Best Practices Case Study: *Supporting High School Completion*

Kathy Nickson, March 2013

Eastridge High School
East Irondequoit Central School District

School Context

The East Irondequoit Central School District, in Monroe County (NY), serves approximately 3600 student s in two primary schools, two intermediate schools, one middle school, and one high school. At first glance, the district appears to encompass a suburban community of single family homes bordering two bodies of water and the north side of Rochester. A closer look, however, reveals many families struggling economically, with approximately 50% of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. The district has little in the way of an industrial base and not much land on which new industry might locate. It is very dependent on State aid, and as one administrator explained, when it comes to finances, "We try to be as creative as we can be . . . creative and careful about how grant money is used."

At Eastridge High School, with nearly 1,000 students in grades 9 through 12, the faculty and student body embrace the school's socio-economic, racial, and ethnic diversity. As one teacher said, "Diversity creates a very tolerant climate where there's a lot of understanding: faculty with students, students with students, faculty with administrators." Many of the educators reported that the school has accomplished much over the past five years, including a safe, caring environment, higher graduation rates, and more rigorous course offerings. They also expressed

Student Demographics 2010-11: *Eastridge High School, East Irondequoit CSD*[i]

|	Eastridge High School	East Irondequoit Central School District	New York State
Grades Served: Total Enrollment	9-12: 989	K-12: 3,082	K-12: 2,689,969
Eligible for Free/Reduced-Price Lunch	46%	49%	49%
Limited English Proficient	2%	3%	8%
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution African-American Hispanic/Latino White Other	18% 12% 65% 4%	18% 13% 63% 6%	19% 22% 49% 9%

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

pride in the facilities, including a new cafeteria, sports stadium, and performing arts /dance studio, which enhance an already inviting, clean, well-maintained building. Eastridge High

School faculty and administrators spoke of working collaboratively to ensure every student feels a connection to the school and is successful in completing his or her education. A teacher summed up the school mission and challenge: "We face getting students to invest in education and recognize the power that education can provide them."

The larger study of which this case is one part investigated 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 (to graduate in 2008), 2005 (to graduate in 2009), and 2006 (to graduate in 2010). The graduation rate for Eastridge High School has consistently been in the low 90% range, compared to a state average in the mid 70% range. The superintendent credited the leadership at the high school for their "focus on every single child and the focus academically on what they [the students] need to do to graduate."

Percentage of Students Graduating in Four Years - Eastridge High School and New York State
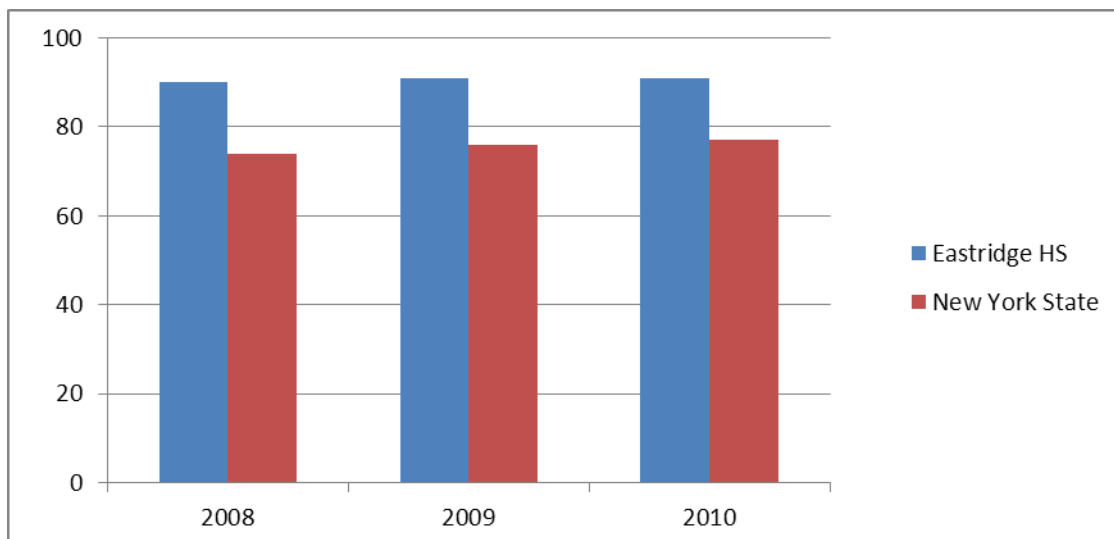
Data from New York State Report Cards

Best Practice Highlights

The practices associated with Eastridge High School's consistently high graduation rates reflect a caring school environment that supports student success. The faculty and administration work collaboratively with specialized programs and rigorous course offerings to provide many paths to the same destination—graduation. These practices include a focus on building trusting relationships in a nurturing school culture; specialized programs to encourage academic success for all students, whether high achieving, under achieving, or at risk; and high expectations that encourage rigorous and challenging course work.

