Best Practices Case Study: *Supporting High School Completion*

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Amityville Memorial High School
Amityville Union Free School District

We ultimately care about their success and failure. If they fail, we've failed.

- guidance counselor

School Context

Located on the southern shore of Suffolk County, the community of Amityville is comprised of two distinctly different areas. The village of Amityville is home to tree-lined boulevards with century-old Victorian homes, many with expansive views of Long Island's Great South Bay. Referred to by school personnel as "south of the railroad tracks," most children living in this end of town attend private or parochial schools: "We have one of the highest percentages of private school attendance in the state," reported an assistant superintendent, although recent economic conditions have caused a slight shift in this trend. In contrast, "north of the railroad tracks" is a much less affluent area, and the majority of children living there attend the public schools. "Even though the community is a little divided on where they send their children, overall, they have a good feeling about the school," said the high school principal.

Amityville is a community with the stability of generations. Many staff members of the high school graduated from the school and described a familiarity between school staff and parents or grandparents. Recently, however, the immigrant population on Long Island has been increasing, and educators noted that many of these families frequently move among Amityville and neighboring school districts, making student transiency a particular challenge.

To tap into an important source of support for families in the community, the superintendent participates in a pastoral council with representation of over 50 churches in the area. This provides an additional way for the school to reinforce connections throughout its community.

Teachers and administrators described the parents of students in the district as hard workers who, for the most part, have not attended college and who often work two to three jobs. They added that many high school students are expected to get jobs to help out at home, and this sometimes interferes with their schooling.

The district's five schools are organized according to what is known as the "Princeton Plan," which was put in place in 1966 to foster diversity within each school building by organizing schools by grade level rather than by geographic location. One elementary school houses preschoolers and Kindergarteners, another serves Grades 1 through 3, and a third educates fourth through sixth graders. In the fall of 2008, the high school was reorganized from a 9-12 building to a grades 10-12 building due to overcrowding, and the ninth grade was moved to the middle school, making that a grades 7-9 building. In 2010-11 the total district enrollment was 2780 with 694 of those students in grades 10-12 and 222 in Grade 9.

**Student Demographics 2010-11:** *Amityville Memorial High School, Amityville Union Free School District[i]*

	Amityville Memorial High School	Amityville UFSD	New York State
Grades Served: Total Enrollment	10-12: 694	K-12: 2780	K-12: 2,689,969
Eligible for Free/Reduced-Price Lunch	39%	61%	49%
Limited English Proficient	6%	11%	8%

Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution
  African-American
  Hispanic/Latino
  White
  Other
	57%
	29%
	11%
	3%
		54%
		35%
		8%
		3%
			19%
			22%
			49%
			9%

Demographic data are from the 2010-11 state report cards.

The diversity in the student population at Amityville Memorial High School falls along ethnic lines, where in 2010-11, 57% of the student body was African-American (a decrease of 4% from 2008-9), 29% Hispanic (an increase of 6% over the same period), and 11% white (a decrease of 3%). That same year, 39% of high school students were eligible for free or reduced price lunch, with 61% eligible in the school district overall. Six percent of the students were classified as having limited English proficiency, and, according to the 2010-11 NYS School Report Card Supplement, 16.5% of students in Amityville received special educational services, compared with the state average of 13%.

The larger study of which this case is one part was conducted to investigate factors that promote successful high school completion among critical needs groups. Schools in the sample were selected based on their four-year graduation rates for the cohorts of students entering high school as ninth-graders in 2004 (expected to graduate in 2008), 2005 (to graduate in 2009), and 2006 (to graduate in 2010). In 2008, the four-year graduation rate in Amityville was 87%, compared with the average of 74% for all schools in New York State. In 2009, Amityville graduated 86% of the 2005 cohort, and in 2010, 81% of the 2006 cohort graduated. Across those years, the mean graduation rate was 85%, compared with the state mean of 76%. Since 2010 the State standard has been 80%. According to the school's 2012-13 profile, the class of 2012 had 90% of its graduates attending either two or four year colleges. Additionally, 9% of the graduates entered the workforce, and 1% entered a branch of the Armed Services.

