

Best Practices Case Study: *Supporting High School Completion*

Linda Baker, April 2013



Brookfield Central High School *Brookfield Central School District*

“Be proud of who you are and where you come from because nobody can ever take that away from you.” That’s the last thing I always tell my seniors before they leave. – teacher

School Context

Portrayed by educators as “a cool little community” with “old-fashioned” style and surrounded by “the most gorgeous countryside,” the town of Brookfield encompasses several tiny hamlets in Madison County in central New York State. Echoing a teacher’s comment that “there’s a wonderful depth to Brookfield,” faculty members emphasized deep historic roots, deep family ties, and deep pride in the community.

First settled in 1791 by travelers from Rhode Island, the town had a strong Quaker presence in the early years, and faith-based groups have continued to be a major influence on the culture of the community. The school crest includes an open book representing “the church and the school, both of which have played a large part in the development of the town,” according to the school website. In addition to the churches and the school, the town now boasts “one gas station, one store, one restaurant [and] a bar,” said an administrator, but still no traffic light. The school is “the center,” “the hub,” “the pulse” of the community, educators agreed.

Although Brookfield continues to be home to the county agricultural fair each summer, the local economy has moved from “almost entirely agricultural” to a mix that includes construction and manufacturing jobs, as well as work at nearby Hamilton College and Colgate University, in insurance companies headquartered in neighboring towns, and in a variety of professional fields, an administrator reported. “In the 1980s there were seventy-some working farms [here], and now we’re down to less than a dozen,” he noted, adding, “There are still a fair number of kids who get up in the morning to milk the cows before school.” “There are many more professionals in the community today than in the 1980s. The middle income, [including] the ‘blue-collar’ portion, has shrunk, and the other ends of the spectrum have gotten larger on both sides,” the administrator continued. Another faculty member said, “Poverty is more accepted here, not something to be ashamed of. There’s no embarrassment because there is so much poverty and it is multi-generational. It’s so common. The church gets involved and the staff gets involved.”

About 250 students in pre-K through grade 12 attend Brookfield Central School. Most grades have 18 to 24 students. Overall numbers have been consistent over the years, administrators said. There is usually one class per grade at the elementary and pre-K levels; grades 7-12 have one

teacher per subject except for two math teachers and two science teachers. Class sizes in English and science average 17, and math classes average about half that size.

Student Demographics 2010-11: Brookfield Central School, Brookfield Central School Districtⁱ

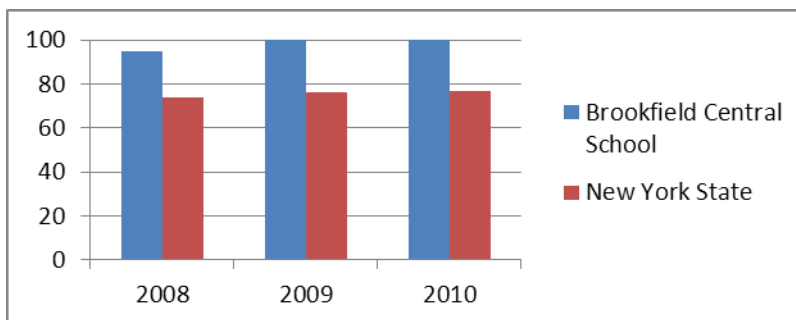
	Brookfield Central School	New York State
Grades Served: Total Enrollment	K-12: 232; 9-12: 77	K-12: 2,689,969
Eligible for Free/Reduced-Price Lunch	45%	49%
Limited English Proficient	0%	8%
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution		
African-American	1%	19%
Hispanic/Latino	0%	22%
White	99%	49%
Other	0%	9%

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

Diversity at Brookfield is mostly socioeconomic, with 45% of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch. Less than 1% of students were identified as non-white. No students were identified as having limited English proficiency.

Pre-K through grade 12 classes take place in the same building, with grade 7-12 classes on the second floor and elementary classes on the first. One gym and one cafeteria serve all students. “Through the years the district has done an excellent job of improving the building. . . . One of the latest [projects] was a wing that [enables us] to keep our 12-1-1 students here and also expand some of our resource room services. . . . On the upper floor we’ve been able to create a second science room and a second science lab,” reported the principal. The district uses a “larger gymnasium/auditorium” in a neighboring district to present its annual school musical, always “to a packed house” on two nights; soccer fields in the same nearby district were used when local fields were being improved, the superintendent said. “We . . . make our building available to the community,” said the principal, mentioning use of the weight room, Zumba dancing, and men’s basketball. “Many, many [students] are the grandchildren of people still in the community, so the grandparents come back for events more so than in any other place I’ve been,” she added.

