of data.

In these schools, teachers see how data can help them cope with the seemingly unmanageable amount of content they are expected to teach and prepare their students for the state Regents exams. Administrators work to refine the ways they disseminate performance data and do it in a way to promote cooperative dialogue around continual improvement. As a Honeoye Falls-Lima administrator advised, "Use data to inform decision making, and get broad-based input for decision-making.... Have all parties at the table." Keeping "an eye on data, state assessments, and getting teachers' feedback on what went well" are all sources of evidence to guide practice.



It's not just having the data and dispersing them, but making sense of them. –Batavia, Administrator

We are continually looking to improve program evaluation by benchmarking our results against New York State similar schools and also to nationally recognized schools. We look at schools with similar demographics. We also look at music, Scholastic art winners, athletics and get outside assessments. We're looking beyond ourselves and celebrating what we are doing better—so we can then look at what needs focus and improvement.

–Honeoye Falls-Lima, Teacher

Administration meets with the teachers. Students have the chance for feedback. There's a schoolwide survey put out at the end of the year from the school improvement team. There are exit interviews with each senior student which are used to set district goals for the following year. –Honeoye Falls-Lima, Teacher

The themes of evidence-based and strategic action are closely linked with transparency. To inform their work, higher-performing schools collect and use data from a variety of sources (not only state assessments), such as survey data from teachers and community members, exit interviews with seniors, and interviews with graduates to learn about the adequacy of their preparation for demands beyond high school.

By the time the results come from the state, we've already had a head start on the data. –Batavia, Administrator

#### One way White Plains does it

### Reporting on Groups of Students

The White Plains School District has taken monitoring and analyzing student performance data several steps further than the standard data warehouse reports many schools rely upon. With the help of a consultant, administrators have created spreadsheets on which important details regarding performance of different groups of students (i.e., special education, ESL, African-American males, all females) can be teased apart, including conversions to AYP; they analyze Regents and benchmark scores for the most current year, trends, and gaps; and they make a periodic “Report to the Faculty” on the results. What is done with all these data is a continual process of revising goals and making changes to meet those goals. (Wilcox, 2008)



The annual report provides the data on benchmarks. Each year we hope to improve our students' achievement on the state assessments by 10 percent a year. We've had such a huge growth over the past five years that's astounding. We now have to come up with better ways. –White Plains, Administrator

**Looking ahead.** Making sure that resources are targeted to where they will have the greatest impact begins with a school's greatest resource—teachers. In higher-performing schools, pains are taken to match teachers with students in a way that optimizes their positive impact on student performance, particularly for those students at risk and those with special needs. Systematic analysis and interpretation of a variety of evidence helps facilitate shifts toward offering more inclusion classrooms taught by the most qualified teachers as well as implementation of tutorial sessions and “labs” headed up by the teachers who can best help the students who need these extra supports.

New initiatives to target resources where most needed are not only about alleviating existing weaknesses, but are based on looking at trends in a proactive effort to head off issues before they arise, thus maximizing potential growth in performance. For example, a “continuous improvement model” “where you are relentless and never satisfied, but are always looking to build and improve upon it” drives the allocation of resources in Honeoye Falls-Lima.

#### One way Greene High School does it

### Sharing Data and Analyses

Monitoring student progress through data analysis is key, not only to setting and revisiting goals, but also to adjusting to the needs of students as they arise. The major thrust of the Integrated Improvement Plan committee is to review state indicators and federal and state benchmarks such as test results and school report cards in order to identify problem areas and come up with a strategy to improve in these areas. This is an ongoing process. At one level, the curriculum council meets every other month. This council includes department chairs, team leaders, special liaisons, and representatives from physical education, art and music, foreign language, special education and Academic Intervention Services. The council receives statistics from the principal and curriculum coordinator as to how each subject area is doing in regard to state assessments. This information is then taken back to each member's respective department. Also, after each state assessment, department chairs are responsible for having their departments develop a T-chart reporting on areas such as strengths and weaknesses identified while grading and difficulty of the test. This is shared with administrators and reviewed in teams. Grade-level meetings bring together teachers of all subject areas to monitor individual student needs and determine if a problem is subject- or teacher-specific or extends to the point where parent or guidance conferencing is needed. (Ranado, 2008a)