Percentage of Students Graduating in Four Years – Amityville Memorial HS and New York State
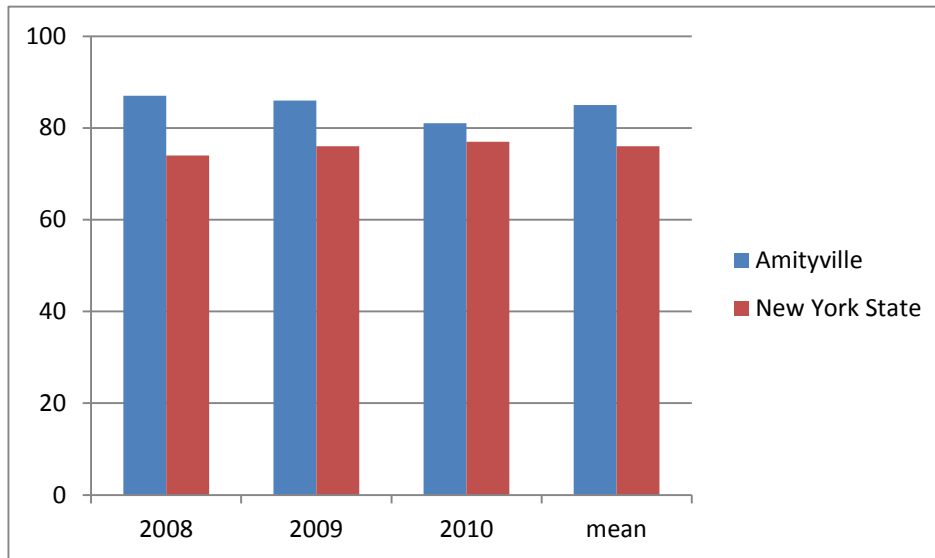
Data from New York State Report Cards

Best Practice Highlights

The practices that characterize Amityville's graduation rate reflect an acute awareness of the lives of students and a desire to make a difference in those lives. Educators at all levels spoke of ways they reach out to the community, from the superintendent serving on the pastoral council to teachers interacting with students beyond the school day - in extra-curricular activities, sports, offering extra help, or letting kids just hang out. "Sometimes they just like being around the teachers," said one teacher. Despite a changing demographic, faculty and administrators demonstrate a desire to understand their students' situations and to help them overcome any challenges to successfully completing high school. The best practices associated with the four-year graduation rates in this district include:

Providing Multiple Ways to be Successful

Everyone's brain doesn't work the same way. They are not in competition with each other. There are multiple ways of being successful. - teacher

Whether with flexible scheduling to allow students to complete school following non-traditional programs or in classroom practices that differentiate instruction and employ a variety of assessment options, the teachers and administrators let students know that "there are multiple pathways" to a diploma, said a guidance counselor, adding, "Nine out of ten times, it's just as easy to stay in school [rather than drop out] if different options are made available."

Requiring Extensive Professional Development

*We have a pretty good handle on providing professional development that is research based.
. . . probably a good idea [now] is to get to, "Is it making a difference?"*

- district administrator
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A wide range of professional development courses are tailored to the needs of the students in this
district, and include courses such as Homelessness Intervention and the Unique Learning
Characteristics of Boys, among many other choices. To fulfill the annual requirement of 18
credit hours of professional development, all teachers create individual learning plans that are
directly related to their roles within the district, selecting courses that enhance their
understanding of student learning needs and the strategies needed to meet those needs.

Developing Supportive Relationships with Students

*A lot of our staff have a "Peace Corps" mentality and want to get things done. Teachers
send bag lunches every week to families in need. There's an ownership of wanting to help
our kids.* - district administrator

An attitude of caring for students, creating connections with and for these students and their
families, and conveying the message that each student matters is pervasive. "We're in it for
you!" is the attitude conveyed by a guidance counselor, who described a caring high school staff
with an understanding of student needs and a flexible attitude when dealing with students. For
example, some teachers join Awareness Weekend each year, staying overnight with students in
the high school, sharing their personal stories with them, and interacting in groups that have been
structured to mix up pre-existing social networks, establish relationships, and build cohesion.
Overall, a faculty member said, "There's a lot of support, a lot of caring. Teachers go overboard
– they come in early or stay after school to do things they are not required to do. Students and
parents respond to that. Parents are not resistant to anything we are doing to help their child."

Helping Students Plan for Their Futures

"July 1: Where are you? What are you doing?" – guidance counselor

While high school completion is an expressed priority in the Amityville district, many educators
shared that their aspirational goal is for students to attend college or vocational training after
high school. "We believe that there is a higher ed option out there for everybody," said a
guidance counselor, adding that "It's become a mantra for our department and the school that not
only are we preparing you for graduation but for July 1 after graduation. We try to make them
think the next step ahead," she said.

