

Warrensburg Junior-Senior High School Warrensburg Central School District, Warrensburg

School Context

I describe us as a big small school. – principal

Serving approximately 900 students, and nestled between the rising peaks of the southern Adirondacks, Warrensburg Junior-Senior High looks like an idyllic small town school. In a modern brick building that the principal was “a big part” of designing and cares for like his own home, the school is clean, neat, and welcoming. In fact, many of the teachers and administrators in the district grew up in the town or nearby and have either come back or chosen to stay.

The natural beauty of the place contrasts with signs of economic struggle. It is not ethnic diversity (over 97% of students are white), but rather poverty (over 38% of students are eligible for free/reduced lunch) that teachers and administrators identify as the greatest challenge in the district and school. With little local industry and a fiercely independent and pragmatic way of looking at life, the school stands at the juncture of what limited opportunities community members have available to them locally and what possibilities the school can offer to better the lives of the children who grow up here. One teacher sums up what many teachers and administrators express as a significant challenge to the district and school:

I think our challenges are like a lot of districts, but because of our socioeconomics sometimes they're magnified. We don't have a large community with wealth and with a lot of college graduate parents. Because our district has very little industry or expensive lakeside property, our tax base is primarily financed through individual property owners. So, the average homeowner's taxes are higher than other communities. We're not losing people...but student population is also not growing. We've had a lot of press recently with some of our newer board members who are saying “Great, we're doing a good job, but cut taxes, cut taxes....” Kids don't understand – but they're starting to say, “We come from a poor school district.”

Closing the gap between school and community means offering a variety of options and benefits for the students who may stay and others who may leave to pursue what the community cannot offer. The district does this by complementing programs in the Junior-Senior High School with alternative routes to a high school diploma through the local BOCES, maintaining “tech” courses as well as two foreign languages (where many like-sized schools offer only one language), and offering distance education for students who wish to take Advanced Placement courses. The school also opens its doors in the evenings for community members to use hallways for walking, provides a newsletter, and makes donations to local food banks, among a host of other community services.

Student Demographics 2006-2007: *Warrensburg Junior-Senior High School, Warrensburg CSDⁱ*

	Warrensburg J- S High School	Warrensburg CSD	New York State
% Eligible for Free Lunch	27%	27%	37%
% Eligible for Reduced Lunch	11%	10%	8%
% Limited English Proficient	0%	0%	N/A
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution			
% African-American	1%	1%	20%
% Hispanic/Latino	1%	1%	20%
% White	97%	97%	53%
% Other	0%	1%	7%
% Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards on Secondary Level English Assessments	78%	74%	69%
% Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards on Secondary Level Mathematics Assessments	79%	77%	71%
% Students Graduating	78%	77%	67%
Total Enrollment	457	923	2,772,669

Best Practices Highlights

A fiercely independent, optimistic, pragmatic, and disciplined school:

- Despite challenges to cut back costs and a general sense that many community members do not or feel they cannot support the school budget, an independent spirit and measured optimism prevails. Teachers feel the freedom to offer a variety of opportunities for enrichment and promote the importance of academics and achievement.
- A “get out of your own way to get it done” pragmatism permeates this school. Efforts are made to make education palatable to a community that might feel disaffected from it and are built into policies and procedures. Teachers and administrators consistently work at framing academics in a pragmatic vision of what children need to do to succeed in and beyond this small community’s borders.
- With a consistent building-level vision and leadership focused on high standards of achievement, teachers feel a sense of satisfaction and engagement in their work. The principal is valued as an instructional leader, a “home town guy,” and one who has clear and reasonable expectations for teachers’ and students’ performance.

A Closer Look

These characteristics are evident across five broad themes that frame the best practices study of which this case is one partⁱⁱ. The sections that follow discuss specific practices at Warrensburg Junior-Senior High School within each theme.

Curriculum and Academic Goals

Mission of High Expectations

With consistent leadership for over 22 years, the principal provides what one teacher described as “continuity of mission.” This mission, “high expectations bring high results,” is rooted in 70 as a passing score; the principal says this is both “consistent” and “not the easiest way to go.... The students know if they don’t do what they have to do there will be consequences.”