A Focus on Building Trusting Relationships in a Nurturing School Culture

Administrators and faculty interviewed all agreed that the positive school climate encourages strong, trusting relationships. Accompanied by this foundation of trust is belief in students' abilities, and these two factors were seen as related to academic success and graduation.

All success has to come from establishing a relationship with your students . . . creating a culture of support. I think students, even in the roughest times, have at least a handful of adults that they can go to. . . . There's safety, both physical and emotional. - teacher

Specialized Programs to Encourage Academic Success for All Students

Designed for students at any level -- high-achieving, under-achieving, or at-risk -- these programs include:

- Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) courses and the Project Lead the Way (pre-engineering) program to challenge students;
- Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) to inspire and support students to live up to their potential;
- Alternative Education for 9th and 10th graders who have behavior difficulties; and
- STAY [in school] for seniors in jeopardy of not graduating.

Providing multiple pathways for students is very important to us. It's to encourage kids to stay in school, stay interested in school; to help the student and their families to see a reason for it. – superintendent

High Expectations That Encourage Rigorous and Challenging Course Work

According to educators interviewed, the high school community generally endorses high expectations for all students, and the district has invested in several academically rigorous programs in alignment with a philosophy that welcomes all students to challenge themselves. Graduation is expressed as the universal expectation, and teachers and administrators assert that every effort is made to help students fulfill that goal.

There's certainly that push to engage the kids in meaningful coursework, with more rigor that they can relate to and be challenged. It's about respectful work. People want challenges.
- district administrator

A Closer Look

Practices that build trust, focus on specific needs, and foster high expectations for all are reflected throughout the themes that frame the overall study of which this case is one part.

Curriculum and Academic Goals

Educators in East Irondequoit demonstrate a systematic approach to setting academic goals and strategically revising the curriculum to achieve those goals.

District Goals
The process of developing district goals involves the administrative cabinet and a strategic plan to guide decision making. Information from the Office of Instruction begins the yearly conversation on strengths, opportunities for growth, and instructional goals. A district administrator reported "a focused and detailed approach to goal setting." Once identified, district goals are brought to the board of education for approval and when approved, published for the community. A teacher stated that building and departmental goals "implicitly align" with the district goals. The principal and superintendent agree that goals for the high school must move beyond graduation rates to college and career readiness. Another district administrator asserted, "Our graduation rates have been in the 90s for the past few years. Now our challenge is to increase the number of kids earning the advanced diplomas."

Curriculum Writing and Revision
A district administrator described a systematic approach to revising curriculum that involves a five-year review cycle of the content areas. Academic achievement data are analyzed, and suggestions for adjustments examined. Revision is also ongoing, especially in response to new State mandates. A teacher noted that the board of education is "philosophically as well as financially supportive" of curriculum writing and revision. Teachers are paid to write curriculum in the summer, after taking a curriculum writing course taught by the assistant superintendent of instruction. Teachers reported that curriculum writing is collaborative, involving a cross section of teachers that includes vertical teams and special education teachers. It is never done in isolation.

Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building

District administrators spoke of careful hiring practices, with the superintendent instrumental both in the beginning and at the end of the process. The high school principal was described by both administrators and teachers as competent and caring, fostering strong relationships that focus on student needs. In addition, the district's extensive professional development courses encourage individuals to build their own competence. Involving staff in professional development leadership roles helps ensure sustainability of the knowledge and strategies learned in the courses.

Hiring Practices
Although there has been little teacher turnover in recent years, everyone interviewed agreed that hiring a new teacher who relates well to students is of the utmost importance. The principal characterized such teachers as taking the roles of "teachers, counselors, parents, and nurses; they do everything. Someone who knows they're not just in a classroom for 56 minutes." New teachers attend a new teacher program in August with the assistant superintendent of instruction. The district provides an instructional coach to mentor new teachers for grades 6-12, and principals meet with new teachers periodically throughout the school year.