A Closer Look

These practices – providing multiple pathways to success, requiring extensive professional development, developing supportive relationships with students, and helping students plan for their futures – are evident throughout the five dimensions that frame the study of which this case is one part. The following sections expand on these practices within the context of the study's framework.

Curriculum and Academic Goals

> *Our expectations never change.* – guidance counselor

The sentiment expressed by educators when asked about academic goals was that all efforts lead to keeping students motivated, engaged, and in attendance at school, with the goal being not only graduation but also plans for a post-secondary experience.

Enhancing Engagement through Rigor and Relevance

Student engagement and motivation are often interwoven with the rigor and relevance of the curriculum[ii]. At Amityville Memorial High School, attention to enhancing engagement is seen as a priority and a key to graduation. The principal expressed the need to continue to provide additional curriculum support to teachers so that the high school is able to engage students through meaningful curriculum and does not become an "institution of remediation." That sentiment was echoed by an assistant superintendent, who spoke of the need to address the "richer, deeper, broader things the students need to be successful in college and career."

> *We need to look at different models for the actual teaching plan and curriculum. When you're talking about kids who are 16, 17, 18, or 19 and you tell them to go to a class for remediation, it's not going to work unless they are highly motivated. These are kids who are struggling.* - principal

An ongoing study of courses and student success in these courses has led to the refinement of curricular offerings with an eye toward increased rigor. For example, a teacher recounted how an administrator had noticed that students entering AP English in 11th or 12th grade might not have the skills to succeed. After conferring with teachers, the department instituted a pre-assessment similar to the multiple choice section of an AP exam, which confirmed that the students lacked needed background information. Based on these data and conversations with Honors level teachers about the rigor of the earlier Honors courses, the English curriculum was rewritten. The teacher and a colleague undertook a "project to up the bar for the Honors student [starting in the sixth grade]. It's been successful so far," she said.

Despite budget and staff cuts, the high school is seeking to provide a more relevant curriculum by offering new courses in Hispanic literature and Black history and literature, as well as a course about medical careers.

College and Career Ready Attitudes

Educating for the Future - banner of *The Amityville Tide*, the district newsletter

High school completion and post graduate study were cited by many staff members as the way in which they would define success for their students. In the past five years, they reported, the focus has been on having a plan beyond high school. Talk about college begins in elementary school where a "Kid's College" fair is held annually to expose younger children to the idea of college. As a guidance counselor explained, "At elementary [we introduce the idea of] a plan for you after graduation. When kids come in, not only are they learning their primary words, but college vocabulary. By the time they are at the high school level, it's, 'OK, college. I might not know specifically where I want to go or what to major in,' but [the idea of] going to college is not new."

It is also important to reach families with the same message. One strategy that is seen as successful, especially with immigrant families, is outreach through the churches, including the pastoral council. For example, the council churches "make a push" for parents to attend the district's annual college fair, the purpose of which is to connect parents with the goal of college education for all students. "Some parents attended and went back to their church and said it was a good experience, so more parents came in. It made us not 'them.' That worked," said a guidance counselor. To overcome language barriers, "We're careful about translating where possible," explained an assistant superintendent.

Another way the district encourages the idea of college is to "fund every 11th grader to sit for the PSAT," said a district administrator. This practice helps establish "the baseline for the SAT." SAT prep courses are then built into the student's high school schedule as a non-credit bearing elective.

Staff Selection, Leadership and Capacity Building

A priority is keeping current with the types of instructional strategies that will engage the students we have. – assistant superintendent

District administrators related that an awareness of the needs of the student population in Amityville is at the forefront in both careful hiring practices and the professional development provided to teachers. A recent reorganization in administrative structure provides the collegial atmosphere to propose and pursue new initiatives, they said.

Building Capacity through Professional Development

To keep current with the goals of the district, the school, and their own instructional practice, all teachers develop an annual Individual Learning Plan, one element of which is a requirement of

eighteen hours of professional development each year. This requirement was reported to have been part of the teacher's contract for many years and specifies that six of these credits must be related to building goals, six connected to department goals, and six connected to personal goals. Teachers choose from the "huge variety of" offerings posted on My Learning Plan and may take as many courses as they would like after meeting the required amount. Current courses are generally two hours long and offered at the end of the school day. They include, for example, those related to the Common Core Standards and "trying to find ways to implement those in the classroom," according to one teacher, who also described the technology course offerings as broad and extensive, including "eboards, blogging, smart boards, and ipads." An assistant superintendent emphasized that the focus is on "integrating technology into the curriculum with a hands-on emphasis."