Percentage of Students Graduating in Four Years – Brookfield CS and New York State



Data from New York State Report Cards

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). Brookfield’s four-year graduation rate was 96% in 2008 and 100% in 2009 and 2010. The average for New York State during those same years was 74%, 76%, and 77%.

Best Practice Highlights

Brookfield educators attribute their successful high school completion rates to an interwoven set of processes, approaches, and established norms that generate feelings of accomplishment and pride. Highlights of these educational practices include the following.

Shared Responsibility and Organizational Flexibility

We do not have walls built with everyone having their own turf. We all trust one another. We’re all here for the same reason. – administrator

“If you see something that needs doing, you do it,” said several educators, explaining that all staff members share responsibility and that everyone expects and trusts each other to act in the best interests of students. “Our hierarchy [does not have] lines and arrows but linked Olympic circles,” an administrator noted. Part of “the beauty . . . is the interaction between administrators and teachers that you get [only] in a small school like this,” the superintendent commented.

Attention and Support for Each Individual Student

We don’t let kids fall through the cracks. We’re small enough that we can catch them. – teacher

Faculty members described seeing each student as an individual and providing support tailored to that individual. “There’s no opportunity for kids to be missed or fall through the cracks. It’s one of the features I like about it being such a small school,” a teacher said, adding that individualized follow-through is as important as identifying the problem.

Continuity of Relationships

Every year at graduation you’ll see the front row of teachers crying because [the graduates] are like our children. – teacher

Seeing students from the time they are in pre-K and teaching them every year of grades 7 through 12 foster strong, enduring relationships, both instructional and personal, high school teachers noted. “We really know these kids. We’ve built connections and grown with them,” one faculty member said. Every educator stressed the importance of “knowing all the kids” and being able to meet their academic needs largely because of the depth of that knowledge.

Caring Collaboration

Our hearts are here, and collaboration is critical to following our hearts. – administrator

“Kids need people who care about them,” a teacher emphasized, explaining that everyone in the building cares deeply and works together to support students. “We talk every day. If there are kids with problems, we talk about it,” said a teacher. “We communicate easily. We share a lunch period, and [we] are here before and after school,” another teacher observed. “We’re here for kids. . . . It’s very personal to all of us,” said a colleague who also stressed the team approach.

A Closer Look

These practices – shared responsibility and organizational flexibility, attention and support for each individual student, continuity of relationships, and caring collaboration – 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

We’ve established high expectations for excellence for our students. – teacher

Expecting the Best

Faculty members emphasized that “the Brookfield culture” is one of high academic expectation, often expressed as “doing your best” whether as a student or as an educator. Several staff members commented that students follow the example of the adults who mentor and encourage them. “I let them know that I have very high expectations, but once you’ve established those expectations, the students have blown me away from time to time showing me what they’re able to do,” said one teacher. “The students . . . know what my expectations are,” said another faculty member, noting that mutual respect is built upon expecting the best from each other.

Defining Success and Establishing Goals

As with expectations, definitions of success revolved around the idea of doing one’s personal best and being a good citizen, with an understanding that goals and interests will vary. As one teacher explained, “We just finished *Death of a Salesman*. One of the framing questions was ‘How do we define success? Is it Willy Loman’s success with the house and the cars [or] is it Biff’s idea of success as being happy?’ . . . It’s a really cool conversation to have with kids. As a group we came to an idea that you want to be secure but be happy and content with what you do. So my advice to them was to figure out what you like to do and how you can get paid doing that, and then work won’t seem like work.”

The superintendent was credited with articulating “a clear vision [of success] with well-defined goals to direct the district,” the principal reported, noting that district goals include fostering academic excellence for every student, having an outstanding teacher in every classroom, and providing teachers with the training and the tools to implement the Common Core Standards.

Instructional Improvement through the Common Core

Faculty members said that they “believe” there is a school improvement plan but that most of the effort has been informal, that is until the district started working on the Common Core initiative. Several teachers praised the Common Core for fostering strategic improvements in curriculum and classroom instruction. “It seems to fit perfectly with my curriculum,” said a teacher.