# Batavia High School

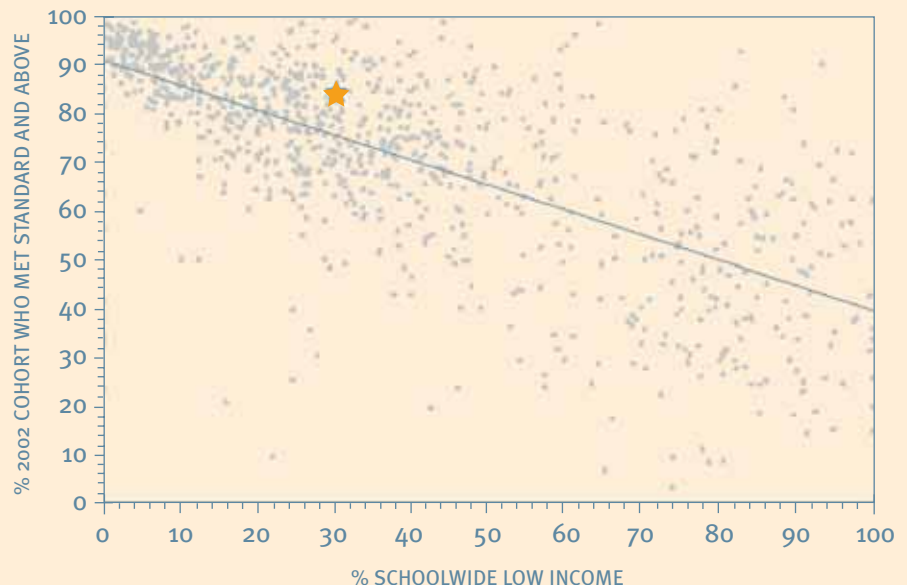
## Taking initiative

The Batavia school district is committed to analyzing data, but with a difference: “We keep a lot of data...but we’re not just a repository,” says one administrator. Students’ state assessments are scanned, and an item analysis done so teachers can use the data for instructional decisions.

Analyses of data are by building, by class, and by student. From this information, teachers are able to pinpoint particular areas that need adjustment. However, it is not only state assessment data Batavia teachers reference to inform changes. They are also required to look at student work together. They discuss the strengths and weaknesses displayed and what strategies and best practices will help students. Using data effectively “by making sense of it” to make good instructional decisions is a district priority. As one teacher explains, “It may have been painful at first, but we’re realizing that looking at the data is a good thing. [It helps] us to understand where our weaknesses are and how to change and correct what we are doing.”

Teachers use both formal and informal means of monitoring student progress, with several departments administering common mid-term assessments. The English department developed common benchmarks that parallel the tasks on the English Language Arts Regents Exam. A particular focus on improving the graduation rate has been facilitated through ever-more-refined methods for accessing data quickly, but also in tapping the expertise of an outside consultant to look deeply into the factors contributing to graduation rates. This project included analyzing the records of students who had not completed high school, which revealed ninth grade as being a time when the high school started “to lose students.” As a result, identifying at-risk students as early as middle and elementary school and implementing needed programs for them has become a district-wide initiative. Using evidence to show the importance of proactively targeting resources before students come to high school reinforces the notion that ownership for high school success must be shared K to 12. (Nickson, 2008a)

Batavia High School students consistently outperform students in schools with comparable demographics on NYS Assessments, for example, the 2006 Regents Global History Exam



## How Average-Performing Schools Differ

### Average Performing

Data primarily analyzed by administration.

No particular professional development agenda associated with evidence; many teachers seeing professional development offerings as of little use.

Resistance to evidence-based decision making.

Use of data to inform specific interventions and other reforms not systematic.

Lack of continuity and clarity of priorities and vision; articulation of goals and strategic plans top-down—generally not shared with a broad spectrum of school and community.

### Higher Performing

Close analysis and discussion of data among teachers and administration.

Professional development foci informed by teachers' needs.

Embrace of the use of a variety of evidence to inform practice.

Close analysis, clear dissemination, and strategic use of data to target interventions and develop and implement other reforms to improve student performance.

Consistent dialogue around vision; clarity and breadth of input in developing and articulating a shared vision for student success and strategic plans.

### Key Points and the Unexpected

Average- and higher-performing schools typically base their actions on some kind of evidence; however, key to higher performance is the shared belief that using a variety of evidence to inform strategic action rooted in clear goals is worthwhile and effective. Consistently asking, “What are we doing well?” “What trends do we see in our students’ performance?” and “How can we do better?” guide the kinds of data that are gathered, how they are analyzed and disseminated, and to what effect. When linked to clear goals and strategic plans, this kind of inquiry-based thinking and acting promotes a kind of synergy and momentum that builds on itself. It is at the same time outwardly focused—asking, “What are the state and other effective schools defining as success?” but also (and quite importantly) inwardly focused, asking, “What do we think counts as success and how can we use what resources we have to achieve more of it?”