Additionally, integrated co-teaching training is held annually in each building by an outside agency, which engages teachers in a four-day workshop and job-embedded coaching. A district administrator described the process: "We try to not break up our [co-teaching] teams -- we send each new team to the full workshop. As outside consultants, they do classroom observations in a non-threatening way. They debrief with the teachers and talk about what is working and not, give suggestions. We are trying to make sure it's co-teaching, not the special education teacher in the back of the room as a glorified teaching assistant."

He also reported that special education faculty and staff have received embedded coaching in classroom management strategies from behavior specialists who employ a team approach. After learning a technique, teachers try it and then reconvene to discuss how it went in a collegial circle. District psychologists (one per building, including one who is bilingual) also act as a skilled resource for teachers who are increasing their awareness and use of positive behavioral interventions.

Hiring a Perfect Fit for This District

Although hiring has been minimal in recent years due to decreasing revenue, careful vetting helps to ensure that new hires are attuned to the population of the school district. The ideal teacher candidate was described by a district administrator as one who "has a sensitivity to culture." Another spoke of looking for "evidence of having worked with a multicultural population," having a "reflective personality," and a commitment "to work as hard as possible to meet the needs of kids."

Requirements for a principal were described by an assistant superintendent as a "passion for children," knowledge and experience in instruction and learning, and a high degree of flexibility. These are the drivers that make a principal a good fit for Amityville, she said. "We want our principals to own their school – to be the mother or father of that school. To have that internal feeling that "it's mine."

Building a Leadership Team

The district administrative structure has evolved over the last five years. Changes are due, in part to decreasing revenues and a subsequent decrease in administrative positions, as well as to a change in the superintendency.

A central office team of the superintendent and four assistant superintendents remains in place, and that team was described by another district administrator as having become increasingly cohesive and "very collegial in tone," with an "OK, we'll do it" attitude that engenders support and "buy-in" from the teachers and the union. The superintendent and assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction meet monthly with the union leader and discuss initiatives such as professional development and how teachers are perceiving it.

Eight district-wide K-12 subject area directors coordinate curricular efforts throughout the schools, a reorganization attributed to recent budget constraints. At the high school, these directors have replaced department chairs as leaders of curriculum development and data analysis. In an effort to keep directors connected to students and the classroom, each director teaches one period per day. They are also responsible for running department meetings and may meet with individual teachers. Both a district administrator and the principal expressed concern that with these broad responsibilities, they are "stretched" too thin.

Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements

> *Our teachers go the extra mile; they really work hard to try to get every kid to graduate.*
> *They individualize where they can.* - district administrator

Faculty in Amityville described the use of internships, alternative programs, and flexibility in their practices and programs as ways in which they encourage students to continue in school through graduation. Additionally, strong connections with students, parents, and community members support this persistence and extend learning beyond the classroom.

Flexible Practices

With the population of Amityville in mind, teachers and administrators reported working to find ways to keep students engaged and in school both through programmatic decisions and instructional practices. To curb out of school suspensions, the school instituted a Lunch Detention that also provides Instructional Support Services. "We don't have to suspend and send them back home," said the principal.

For some students, time to attend school competes with outside factors, such as the need to babysit or work. A member of the social services staff stated that in that situation, "We try to

adjust schedules. Teachers make themselves available. If it can possibly be done, we will adjust a student's schedule." He went on to describe how accommodations are made to ensure that students who are struggling have someone who can work with them. "If a student has a free period or a lunch period, we will meet with the student to work with them [to find a teacher to help], even if it is not their own teacher. We do this informally; the psychologist or I will suggest, 'Why don't you go see this teacher,' and introduce the two. More times than not, the teacher will be willing to help. We make those accommodations."

Within the classrooms, teachers spoke of providing flexibility and sensitivity with regard to the instructional needs of English Language Learners. "I provide work in both languages (Spanish and English), although this isn't a requirement," stated one teacher. Since an ESL teacher is not available at all times or in all classes, teachers have taken it upon themselves to adapt instructional materials for Spanish-speaking students. Some teachers said they provide Spanish textbooks and workbooks, while others use technology such as Google translator to create the needed materials, or even communicate with students.