The superintendent lauded the effort and accomplishment of the faculty members who have been leading the way with the Common Core: “I can’t say enough about the three Common Core ambassadors that have gone to Albany on so many days and then coming back and turn-keying the information not only for Brookfield teachers and students, but for the whole Oneida BOCES. Comparatively speaking, given our size, that we have three of them is fantastic. And I think that has carried over to the staff. We are truly not fighting the process of the Common Core.” “When we talk about the ‘six shifts’ [of the Common Core], . . . the only one that was new to me” was

increased use of informational texts, said one of the Common Core ambassadors. “With my training and going to Albany, I [can re-assure teachers] that you don’t have to throw away *To Kill a Mockingbird*. You just have to put in more informational texts to supplement and augment what you’re doing. We do need to equip [teachers] with skills to break down informational texts. It does change what we’re doing, but I definitely agree that it’s for the better,” he continued.

Ownership of Curriculum

All teachers write the curriculum for each of their classes, often six different courses per teacher: “I’ve done a lot of it,” “I write my own curriculum,” “[Writing curriculum] is my summer break and my April break and my February break.” “Here it’s all on us. There is no curriculum person. . . . It’s a lot of work, but, at the end of the day, it’s my work; it’s not somebody else’s.” Since there is usually only one faculty member per 7-12 subject, teachers noted that they function as department chairs and curriculum specialists as well as classroom instructors.

Faculty members described recent curriculum revision efforts focusing on mapping and aligning curriculum and eliminating gaps. “We’ve got to align all of that, [but] it’s an easy process,” said one teacher. Administrators “like to see curriculum maps. They like to know what our end goals are [and see our] reading lists, guiding questions. . . . I find that I’m always adding new things, working on new things, tweaking things, figuring out how to work more informational texts in. I have a feeling I’m going to be doing that non-stop,” another faculty member commented.

Collaboration in Curriculum Building

The curricular coordination in which teachers engage involves multiple grade levels and multiple domains. Teachers reported talking with fifth and sixth grade colleagues to eliminate gaps and redundancies in the progression from elementary to secondary courses. “[We discuss] what we are each doing and how we can dovetail,” one teacher explained. Because the same teacher usually instructs all levels of a subject grades 7 through 12, “there is a built-in continuity,” an administrator commented, noting that in the two subject areas where there are two 7-12 teachers, math and science, teachers carefully align curricula from one course to the next.

Teachers provided multiple examples of inter-disciplinary curriculum collaboration. For example, when seventh graders read *The Diary of Anne Frank* in English class, they learned about effects of starvation in science class. “It was perfect that they could see the science part of it,” a teacher said. Faculty members stressed that curricular collaboration occurs easily and naturally at Brookfield. “It’s not something we have to take days to plan out. We just do it because we are here together,” one educator said. “We have these conversations all the time. Casually he tells me what unit he’s on, and I say. “OK. Let me switch up these books then,” a colleague added.

Much of the recent collaboration has revolved around the Common Core. “I’ve been second-hand involved,” said one teacher who noted his high level of communication with a Common Core ambassador. “We figure out a way with the Common Core to get another informational text, or non-literary text. We have established that interdisciplinary focus. We work as a team because we’re such a small school we have to,” another faculty member explained.

Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building

*It comes down to being so passionate about the kids.
I just can’t seem to pull myself away from here. You get roped in. – teacher*

An Extraordinary Teaching Staff

“[W]e have extraordinarily dedicated staff members who give of themselves above and beyond what is expected. It’s more than a job. . . . It’s an opportunity to make a difference in the life of a kid,” the principal said. Teachers have at least six classes per day, with as many as 120 students. “It’s not an easy task to teach that many classes a day, but there’s something special about this school,” one teacher commented. “We are paper thin in terms of staff,” said another, noting that the system works only because “everyone goes above and beyond.”

“I always worry that we’ll lose one of our highly effective teachers because we don’t pay them more and they’ll get tired of teaching six preps a day,” said the superintendent, but staff members said that they feel valued and know that they make a difference in students’ lives. There has been little staff turnover over the years, with positions usually opening only after the retirement of a long-time teacher.

Adapting Staff Structure to Educational Needs

Staff members described Brookfield’s management structure as “a little different.” Leadership has been re-designed so that the principal also serves as guidance director, the superintendent is an interim and shared with another district, the business manager also serves as dean of students, and a “lead teacher” provides classroom perspective to the four-person management team, referred to as the “core four.” The current model was developed “after a lot of discussion with the school board and teaching staff,” the principal said, explaining that it was designed partly to provide stability and ensure that there was always an administrator in the building. “The old structure [had] a full time superintendent who was building principal. So whenever that person was out [of the building], there was no [administrative presence],” the principal clarified. Since the principal now serves as guidance director, having another administrator as dean of students avoids the potential conflict of one person both guiding and disciplining students, she added.