### What we didn't expect:

The importance of a shared belief that using a variety of evidence can inform better practice was fundamental in higher-performing schools. Regardless of what data are made available through data warehouses or consultants, without this belief, numbers related to student performance can be perceived as signs of failure and result in narrowed visions of success and stifled dialogue around improving schools.

“Looking at data” is perceived to be a bad thing, but it has made us aware of where we have needs within our teaching. It set a new tone that we are going to look at what we are doing and make things better. –Batavia, Teacher



We have a good system in place for data analysis — chairpeople meet with each teacher and go over results with and ask what the teacher is planning to do based on the results. This also takes place in the elementary and middle school. Principals in the elementary schools have met with every teacher and gone over results and asked for an action plan. –MacArthur, Administrator



# Conclusion

**O**ur study findings make clear that achieving consistently higher performance at the high school level is rooted in rigor, innovation, transparency, evidence-based decision making, and strategic action (RITES). In all of these aspects, the most successful schools strike their own unique balance between focus and freedom. They focus on what will make the most impact on student performance defined within their schools, districts, and by the state, but also exploit their freedom to challenge, innovate, share, and use a variety of sources of evidence to inform their practice.

Rigor takes shape in a variety of ways—from detailed and shared definitions of success to the broadening of more challenging course offerings for typically lower-achieving students. Rigor, in the sense used in this report, refers to an intense, focused ethic of striving to do the very best one can do. Although rigor could be perceived as rigid and inflexible—and in some ways, the driving force of constantly asking “Where can we improve?” in higher-performing schools is rigid—this rigidity is balanced by other elements that encourage fluid exchange of ideas and avenues for innovative action.

The ability to innovate—to create anew; to refresh; to adapt—is a critical element that makes rigor sustainable. In our study, practicing “disciplined innovation” begins with open dialogue about what is working and what may need improvement. Taking risks—albeit calculated and strategic ones—is encouraged when aligned with broader, yet nuanced definitions of success. Striking a balance between rigor and innovation—focus and freedom—is where higher-performing schools thrive.

Transparent reporting acts as the permeable filter through which state-determined expectations for performance (i.e., AYP targets, State tests), community expectations, and school and district goals and plans pass and interact. As a practice, being transparent in a school is related to coming to know—through deliberate and close contact with students, other teachers and administrators, and a broad spectrum of the community. In higher-performing schools being transparent—being knowable—and knowing those you serve is a top priority.

Finally, through an inquiry-based model of continual gathering, analysis, and interpretation of evidence followed up with strategic allocation of resources, higher-performing schools are able to, as one administrator describes it, “fire on all cylinders.” Evidence is defined broadly to incorporate that which can be quantified in student test scores, but also by listening to students, teachers, and community members about their lived experiences related to the school. Resources are then strategically focused on key areas identified in the evidence as needing improvement.

Although these elements were identified as most salient to the success of higher-performing schools, this is not to say that the practices we saw in higher-performing schools were completely absent in all of the average-performing schools across all of the elements of best practice. Rather, some of the average-performing schools showed signs of moving in the direction of best practice found in the higher-performing schools, but had not quite put all of these elements into place yet.

Overall, these elements of best practice identified through our research—rigor, innovation, transparency, evidence-based and strategic decision making (RITES)—provide a research-supported synthesis of ways higher-performing schools maximize students’ opportunities for success at the high school level. We hope that this report, in conjunction with the previous elementary and middle school studies, will stimulate discussion and action at state policy levels and within and across school districts, leading to improvements in education in New York State.

# About *Just for the Kids—New York*

Since 2004 the goal of *Just for the Kids—New York* has been to help schools learn from other schools that are performing well. To that end, under the leadership of the University at Albany’s School of Education, the project is conducting a series of studies of schools that work in New York. The project has completed studies of higher-performing elementary, middle, and high schools and made all results freely available on its website, [www.albany.edu/aire/kids](http://www.albany.edu/aire/kids). There visitors are able to access and download case studies of all the higher-performing schools studied; frameworks that show best practices at each level, with supportive documentary evidence; cross-case reports such as this one; and additional information about the project and other School of Education research.

*Just for the Kids—New York* has been a collaboration among the University at Albany School of Education, The Business Council of New York State, Inc., the State of New York, and the National Center for Educational Achievement. This Report was produced by the University at Albany School of Education under the leadership of Susan D. Phillips, interim provost of the University. An Advisory Board of leaders of statewide education associations advises the project.

What Makes High Schools Work:  
How Higher-Performing High Schools in New York Adapt and Thrive  
Kristen Campbell Wilcox, 2008

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