Flexibility in classroom instructional approaches and assessment practices was also reported, with one teacher mentioning open note or open book quizzes, verbal assessments, or projects to demonstrate learning.

Flexible Programs

We try to offer them as many alternatives as we can within our resources.

- assistant superintendent

The belief that all students do not have to follow the same pathway is evident in programs that allow for internships and for career and technical education (CTE). Seventy-eight students were reported by a guidance counselor to be enrolled in the CTE program at nearby Wilson Tech, where students can participate in programs ranging from advertising to welding. Students earn credits toward a state-sanctioned (Regents) diploma when enrolled in the CTE programs.

Some students have internships in the community during the school day. "About half of our kids are doing some kind of internship coupled with work. Sometimes it's during the day, sometimes in the afternoon," she continued, adding that these internships within the Amityville community are for "seniors who have already satisfied their course requirements, so it's an elective credit."

Although working toward a GED is an option allowed by the state, a guidance counselor expressed concerns about the lack of stability and support for students in most GED programs, so they are not promoted by the guidance department in Amityville. Rather, an alternative program is offered. According to the counselor, "We find that kids who are on the drop-out cusp do just as

well if they stay – for example in an evening program – than if they go to a GED program. Maybe two students in eight years did a GED program through United Way because it was training along with the GED," providing preparation for future employment.

Viable and successful alternatives for students who are at-risk for dropping out of school and are not meeting with success in the traditional high school program are two Virtual Academies run by the district. The Virtual Academies follow an alternative high school model.

"Virtual 1" is designed for non compulsory age students to aid in drop-out prevention and includes credit recovery. This program meets Monday through Thursday in the late afternoon and is now a blended on line program. Teachers meet with students for two and a half hours each of the four days and provide English and social studies instruction two days per week and math and science the other two. A special education teacher and a guidance counselor are part of the staffing for this program. "Some students would have dropped out if they did not have another place to go," affirmed a social services staff member.

"Virtual 2" meets Monday night, Wednesday night, and Saturday. This program is primarily for excluded students, but some at-risk students also attend to give them an opportunity to continue their schooling. Guidance counselors at the high school keep in touch with the staff in these programs, and students may return to the traditional high school program. In both of these programs, an assistant superintendent advised, "You have to have an engaging, caring, environment where students are free to participate."

Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis and Use of Data

> *The high school does quarterly type benchmarks. At their department meetings they spend a lot of time looking at the data.* – assistant superintendent

Collecting and analyzing data on course completion, assessments, and daily attendance provides the roadmap with which teachers and administrators guide student progress. Structures within the high school, such as the attendance team, the guidance team, and department-based teams, as well as individual teachers, utilize these data to inform their decision making.

Examining Performance Data

By monitoring data at the level of the class and the student, teachers and administrators at the high school reported that they keep their eyes on student academic needs. Student progress toward graduation is carefully evaluated by the guidance staff, as course completions and Regents credit help determine student scheduling needs. Additionally, data are used instructionally by teachers to identify areas of strength or weakness. For example, a teacher

reported, "We might see that geometry is a weakness and we need to devote a little more time to that in instruction." This teacher and others reported using formative assessment as a part of their instructional practice to determine if students understood the topic presented or if they need to make instructional adjustments or differentiate the lesson.

In addition to classroom assessments, mid-term, final, and Regents exams are part of the assessment program. The high school has begun to use common benchmark assessments in each course as their mid-term exam, and teachers reported doing their own analyses of these data. A computer program provides questions that are formatted in a fashion similar to Regents Exam questions and are then used in designing these mid-term exams.

Analysis of Regents Exam results is done at the district level and shared with the department directors. "It's the directors' responsibility to take that to teachers," reported an assistant superintendent, and that generally happens in department meetings or during summer curriculum work where details of the item analysis are shared with teachers.

Monitoring Attendance

Regular attendance in school is viewed as critical to student academic success. To this end, attendance is monitored daily by a team of clerical workers and an attendance teacher (shared with the middle school). The principal meets weekly with the guidance department to discuss student attendance issues. "Of our 700 students, about 35 are absent, and 35 late [each day] – that's 10%. That's a little high," noted the principal. She explained that students often travel back to their native countries for extended periods of time in the winter months, creating excessive absenteeism. With careful attention and interventions from the guidance and social work staff, including home visits and constant monitoring, an improvement in attendance rates has been seen.