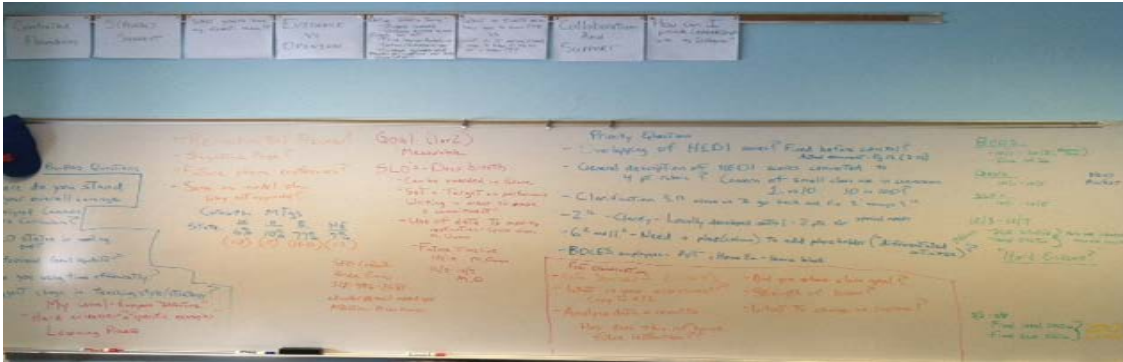
Both the superintendent and principal are retirees with “a wealth of skill and wisdom,” staff members emphasized as they described a school leadership team that has adapted to challenging circumstances. In explaining how “lucky” they felt to be working with these educational leaders, several staff members portrayed the principal and superintendent as “wonderful” role models who are “much too busy” but manage to provide “outstanding” direction and attention to detail.

The shared leadership concept extends well beyond the “core four” management team. The chair of the Committee on Special Education also teaches the pre-K program. A business teacher who recently completed a degree in guidance handles part of the guidance department responsibilities.

Building Professional Capacity

The superintendent has taken the lead in negotiating the APPR (Annual Professional Performance Review) program required by the State and in fostering support for the Common Core. Having negotiated the initial local APPR, the superintendent is now certified as the lead evaluator. He performs announced teacher observations and has set up the in-service components for the district’s APPR program. The photo below shows the APPR planning outlined on the board in the superintendent’s office. Sections include pre-observation questions, goals and student learning objectives, process and priority questions, post-observation procedures, contact information, and data resources. Faculty members point to this ongoing

whiteboard outline as an example of the superintendent’s leadership in helping them to build their professional capacity.



“The staff has bought in. They’ve been terrific,” the superintendent said. “The idea of accountability was accepted immediately. We just tried to be fair with our teachers from day one. We started with the in-service on portfolios last year, before we even got into the process. We brought outside consultants in to talk with these folks about portfolios, to talk about SLO [Student Learning Objective] development, about rigor with local assessments. We’ve brought some BOCES staff in to meet with them. . . . We’ve had regular faculty meetings and discussions about the APPR process,” he explained, adding, “We set out intentionally to create the trust and understanding.”

“The Common Core Standards have been implemented here very early due to the dedication of our staff and the leadership of our superintendent and principal and [teacher] team leader. That leadership has been tremendous,” said another administrator. After receiving the information last June, the superintendent noted, “I immediately went out to three teachers here and said, ‘Would you like to get involved? I think it really would be great not only for you but for the district.’ They have team meetings daily, over lunch or before school. As a result of that, [the principal] and I can set the lead and support and encourage, but they come back with so much information that is shared that the staff has a great idea of where we’re going curriculum-wise.”

Teachers described a variety of professional development opportunities, some involving Common Core and many based on domain-specific contacts. “I’ve had the opportunity to stay pretty up to speed with what’s going on in the field. Some of that has been on my own, but the school has been very receptive to it,” a teacher commented. “I mooch whatever I can,” another teacher said. Faculty members mentioned specific conferences and educational mentors that have been instrumental in helping them develop deeper knowledge and teaching skill. Brookfield teachers are eager to engage in professional development, the principal reported, noting that recently they seem to place particular value on faculty meeting discussions of Common Core: “I think that’s a very good form of professional development that’s happening in this building.”

Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements

We are all very, very busy all day long. – teacher

Active Engagement with Clear Expectations

The secrets to effective instruction include active, purposeful engagement and high expectations, for both students and teachers, Brookfield educators reported. “A good teacher is someone

whose students are engaged, involved in the learning activities, thinking, responding, . . . challenging themselves. It's the engagement of students in the learning activities that marks the good teacher," said the principal. Teaching styles differ, but Brookfield educators strongly advocated active student involvement rather than lectures. "I like things very relaxed. I do not like formal structure. My desks are facing each other so we can talk as a group. I don't stand a lot or lecture. I like to be on the level of the kids. I sit. I don't like to teach down to them," said one teacher, who also stressed the importance of clear structure: "They need procedures; they need routines. They need to know what to expect every time they walk through the door. I do bell work. It's the same procedures every day. Come in; take out your work. I don't have a list of rules, just three things: respect, responsibility, and pride in what we do."

"What do we do different at Brookfield? We teach our kids to think. Always remember that," is an idea that is part of the legacy of a recently retired 37-year veteran teacher. "Show them how to stand on their own two feet," said one teacher. Several teachers noted that subject knowledge is important but that it's even more crucial to help students develop the thought processes for success. It helps to "[show] them that we're real people. We show them that we live this life, too. We show them you can be what you want to be, follow your dreams," said another teacher. "The Common Core is just embedded in our classrooms right now," reported an administrator. "Whenever I ask them something, I want the why. That's all the Common Core is asking of us," said a teacher. A colleague gave an example of incorporating Common Core elements: "Today I printed out FDR's speech about the Hoover Dam because we're talking about hydroelectric power. They came up with questions, responses to what FDR said. . . . I tied everything in [including] the Great Depression. . . . That connection is important; it's real life."

Courses and Scheduling

Describing course scheduling, the principal said: "7, 8, 9, 10 have almost identical schedules. . . . The incredible challenge scheduling here is that everything is a singleton, and the master schedule has to be integrated between 7-12 and preK-6. Very challenging." BOCES programs are offered to seniors in the morning and to juniors in the afternoon.

"This community has supported this district as a stand-alone district. They realize that we go out and bring in services to provide our students with a proper education, whether that be [through] BOCES or college credit [distance learning] courses," said another administrator. "There's one little practical thing that I do believe helps. And that is by the end of sophomore year, because we limit study halls, our students have 14-15 credits and that does make it a little easier to get to the point where they've completed graduation requirements," she added.

Brookfield has 40-minute periods with the exception of the activity period. All 7-12 students have lunch at the same time. During the daily activity period from 10:45 to 11:15 a.m., students are in chorus, band, AIS math, AIS English, AIS science, AIS social studies, or able to get extra help from any teacher, most of whom have study hall then.

Juniors and seniors who "do not have an elective that interests them or meets their needs [are encouraged] to participate in a work study program where they provide assistance in the classroom or in the cafeteria. . . . They receive free lunch and a notation on their transcript that they did work study in a classroom, and we give them a half credit for the activity. We think it helps tremendously for our elementary school students to have the older students in the

classroom assisting as mentors, under the direction of the classroom teacher. We also think that those who work in the cafeteria learn some valuable job skills. We often write letters of recommendation based on those job skills,” explained the principal.

Seven high school students currently receive special education services at Brookfield. All are in inclusion programs and attend resource room with related services as necessary. A few special education students receive services at BOCES programs outside the building. “We contract with our BOCES and work very closely with them,” said an administrator. “The special ed teacher who is the secondary teacher has been doing it a long time and she is very good at knowing students’ strengths and students’ needs. So when we’re looking at what courses they’re going to have to take to achieve the diploma, we have a pretty good handle on giving them the services and modification that can get them through to achieve the Regents diploma,” the administrator continued. The district employs two full-time special education teachers. Related services, including speech therapy, social work, and school psychology, are contracted through BOCES.

Preparation for Testing

Teachers reported that students feel well prepared for state exams, partly because test questions throughout the year are modeled on them, and partly because students focus well on the review at the end of the year. “It definitely seemed to work last year. I had a 96% passing rate and the one who didn’t pass then passed the RCT [Regents Competency Test],” reported one teacher, noting that the RCT will not be available this year. Several teachers mentioned three to four weeks of review, including review sessions beyond the school day. “Seasonally it’s encouraged that we make ourselves available for review classes . . . as a final push before the exam,” a teacher explained. “We do 7-9 [pm] and usually they come back. . . . I always end up doing one weekend right before the Regents. I do a pizza dinner and we do a night review. We run through everything. I take out my concept maps and say, ‘Is there anything we missed here?’ We look at the vocabulary. ‘Is there anything here that we’ve missed?’ They tell me,” commented another faculty member. “[Review classes] start in May and end in June. I work around baseball and softball. I know the kids are busy, but I adjust my schedule to them,” another teacher said.