Although teachers are not generally involved in setting school- or district-level goals, they support the school’s and district’s mission of “high results” by actively participating in committees, including the School Improvement Team, regularly attending board of education meetings, consistently conferring with one another within subject areas and across subject areas, and enacting many of the policies and living the mission in their instructional practices regarding standards of quality of school work.

Curriculum: Following State Guidelines

Curriculum at Warrensburg is guided by the State Standards, State Curriculum Guides, and the State Regents Tests. Teachers feel that they have been adept at keeping “ahead of the curve” in changes from the state and have resisted “teaching to the tests:”

We were 3 years ahead of the state [in history] and have been doing a chronological format. The state guidelines are what we built our program on. We picked up [added] a geography textbook, and then we go chronologically through the modern times. We do Regents review for a few weeks, but we are not teaching to the test.

Warrensburg teachers and administrators are just “starting to look at” curriculum alignment, according to the superintendent.

...where we’re at – the vision is in place. It’s putting it to paper that’s taking time. The building principals and professional development coordinator do this.

Little time, other than during a couple of Superintendent’s Days and two meetings with the principal every year, is set aside for discussions around curriculum. With 5-6 teachers in each content area across grades 7-12, there are no department heads to lead these discussions. Even though some departments seem to have an unofficial “leader,” the climate is one in which each teacher’s initiative in delivering the curriculum is as valuable as the next

In such a small school, each teacher is accountable for ensuring students are ready for the State Regents tests and expected to be competent at doing this. Teachers feel both a sense of responsibility to carry their weight, but also a feeling of freedom to deliver the curriculum in their own unique ways based upon what their students need:

As far as curriculum goes – I know what I need to teach at each level – I know what the kids need to have – I get to pick how we get there.

We don’t have a department head. . . . I think a person should do what he thinks is best. I wouldn’t go to them [other teachers] and suggest they try something. Primarily because they’re good teachers and I wouldn’t want somebody to come and tell me how to do something different either.

Ultimately, State Standards and State tests (even though these are seen as low targets for most of their students, yet necessary hurdles) drive much of what is done regarding curriculum. Although

discussions around curriculum happen and there are even instances of cross-curricular discussions, most of the decisions regarding how the curriculum is aligned and delivered is left up to the individual teacher's translation of the State Standards. This approach seems to have worked for the "big small school" that Warrensburg is.

Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building

Teachers at Warrensburg see the building principal as a key driver of their success at maintaining higher student achievement than what might be expected in this rural, economically challenged school context. They point to several leadership qualities that they say help support their teaching: continuity and consistency; a willingness to be unpopular; and providing both freedom and discipline.

Continuity and Consistency

The principal has been in the district for 36 years, beginning as a 6th-grade science teacher, then coach, and finally principal for 20 years. The assistant principal was a former student and was coached by the principal, and several other teachers were also the principal's students in the past. As one teacher explained of this "home grown" leadership, "We make a good team." The principal is described as "the backbone" and "the rock"-- a leader who provides continuity of structure and consistency of high standards that supports teachers' and students' work.

[High standards] are supported by the principal. He is unbelievably good. He's consistent.

Teachers point to the consistently enforced 70 passing rate as just one example of how their school holds higher standards, and they express a sense of feeling supported by each other's high standards.

I would say that the standards here are a lot higher. Our English department demands that they read several books a year. Then the science department – [they] have very high standards. I can hold my standards up. I guess this is why we do fairly well. A kid from another school will sometimes have trouble in this school since ... they're held to higher standards [here].

When it comes to finding new teachers, teachers and administrators work together in the hiring process to focus on a few key characteristics they feel fit their school culture. Usually one to two teachers are involved in the interviewing process, and those teachers create their own questions. Their reactions to interviewees are brought into hiring discussions along with the superintendent, principal, assistant principal, and one to two board members. A consistent theme around the importance of qualities of "child-centeredness" and maintaining high standards guide their choices in new hires.

I want them to be child centered – to see they really care about kids – I don't care if it's Kindergarten or seniors. If they view it as a job, I don't want that kind of person.
- principal

I've helped out on the interview process. There are two things that are important... whether they are giving a pat answer or whether they enjoy spending time with 14-year-old kids – that comes through.
- teacher

Teachers see holding high standards, patience, understanding, tolerance, and knowing your subject matter as important, but most important is being able to treat students with compassion and encourage them to do their best. Once teachers are hired they receive mentoring that models this focus on the child and policies and procedures that support the school's high standards.