Recognition, Interventions and Adjustments

There are a lot of programs in place that give them an opportunity to graduate. – teacher

The school community in Amityville provides many levels of academic supports for students, adjusting intervention to meet student needs. Interventions include extra lab classes and academic support as well as formal programs to meet the needs of students with disabilities and English Language Learners.

Supporting Students

Before students are referred for special education services, their needs are discussed and addressed by an Instructional Support Team (teachers, administrators, and support staff) that

meets weekly. Additionally, articulation between middle school (grades 6-9) personnel and the support services (guidance, social workers, psychologist) at the high school was reported by a social services member. The purpose of these meeting is to help provide for a smooth transition to 10th grade and ensure that students identified as "at risk" will be connected with the supports needed for success in high school. Those students are then scheduled to meet with the appropriate support personnel during the first week of school to create a plan for support.

At the high school, academic support is provided through AIS (Academic Intervention Services) and is scheduled for students as "lab" classes. "Our kids who struggle toward the graduation mark are often in families who may not have completed high school. When we create the schedule [for these students], it is lab heavy. It is almost automatic [to schedule] lab classes for weaker students in the five Regents courses like Global Studies," said a guidance counselor. For example, weaker students who take Global Studies "have a Global Studies course and a lab attached to it every other day. The lab class is taught by a social studies teacher, but not necessarily their own social studies teacher," she explained.

Continuum of Services

Throughout the district, Response to Intervention (RtI) and other procedures were reported to be used to reduce the number of students classified with learning disabilities. "One success is that we have reduced special ed placement through RtI. We are making intelligent choices. It seems very easy for people to want to classify people with language differences. We see a lot of that, but we are careful not to classify people because of language barriers [because] that's what it is – a barrier, not a condition," shared an assistant superintendent.

For students who are identified as disabled, Amityville provides a full continuum of supports ranging from out of district placement to a life skills class to consultant teacher services. Co-teaching is one of the options and is a model used in both Regents and non-Regents classes in the high school.

Although "a high percentage of [classified] students are being educated outside the district" because "they come here already with an IEP and [out of district] placement, we are working hard to bring as many students back into our schools as we can," said an assistant superintendent. For those students who are placed in programs outside the district, such as BOCES classes or private schools, a district administrator monitors their attendance, course work and grades, and reports that, "a majority of our out of district students graduate. It may be in June or August, but they graduate."

Many teachers and administrators shared that an increase in the ESL population is happening throughout the district, although more at the elementary than the high school level; entering high school students often have had interrupted schooling. To meet the needs of English Language

Learners at the high school, the ESL teacher works with mainstream core content area teachers in a variety of ways including pushing in and co-teaching using the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) approach.

In a Nutshell

The caring attitude of the staff in going "the extra mile" is pervasive throughout the district. Students receive the nurturing and support needed to stay in school through completion and then to venture into the post-secondary world with skills and strategies. By providing multiple pathways to success, requiring extensive professional development, developing supportive relationships with students, and helping students plan for their futures, the Amityville school community strives to fulfill its mission of "Educating for the Future."

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[i]This case study is one of a series of studies conducted by Know Your Schools~for NY Kids since 2005. In 2012-13, research teams investigated 13 high schools; eight of these schools had consistently higher than predicted graduation rates among at least two critical needs groups and five consistently achieved average graduation rates, given their student demographics. Schools were selected based on the four-year graduation rates for the cohorts of 2004, 2005, and 2006, as reported on their state report cards in 2009-11. (Each year's report card states the graduation rate for the cohort that graduated the prior year.) In 2011, the mean free and reduced-price lunch rate for the higher performers was 44%; for the average performers, 36.8%. The state average was 49% for that year. Seventy-five percent of the higher-performing schools are classified by the state as having high needs to resource ratios. 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. 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. Results of the cross-site analysis and details regarding the project, its studies, and methods may be found at www.albany.edu/nykids.

[ii]Bridgeland, J.M., DiIulio, Jr., J.J., and Morison, K.B. (2006, March). The silent epidemic: Perspectives of high school dropouts. A report by Civic Enterprises in association with Peter D. Hart Research Associates for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Washington, DC: Civic Enterprises.