Technology

Despite financial challenges in the district, up-to-date technology is available. “[T]here’s a smart board in every room. . . . I try to get the students up and active in the lesson. I try to use as much of a hands on approach as possible. It helps them retain the information better. . . . They’re able to come to the board and locate things on the map, or add their own notes or interpretation of things. Often times I incorporate maps, propaganda posters into my lesson. They’re able to manipulate those things on the smart board and not just get a copy of them,” a teacher explained.

Connections and Relationships

Brookfield faculty members attribute much of their success to the strong relationships they build—with students, with each other, with the community, and with educators elsewhere. “[We value] getting to know the kids individually and the parents. It’s not just a school; it’s a community,” explained one teacher. “I particularly enjoy working in this community because it is a rural community and if you can make a difference educationally for one of these kids you have really changed their life,” said the principal. “We have a very supportive professional community,” a colleague emphasized; “it’s very warm. The teachers are very supportive of each other and help each other out. I don’t think there’s any ego or pride. People are willing to work together.” “We try to create the same warm climate for our students,” he added.

Teacher collaboration is “really tremendous,” said the principal; “They honestly don’t have any time built into their schedules, so they have to find time. . . . They stay after school, work at lunchtime, use our faculty meeting time. . . . They collaborate a lot, but it’s on their free time for the most part.” Teachers agreed: “Probably the best thing is to have colleagues you can talk to.” “The collaboration piece between us here is the most important [element] here.” “Because we only have one teacher . . . in a curricular area at the secondary level, we encourage our teachers to link up with other teachers in other school districts, spend time with them and collaborate with them. We often have a teacher take a day to go visit another school and interact with a teacher in another building. We could be very isolated here if we didn’t take advantage of those opportunities,” added the principal.

Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data

You can look at all the statistics in the world, but we can name names. - administrator

Monitoring by Knowing Individual Students

Monitoring students occurs constantly, with more emphasis on personalizing the approach than on looking at numbers. “Because of our size, we’re able to look at each individual student. Because we’re able to do that, I think we have a higher graduation rate than a larger district. I think there are students here who walk across that stage and see that diploma who would not do so in a larger environment. . . . I can name names of students who were not going to graduate, who didn’t stand a chance, but [graduated] because our staff, our principal and guidance counselor spoke with them and pushed the student so hard and went to their home when they didn’t show up in the morning and banged on that door and got them out of bed and got them here,” an administrator emphasized.

“I have to be honest,” said a teacher. “We do have the information available for us. We get the [testing] reports. . . . But it’s so much [better] to look at a student instead of a percentage. . . . For myself personally it’s easier to look at students [individually] and make accommodations from there.” Rather than look at data to see how they’re doing in other classes, “if I have a student who is struggling, I’ll [talk with the] other teacher,” she continued.

Tracking Individual Student Progress

Several classroom teachers explained that student achievement data help to guide instruction. “I can track where students have been over the last few years and see where they are when I get them. We also use [a program] for early literacy, reading and math. Several of my classes do that on a regular basis. . . . Also it’s nice to do benchmarks to see progress over time. So that’s a good way for me to see what types of questions they miss, what areas are the weakest for them, which particular students are growing at a faster rate . . . or which students are not demonstrating growth over time. Despite the reservations I may have about them, I think [these assessments] are one of the best ways to use data,” one teacher said. “The program [we have] is able to calculate data for us with test averages and homework averages, participation, classwork. Every five weeks when I input grades I’m looking at that to track the progress,” a colleague added.

Monitoring Beyond the Classroom

Analyzing data is a prime responsibility of the CSE chair, guidance department, school psychologist, and administrators, school personnel reported. “I look at report cards, . . . standardized tests, . . . IQ scores, . . . any evaluation done by any service provider, in addition to

classroom teachers' input," one lead educator explained. Data supporting student guidance include test scores and grades, discipline reports, attendance, and student interest surveys, staff members said. "It takes a tremendous amount of my time. It's all digital and computerized. I'm accessing and contributing to the data collection all the time," a staff member noted.

Keeping track of daily attendance is one of the priorities at Brookfield. "The nurse is in charge of that information. She alerts the guidance counselor (me!) when a student has a pattern of poor attendance," the principal explained, noting that she (the principal/guidance director) then contacts the student and usually the parents to understand and resolve the problem.

Since student participation in extracurricular activities, including sports, is important to students and families, "we constantly monitor that," said an administrator, adding that the school has a no-cut policy to allow all interested students to participate, as well as an eligibility policy based on grades, attendance, and behavior. "If a student is failing a course, they have to prove to the teacher that they are trying, that they are making progress [in order to play]," he continued.