Everyone who comes in is assigned a mentor. That is regimented. We have to document everything [we] talk about, and [we] observe each other. Warrensburg has high expectations – 70% is passing. We tell students failure is not an option. We stay after school – on our own time. We ask, “What do you need?” We study for tests with them.

I think that through our mentoring, hiring, the way we conduct things, the way we interact with kids -- it does trickle down from the principal. The whole faculty bought into the same idea and same goals, the principal is very supportive of us. You manage things, you lead people – there are administrators who understand that and there are managers who don't. He gets that part of it. He will always take the time to sit down and explain. When we talk as a faculty it's a very respectful process – it's very collaborative.

- teachers

With a veteran staff, the mentees receive what one teacher says is “... a tremendous resource for modeling good teaching behaviors.”

Willingness to Be Unpopular

In addition to offering continuity and consistency around focusing on the child and maintaining high standards, the principal is seen as willing to take risks to back up students and teachers when warranted.

He's been controversial when he has to be. He says, “I have to make decisions and some people won't like them.”

- teacher

One teacher recounted how a group of her students prepared a presentation on Prohibition complemented with a model of a still they made out of clay in art class. She said, “I couldn't believe what a good job they did. They loved what they were doing. These three young men did such a good job!” However, she was worried about displaying the model still as a school project, but was reassured by the principal that he would “take the hit,” if there were any complaints.

Teachers also express a sense of security in knowing that if they do their job well (and what “well” is they say the principal is quite “straightforward” about), the principal is likely to be helpful and supportive.

If I have a parent call – he will talk to me about. He will back up his teachers. If students complain – with him if you've done something, he'll come and say, “Can we help? Can we fix this?” He sets the tone.

Capacity Building through Freedom and Discipline

Providing opportunities to work independently but with a clear sense of expectations enables teachers to do what they feel is needed to hold students accountable for what they do in the classrooms, hallways, and community. From the 70 passing mark to the no hat rule, teachers feel

supported to teach in ways they feel meet their students' needs and hold students accountable to perform.

The 70 passing grade, discipline, no hats, expectations for behavior, staff is in the hallway, before (and) after school watching language, in small community life it's hard to hide.

- teacher

Discipline is maintained with the support of an assistant principal who is also a former student and the athletic director, and teachers point to the importance of having an assistant principal who enforces the attendance policies and detention rules so that they can hold high standards for class work:

I don't have people who don't do their homework. In other schools you have a hard time getting homework from the kids. If you take a look at my grade book, all the papers are in and graded. I attribute that to the administration giving support to the teachers and then the kids begin to do it on their own.

Instructional Programs, Practices and Arrangements

With fairly high percentages of special education students, teachers are motivated to employ a variety of instructional strategies to ensure that students are challenged and successful. A sense of obligation to make sure every child is given the support they need to succeed in high school takes shape through individualizing instruction.

I think every kid can learn. You have to find a way – everybody can be motivated. You have to find the individual way. Most of them – if you can give them a reason why they need to behave in a particular way they will. You have to be very individual.

- teacher

Reliance on Teacher Expertise

Warrensburg teachers rely little on packaged programs and more on teacher expertise and constant communication among many teachers to guide their instructional practices. For example, to serve the special education students, teachers point to constant collaboration and keeping high standards as practices and beliefs guiding their instruction.

The doors are always open.

Nothing [i.e. instructional program or practice] is mandated. We have a strong special ed. department. They know the expectations.

With two self-contained classrooms and four resource rooms (heterogeneously grouped), the majority of the special education students are working within the general education program. Extensive modifications to the core curriculum to make it more accessible are discouraged. Instead the focus is on providing a rich curriculum to all students, with resource teachers reviewing lessons and reteaching when necessary to help students prepare for tests and keep materials organized.

I send out a weekly sheet to every mainstream teacher. I'll ask for work overdue, behavioral, lesson plans. . . . I rely on teacher input to let me know what students are doing. I'm relying on teachers if the kids are missing a concept.