The superintendent, deputy superintendent, and assistant superintendents were said to be very involved in the hiring process for new principals. They pre-screen candidates and interview them; the candidates are then interviewed by a committee that gives the superintendent's team feedback. The superintendent explained, "I've learned you've got to be involved on the front end as well as [at the hiring phase]." The attributes of a good principal were described by the

superintendent as "a collaborative personality, with an intellect that is capable of learning what they need to know. She asked rhetorically, "Are their beliefs aligned with where we're going as an organization?"

Administrative Leadership
The high school principal was repeatedly credited as the driving force behind increased graduation rates and an overall improved climate at the school. For example, a district administrator said, "Once the current high school principal came on board five years ago, she brought the focus on climate in the building, graduation, and everyone working towards it." Another voiced a similar sentiment, "I believe the administrators at the high school 'get' kids. The principal is phenomenal. She cares about kids and the other administrators do, too." The superintendent agreed: "The principal pays attention to each student. She has a chart on her wall for every single senior. She knows their names, the families. It's amazing the relationships she's built with kids. It helps create that climate of 'this is what we're about. This is what we need to pay attention to.' " It is evident that the principal sets a tone of respect and caring. A member of the counseling center, reporting that the students have a feeling of belonging and being cared for, explained, "The principal knows everybody by name. She has an open door policy and because she has a relationship with so many of these kids, they know somebody at the top really cares and won't let them fall through the cracks."

The principal in turn praised her staff. "We have an outstanding group of teachers in classrooms and on the front lines with the students. The Ed Services Team and the whole administration equal a great administrative team. We work well together. There's a lot of trust that sets a steady and consistent climate." Administrators and teachers are clearly focused on working together for the benefit of students.

Professional Development
With a director of professional development and extensive course offerings, it is also clear that professional development is a priority for the district. Contractually, each year teachers must participate in a set number of professional development hours. If teachers exceed the required number, the district compensates them on an hourly basis. Participation was reported by a district administrator at 100%.

Teachers learn about and register for professional development courses online. The courses are offered after school and during the last week in June and the month of August. The district hires outside experts but also utilizes the expertise of members of the faculty and administration to teach courses. A district administrator acknowledged that a lot of financial resources went to providing professional development and capacity building for the IB and AVID programs. As one teacher said, "Central Office provides a lot of PD. It is huge here, and we have so many opportunities." According to a district administrator, the district goal is to offer only meaningful professional development courses that are directly related to instruction.

Professional learning communities (PLCs), a joint initiative of the teacher's union and district, are another example of capacity building. The high school PLCs are organized by grade and department and provide time for professional conversations, the creation of common assessments, and other collaborations. They meet twice a month and are completely teacher led.

Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements

The district does not mandate any particular instructional practice, but the consensus voiced was that lessons should be engaging, student centered, and rigorous enough to challenge students. The more rigorous programs are open to all students with no preliminary entrance requirements. Teacher collaboration contributes to a shared vision of high student expectations and achievement.

Student Engagement

Administrators and teachers said that there are no instructional programs mandated by the district. Many also concurred with regard to what qualifies as good teaching. The teachers interviewed spoke of engaging lessons, building student-teacher relationships and challenging students as effective instructional practices. A district administrator defined quality teaching as "Students fully engaged in learning at the highest level of Bloom's Taxonomy and being able to apply [what they have learned]."

Rigorous Course Offerings

Both administrators and faculty emphasized the importance of offering challenging courses for all students. A member of the counseling center agreed, saying, "The goal of this district is to get every kid to challenge himself in some way." The International Baccalaureate (IB) Program has grown, even as the school maintains Advanced Placement (AP) enrollment. There is an open enrollment policy for IB with no 'gateway' requirements. A teacher explained, "I'm not going to tell a student, 'You can't try something that we advertise as a more rigorous program.' It's never too late to change your approach to scholarship." A district administrator echoed the same philosophy, "We value hard work and persistence over perceived innate ability." Evidence that students are taking advantage of the opportunity to challenge themselves is evident in the 11th grade class: Of 230 students, over 100 are enrolled in 11th grade IB English. The board of education demonstrates its commitment to these rigorous programs by paying all IB and AP fees for all students. A district administrator believes that "more of our students are better prepared for postsecondary learning because of the rigorous programs they are participating in." One of the district's future goals is to become a fully certified IB district—primary through high school.