Interventions, Adjustments, and Recognition

We never give up on a kid. – administrator

Reaching out to Individual Students

The personalized approach at Brookfield ensures that every student has adult support. "Every student is known as an individual. There is no doubt in my mind that they have an opportunity to link up with [at least one] adult who really cares about their success and will do whatever is necessary to help them succeed," said the principal. "I don't think that . . . it's the teaching that gets the students to stay [in school] but the relationships that the students have with the teachers. . . . I don't think it's . . . the curriculum or material [that's important] as much as feeling supported," a teacher echoed. With small class sizes, teachers notice when someone needs extra help or encouragement, she added. "We constantly work on improving the outreach to every individual student so they are successful. Our school improvements have been aimed at figuring out which students we have not served as well as we could," the principal said.

Creative Adaptability

"We do not have enough resources to meet the needs of all our students. The only way we're able to do it now is that we have extraordinarily generous personnel who are doing two or sometimes three jobs. For much of what we've cut, the staff has stepped up and found ways to provide what we were providing on their own time," the principal said. Teachers now present AIS to their students, teaching seven periods a day some days. One teacher described her three AIS classes, with four to six students in each: "We individualize the work . . . [based on] what the kids need. . . . We also add students as needed [usually] for a 5-week or a 10-week period. I tell all of my students that they can come in during that time, too, if they're struggling."

Faculty members told of routinely providing after school and lunchtime help to students, and increasing that help as state exams draw near. For much of the year, the district provides a late bus two days a week, expanding to four days a week late in the school year, the principal said. Teachers constantly adapt to student needs, for example if a student is out sick and needs to make up work, she noted. "There's a lot of individualized help," a teacher said; "If I know that a student hates math and can't get the work done because they're terrible at it, then after school or

lunch time I'll [work with the student]." Teachers collaborate to help students: "I've had students go to [another] teacher [who] is also very good at [this subject]. . . . There's definitely that collaboration between teachers to help students however we can," a teacher said.

"It's amazing [how] we didn't miss an opportunity to do things better when the financial crisis hit. We looked at how we were providing service for some students with disabilities in programs outside this building. The financial crisis forced us . . . to bring students back and provide those programs here. . . . [T]here's no doubt in [anyone's] mind that student life for these students is much better. They're more involved; they're more a part of the student body now," he continued.

Helping At-Risk Students

"Our expectation is that students pass all of the required subjects. If they don't pass . . . and the class is available in summer school, our expectation is that they attend and successfully complete those classes. We're such a small school that I can't guarantee that a student can repeat a requirement the following year. I think it's a blessing in disguise. I don't get many disagreements about going to summer school and making up requirements. We do the exact same thing if a student fails a Regents exam required for graduation. The student has to attend a summer school or at least participate in a tutorial," said the principal. If a student fails a test in June and again in August, even after summer school or tutoring, "then I'll work with them in the school year and they'll take it in January," a teacher reported; "When I came in, there were two students who had not passed in June or August, and I worked with them, and [they passed in] January."

Every staff member gave examples of at-risk students who were "rescued" by caring educators: "We have a student right now who is going to graduate because [a teacher] is working with him every day. He is our big success story." "We have one student, a senior this year; we've been able to offer him an independent study so he can make up the credit to graduate this year on time instead of doing another whole year." "I have a kid right now where we completed three years of [work] in one year to get him to graduate. We're all willing to go the extra mile to get a kid to graduate. He's made the effort." "I sat and talked to him about where he wanted to be in life, and who he was associating with and who he should not be associating with and how those people were drawing him down. [He's now] the most respectful young man that you'd ever want to meet." "He's two rooms over right now doing independent study. He's a senior. I think he's 19 or 20. He's [one of those] kids [who sometimes] just sort of show up in the district." "We have another student that [a teacher] is working with every day. He's in 10th grade [and] at-risk. He's established a really nice relationship with [teacher] that I think is going to make a difference."

For students starting and remaining in the district, prevention of at-risk situations begins early, at least by seventh grade, "by engaging them . . . in the school community, its activities, and [giving] them a good sense of belonging. Inevitably there are one or two in any grade who are at serious risk. . . . With those students we really try to . . . provide as much support as we can to encourage students to attend school, do their best and take advantage of the help that is available. We have students at the 9th, 10th, 11th grade level who are talking about or on the verge of dropping out. When that happens, we really try to get them connected to an adult in this building who they are comfortable with, who will meet regularly with that student to try to keep the connection going, and to provide the support that is necessary," the principal noted.