The curriculum is not tailored. I don't want the curriculum tailored to special ed. kids. They all have to pass the Regents exam. We tailor instruction rather than curriculum. I don't think curriculum should be changed if they all have to pass the same Regents. But for kids more handicapped the curriculum has to be changed.

Right now we finished Hamlet. I have a parallel text – what I would do for the more famous quotes is I refer them back to the text for quotes. I would be hesitant to modify curriculum.

- teachers

Warrensburg teachers talk about how much they talk. They connect some of their assignments, as in the case of the 11th-grade social studies and English teachers coming together to provide a cross-disciplinary project for which students got credit in each of the classes or the biology teachers consistently discussing their instruction during lunch and in hallways or classrooms.

We have two people [who] teach bio. We keep pace. I check with her. She checks with me. It's not so big that we can't talk to each other. We all eat lunch together.

The collaboration is particularly with English [and social studies]. I give them verbal quizzes so that they can excel in all their exams. Also for the cross-curricular writing assignments, we coordinate writing assignments. I have them pick quotes and expand on [them]. They're analyzing any documents they present in my course – if it's a book report, social, economic, moral ... issues. It makes them analyze the literature not just the story. What does the statement you picked say about economic or political issues at that time?

The English department is "What's mine is yours and yours is mine." Pretty much everybody is cooperative.

Teachers provide coherence by sharing their practices around assessing student work. Although teachers rarely co-teach, science teachers, for example, use the same format for a lab report from 7th-grade on to provide students with clear expectations for this kind of science assignment.

Things are well structured. While we don't have department heads, we are small enough that we get together periodically. In science and math we buy into that model. We agree on how we do things. We kind of reach a consensus. We have a handout on "this is how we want lab reports done." This is given in 7th grade so the expectations are clear. By the first Regents class they're getting the same form – different font, different teacher's name, but the same message from all of us. We've agreed on that message. So when kids come in they're hitting the ground running.

Differentiating

Teachers also point to their multiple certifications in helping them understand the demands students encounter in other content area classes.

Our science department – we are all multiply certified – we are connected and understand what our colleagues are doing.

Although no specific instructional programs or practices are mandated, teachers point to a shared expectation to differentiate their instruction and reach out to students during lunch, activity period after school, and even during their prep time to ensure students not only pass the Regents, but pass it with distinction.

I wouldn't say anything is mandated. We have a lot of very talented teachers. They use differentiated instruction to reach all those learners.

Not only are students welcomed into Warrensburg classrooms, they are also given opportunities to participate in distance education courses intended to offer them enrichment beyond what the school can offer itself.

Even if we don't teach AP here we can get AP stats and AP English from other schools – the top kids are challenged.

- teacher

Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data

Beyond the Regents

In general the standard for what students need to accomplish and the data most closely monitored in Warrensburg are the State Regents exams. Even though these exams are seen as an appropriate goal for some students, many teachers make explicit the expectation that their standards are much higher.

Expectations [for the Regents] are way too low - you have to do 17 questions correct on part I and you pass the test. . . . They think it's going to be hard, but the test is to see if you can work at McDonald's. I don't think I've had a kid score below an 80. I don't even feel good [about that] at the end of the year: The scores are not a representation of the work I did.

I don't think we focus on the test at the end of the year as everything.

I tell my kids you don't have to worry about the Regents test. That's learning the minimum.

The Ineligibility List; 3-6 Detention

In addition to the Regents, teachers closely monitor students' performance through the use of the "inel list." This list is used to consistently (every two weeks) monitor and report to Guidance students who have not completed required work in their classes. If students are reported on in one subject, a warning letter goes home to the parents. If students are reported on in more than one subject during a two-week period, letters go home to parents and they are placed on the "inel list," which prohibits them from participating in extra-curricular activities and requires them to receive extra help until they are off the list.

The policy ["inel list"] is about making kids "accountable." A lot of kids will say they don't care – give me a failing grade. But we say we want you to do well. Because of that they say, "Well somebody cares." Everybody has the capacity to be successful. . . . I take

on a kid every year who I feel really needs me. I worked with [a student] after school. I helped her get off the ineligible list week by week .