Every 11th grader in the district takes the PSAT and the pre-ACT; and 10th graders take a test that provides information on current academic development and explores career and training options. The district pays for everyone to participate in this testing, demonstrating a commitment and belief in all students' potential to succeed in college and/or career. The test results assist guidance counselors in planning with students for the future.

The AVID Program (Advancement Via Individual Determination) is designed to mentor and teach students who have the potential to go to college but may not be living up to that potential for a variety of reasons. These students are expected to take one or more advanced courses. Teachers explained that without AVID and this requirement, many of these students would not experience higher-level course work. Some of these students will be the first in their families to attend college.

Project Lead the Way is a rigorous, four year pre-engineering program affiliated with the Rochester Institute of Technology. Students graduate with a certificate in engineering and some of their courses eligible for college credit.

Collaboration
Both formal and informal teacher collaboration was said to contribute to a positive environment in the school, with every effort made to build common planning time into the schedule. As a teacher explained, "There's an aspect of team work within my department. We all want to work together to succeed." Another said, "It's a team effort. Teachers being aware of other teachers' programs help us." The professional learning communities also contribute to departmental collaboration.

Collaboration between administrators and teachers and counselors was also cited as beneficial. Open communication and discussion were said by members of the counseling center to be the norm. For example, many staff members said they are not afraid to bring up concerns, and they feel listened to. "Your ideas matter and what you're doing makes a difference. It's all of us working together," one explained.

Building Relationships
Expressed over and over again by educators, the district philosophy is that success must start with a foundation of trusting relationships. "Belief in the students is a tremendous focus from our superintendent on down. [We want] people to see beyond the limitations of students," stated a district administrator. Teachers said that caring, nurturing relationships come first and academic success follows. Typical teacher comments included:

> *The best thing to do for students and teachers is to know each other and make those connections. Students who have connections at school are going to want to come.*

> *The bulk of success comes from relationships. If you get to know who your students are and understand they're still high school students. . . . Every day is a new day and you'll give them what they need.*

> *Getting to know the students is the most important thing. Letting them know you care about them.*

> *We all for the most part work very hard on positive relationships. That plays a major role in our students' academic and personal success. It creates a safe and trusting environment.*

As indicated earlier, both district administrators and teachers said that the principal has strong connections to the students in her building. They reported that she is at the door every morning greeting students by name. By knowing the students so well, the principal sets the tone for the entire faculty. Her strong ties to students and their families and her tireless efforts have a positive impact on the school culture and graduation rates. When teachers were asked about graduation rates, there was a similar refrain. "We don't give up on our students. We pay attention and notice them." "I always tell them I believe in them. Let's find ways [to help them graduate]." Another element echoed by faculty and administrators is the fact that students have at least one adult in

the building they can trust and go to if there is a problem. The faculty and administration operate under the belief that strong connections are key to both personal and academic success.

Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data

Eastridge High School faculty reported that data inform their daily instruction as well as their long term planning. Teachers and administrators know the individual needs of their students in part through ongoing analysis of data, which ensures that students get the extra attention required for graduation.

Compilation and Dissemination of Data
A director of instructional data compiles, interprets and disseminates data for the district. Reporting accurate data to the state, he said, is his number one priority. "There's a lot of overseeing, double checking and triple checking . . . making sure it's going in right, working with the BOCES Regional Data Center so it all falls in line." Each principal has access to all their building's data. Having data readily available for both the faculty and principal is seen as a way to heighten everyone's awareness of what needs to be done to improve programs and student learning.

Use of Data
The principal finds data collection and analysis invaluable. "It's required when the stakes are this high. [We need to be] mindful that the data are accurate." Administrators check to be sure students are listed in the right cohort and are on track for graduation. The principal calls the spreadsheet she has posted in her office "a living document." She and guidance counselors are in constant communication, updating the data on the spreadsheet. The data ensure that students do not 'fall through the cracks' to discover too late that they can't graduate.