"Another thing that we try to do is to work with BOCES career tech staff because most of our at-

risk students are students whom we are going to want connected to the BOCES program. . . . We'll work together with the teachers at career tech to see if we can get the student interested in attending career-tech and developing a career. The BOCES career tech counselor and instructors have been extremely helpful. I can think of a senior who is probably going to make it because of an intervention like that. We are small enough . . . we can link a student who is at risk with somebody who will make a difference," continued the principal.

Collaboration with Parents

Brookfield has developed strong, trusting relationships with parents, marked by high levels of communication. "I'm always contacting parents. . . . I like sending the emails saying he did great in the game last night rather than [negative messages]. . . . Parents are not always [able to be] as supportive as I hoped, but I'm never butting heads with parents," one teacher said. "Some parents spend as much time here as I do if their kids are in danger. With that relationship with the school and the community, kids don't feel like they're in it alone; they can get help," another teacher added. "If they don't have a support structure at home, we become that support structure. We don't have to worry about offending people," a colleague noted.

Parents have a high level of trust for teachers and other staff members. "All of us teachers play a role as counselors at some time. It's a very low-income district, so the parents look to us," a teacher said. Parents sometimes have the attitude of "I want my child to do well, but I don't know what to do," teachers indicated. "It makes you very proud of the district" when you see how much the school helps families, one staff member said, as she told of parents who don't know where to begin with financial aid forms and just send in their tax forms, trusting that the school will help. "In my past experiences a lot of people get defensive when you cross that line between home life and school life, that you're stepping on toes. Because we're such a small place, we function as a team, a parent-teacher team, pushing kids to succeed. Even kids who I've had issues with, if I send an email home, it's usually addressed [or] parents say, "You have my support. It's not your fault; it's not the school's fault." It's dealt with in some way. . . . We're all on the same team . . . and that makes a difference," explained a faculty member.

Community Support

"Brookfield has such a strong sense of community. The community very much wants to keep their own school. . . . They value their kids' education. We don't have a lot of doctors and lawyers in the community, but the parents have a strong sense of wanting their kids to get an education and get an education in this community," a teacher emphasized.

The community strongly supports the school. The budget usually passes with nearly 70% approval, an administrator reported. "[At] our volleyball or baseball games, you'll see senior citizens. Even though they don't have kids here anymore, they still come to those games because they're their games and their kids," he continued. "Our community is very supportive of our athletic programs and our students. . . . I call it the only show in town. Friday night basketball games are huge. . . . The turnout for baseball was phenomenal," a teacher said. "When we need something, there's always someone here for us. . . . When you go down to the store at lunch time and there's a student who didn't make it to school that day, somebody at the store says, 'so-and-so is in the park.' I drive down to the park and say, 'Get in the truck,' and I bring him to school. That makes a difference. . . . That's the community caring," the administrator added.

Adjustments, Challenges and Worries

Financial challenges are obvious in both the community and the school district. “We have some families that are certainly economically deprived,” the principal said. “In terms of poverty, it’s equal to the inner city ghetto. You don’t notice it as much because it’s not as concentrated in a small area. There is a lot of poverty. There’s a lot of unemployment. . . . You have a population where generation after generation have lived here, so it kind of perpetuates itself. In light of all that, . . . something is going on [here] that is really positive,” a staff member reflected.

“Clearly the biggest challenge [for the district] is financial. We do not have enough resources to meet the needs of all our students. . . . I’m very, very saddened that we are probably going to have to reduce our staff again next year. . . . I’m terribly concerned that we are going to have to eliminate some classes. . . . We’re working very actively with neighboring districts to see if we can offer [more] distance learning classes, if we can share staff in any way, and if we can get any other educational programs through online services. . . . We’re looking at possibly sharing transportation, bus office support, data warehouse support, PD, and any other way we can think of. We do not have sufficient resources here,” the principal said.

Noting that other schools have been involved in merger studies, a teacher said, “I don’t want to see small schools go away, because they have so much to offer. . . . The benefits outweigh [the problems]. . . . We see kids as people, and the kids see us as people and not just teachers. And that only happens here, at a small school. This merger stuff scares me. When they say we need to have a larger school, I think that’s when you lose everything we’ve tried to build.”

In a Nutshell

The close-knit, personalized environment of the Brookfield Central School fosters the interwoven educational practices—shared responsibility and organizational flexibility, attention and support for each individual student, continuity of relationships, and caring collaboration—that educators see as key to supporting students in completing high school successfully.

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¹ 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.