We're good at recognizing the kids who can't get to the 70, but are working to their potential. We can give a discretionary pass for a quarter if they are working to their potential and showing they can succeed. The "inel list" is not strict. It's up to our discretion – if they have a 75 but haven't turned in 3 labs they will be on the inel list.

- teachers

In addition to the "inel list" students may also be placed in mandatory "3-6 detention" for skipping classes.

We have a 3-6 detention... if the kid skips me he gets 3-6 detention. Nobody wants to do that. Here there's accountability around every corner.

- teacher

Some teachers feel that the Regents exams set the bar too low for what they can and do expect from their students. However, monitoring student performance through constant reporting on it, backed up by structures (like after school mandatory detention and the "inel list") helps support teachers' higher expectations throughout the school year.

Recognitions, Interventions, and Adjustments

Reaching Out to the At Risk

Overall, in Warrensburg, providing students with social and emotional support, holding consistently high expectations for all students, and practices that reinforce self-discipline support the sense that succeeding in high school is expected of every student. Teachers take special care of children who are most at risk of failing and dropping out. A Superintendent's Day theme named "Each Save One," for example, called on teachers to take those most at risk under their wings.

I've taught skills class, which [was for] kids who failed 7th grade and needed to pass the 8th grade assessment. They were given the support that they needed in a smaller class. The school isn't afraid of doing a program like that. We're really good at giving the kids what they need.

- teacher

The recent addition of a staff school psychologist and school social worker lends support to this effort. Guidance counselors, administrators, social workers, and psychologists conduct home visits for students having difficulties. The guidance counselor remarks that Warrensburg's strength lies in the relationships that are developed with students. These strong relationships seem to extend beyond the school and to genuine caring for the larger community.

Sometimes we go out for home visits – usually it's the assistant principal, guidance, or school psychologist.

Partnering older students up with younger students to help ease transitions between the Junior and Senior High are also in place.

When they come to 7th grade they are matched with 9th graders. They do different activities. Sometimes they are aimed at getting kids involved – like in a club fair. We [also] do study skills, locker clean out, outdoor activities. . . . When the kids get in 8th grade, we get together with parents and kids to talk about future plans, where things need to be tweaked planning for high school and beyond.

- guidance counselor

Offering Alternatives

The district also supports alternatives to students through the local BOCES and a GED Track.

BOCES offers kids to get pull out credit. They can get global studies there so they can get back on track for grade. We use the GED and alternative ed. programs when we can. We have a junior high summer school so they can stay on track and we do offer transportation. Because we're small we have relationships with kids. We simply know our students -- to encourage them, [to] address red flags, draw parents in, going out to them. We have coaches that will do amazing things for kids.

- guidance counselor

Instead of relying on summer school to catch students up, the guidance counselor explains that they developed a “Why Try” group that meets at the end of the school day during activity period to encourage students to focus on academics, facilitated by social workers.

In a Nutshell

Warrensburg Junior-Senior High School focuses on developing relationships between teachers and students, the school and community. Knowing what children need through consistent monitoring of their work, holding high expectations of all students including a 70 passing score, and providing teachers with support through a balance of freedom and discipline foster a climate of consistently higher performance.

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ⁱ Demographic data are of students in the 2002 entering cohort and are from the 2005-06 New York State Report Card (<https://www.nystart.gov/publicweb/AllDistrict.do>). This case study was conducted in spring 2008.

ⁱⁱ This case study is one of a series of studies conducted by Just for the Kids-New York, beginning in 2005. For the study of high schools, conducted during the 2007-08 school year, research teams investigated ten consistently higher-performing and five average-performing high schools based on student performance on New York State Assessments of English, mathematics, science, and history. Researchers used site-based interviews of teachers and administrators, as well as analyses of supportive documentation, to determine differences in practices between higher- and average-performing schools in the sample. In half the higher-performing schools, from one-third to three-quarters of students qualify for free or reduced lunch. Average-performing schools were matched as closely as possible to the higher performers in terms of student poverty levels, geographic location, size, and student ethnicity. Results were organized along five broad themes that form the framework of the national Just for the Kids study of which the New York study is part. The national study has been sponsored by the National Center for Educational Achievement (NCEA).