Teachers reported that the looking at data at department meetings has been enlightening. For example, one teacher said, "It has forced teachers to realize that what we thought they [the students] were struggling with, they weren't. We were spending so much time on writing, but it was the multiple choice that was killing them." According to several teachers, many PLCs examine data during their meetings. "Only in the last three or four years has data become a very common discussion topic. It's definitely there now," said one teacher. The principal asserted, "People have to be in touch with their data. It's getting people over the fear of getting judged because they didn't do as well as their neighbor. [It's okay] as long as you're asking for help."

Recognition, Interventions, and Adjustments

The attitude evident at Eastridge High School is that each student must be recognized and treated as an individual with individual strengths and weaknesses. It is the school's mission to proactively intervene and adjust to students' needs to help them live up to their full potential. A myriad of programs are available to all students who need extra attention in order to succeed and graduate. All the interventions described below are open to all students, not just special education students and English language learners.

Intervention through Special Programs

As previously mentioned, one of the best practices at Eastridge High School is the number of special programs available to students. Several of these are intervention programs to support struggling and at-risk students. A teacher explained, "We identify these students early. We're not waiting until fourth quarter of senior year. We already know and have a plan in place, working to solve the problem, bringing in parents, counselors. We all work together to increase their chances of graduation."

The STAY program is for twelfth graders most at risk of not graduating – those who have failed one or more Regents exams (some more than once) and need credit recovery as well as Regents exam credit. It is a small program with a flexible schedule that gives students a great deal of individual attention, targeting and meeting their needs. The superintendent praised the STAY teachers, "Those teachers are incredible. . . . Some people have the knack for working with at-risk kids. So much is personnel driven." A teacher stated, "I know if they didn't have that program, they'd be dropping out."

The Alternative Education program for ninth and tenth grade is for both general education and special education students who are not doing well in the traditional school setting because of behavior problems. The students get a lot of individual attention, are closely monitored, and receive counseling and mentoring.

AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination), as mentioned earlier, is both a rigorous program as well as an intervention for students who have the potential for post-secondary education but who are under performing, usually because of their life circumstances. The teachers are trained as mentors and give the students tremendous support and encouragement. It has been at the high school for four years and will be graduating its first class in June.

The high school runs an after school tutoring program in the library from 3:30–5:30 p.m. twice a week for any student in need of extra help. Both content area and special education teachers are available. A late bus at 5:30 p.m. means students do not have to worry about transportation home.

The Ninth Grade Academy is a form of intervention for all ninth graders. It works under the premise that success in ninth grade is crucial for future academic success. To help freshmen avoid becoming overwhelmed both socially and academically, they are housed primarily by themselves with their own assistant principal. The principal said, "It's a nice way of helping kids through that growth year." Link Crew is a new program partnering a senior with small groups of freshman for mentoring and peer counseling. Its primary mission is to help freshmen stay academically focused.

In addition to these special intervention programs, the administrators, counselors, and faculty collaborate when a student is having trouble and in need of help. Senior Jeopardy meetings are arranged for seniors who may need extra attention. Home visits are sometimes warranted. These visits were reported as especially helpful with students who have attendance problems. The counseling center offers special discussion groups during the school day. Topics range from grief

counseling to girls' self-esteem to anxiety prevention. Another option is to place students in BOCES programs. These students are monitored by the school social worker with the goal of high school graduation.

Recognitions
Students are recognized in traditional ways: morning announcements acknowledge student accomplishments, students of the month appear on the school website, athletes, musicians and performing artists are congratulated on their performances, and the counseling center posts the photos of all students accepted at colleges. However, in a school where the principal knows most students' names, recognition may mean something more. Students know the adults in the school care about them as individuals. They see school as a place where they are wanted and belong. This may be the most meaningful form of recognition.

In a Nutshell

Eastridge High School's consistently high graduation rates are the result of a combination of several intentional practices. The East Irondequoit School District is committed financially and philosophically to providing students a wide array of special programs and challenging courses. School leadership inspires the faculty and staff to nurture students in order to form strong relationships that foster graduation. The attitude "we're all in this together" leads to a collaborative school culture that is intent on student success.

East Irondequoit Central School District
Eastridge High School
Mary Grow, Principal
2350 East Ridge Road
Rochester, NY 14622
(585) 339-1450
www.eastiron.org

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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.