

Best Practices Case Study: *Supporting High School Completion*

Mary Helen Collen, June 2013



Elmont Memorial Junior-Senior High School

Sewanhaka Central High School District

Success breeds success. - district administrator

School Context

With a longstanding reputation for excellence, Elmont Memorial High School is one of five high schools in the Sewanhaka High School District in Nassau County, just over the border from Queens. Neatly manicured lawns, flowering trees, and single family homes surround the school, to which most of its 1900 plus students walk. A more urban, commercial neighborhood just blocks away rounds out the catchment area for Elmont High. The superintendent described this community as a “tight-knit group of parents and residents who have a tremendous amount of positive esteem about their community and, in turn, their schools. They have overall a generally high expectation for how their children should perform and are extremely supportive of efforts of the central high school district in its entirety and of the specific building.”

Student-centered, collaborative, and positive were descriptors used by both teachers and administrators to portray a school where success, as defined by a district administrator, means “having high expectations for all students, graduation for all students, and as much of a college and career ready curriculum for all students, as possible.” Or as another district administrator explained, “We’re in the business to educate, to teach, to graduate. It is our collective goal to get every youngster to graduation, and to be a part of the journey and the celebration is without a doubt one of the most rewarding and fulfilling experiences. If you go through it once, it’s contagious. Every student should have the opportunity to graduate.”

Part of the success that Elmont Memorial High School has experienced in meeting that collective goal is attributed to the fact that students begin their academic careers in the building as seventh graders. “We are very fortunate that we get the children in 7th grade and can be working with them through graduation in 12th”, a building administrator explained. Thus, “We have the advantage of getting to know a child’s strengths and weaknesses and working collaboratively with other teachers to push students forward to be successful.”

Student Demographics 2010-11: Elmont Memorial High School, Sewanhaka Central HS District¹

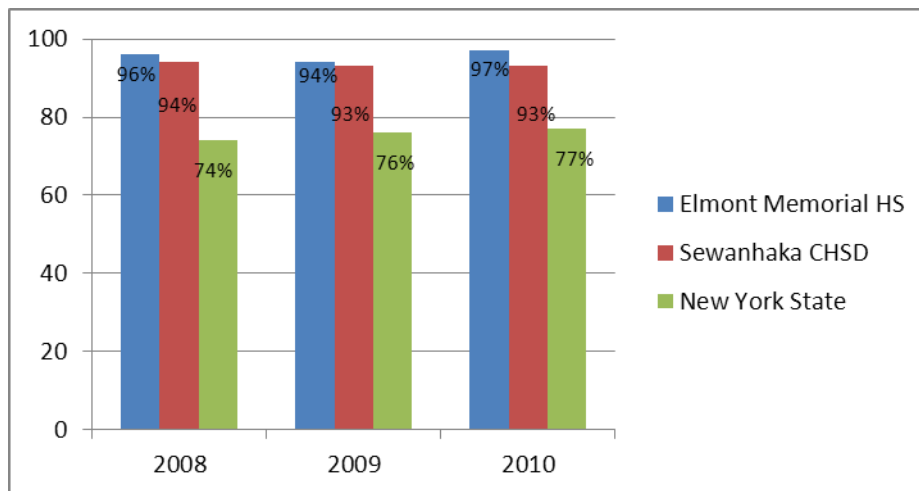
	Elmont Memorial High School	Sewanhaka Central High School District	New York State
Grades Served: Total Enrollment	7-12: 1,928	7-12: 8,528	K-12: 2,689,969
Eligible for Free/Reduced-Price Lunch	27%	18%	49%
Limited English Proficient	1%	3%	8%
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution			
African-American	78%	27%	19%
Hispanic/Latino	13%	28%	22%
White	1%	26%	49%
Other	8%	19%	9%

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

Of the five high schools in the district, Elmont and one other have the highest percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (27%). Elmont serves by far the largest percentage of African-American students. However, according to a school administrator, “Even though you look at the statistical breakdown of the school, and it looks homogeneous with 78% of students identified as African-American, the students describe themselves as diverse. Within the African-American community, there is a lot of diversity – Caribbean, Jamaican, Dominican, Haitian, and Guyanese. Within the umbrella of African-American, kids would self-describe as very diverse.” She added that diversity is celebrated, for example, with a “Showcase of Talent” dinner that includes dances, songs, bands, and runway modeling of traditional dress.

The 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 (to graduate in 2008), 2005 (to graduate in 2009), and 2006 (to graduate in 2010). According to the New York State Report Card, the four-year graduation rate for these cohorts in Elmont was in the mid-high 90s, exceeding both the overall district average and the New York State average.

**Percentage of Students Graduating in Four Years –
Elmont High School, Sewanhaka CHSD, and New York State**



Data from New York State Report Cards

Best Practice Highlights

The practices that characterize Elmont's graduation rate reflect very high expectations for both students and staff. Educators spoke of a nurturing, caring school community where teachers work very long days and students participate in their scheduled classes, extracurricular activities, and extensive review classes. Success is measured by mastery, and students are expected and encouraged to push themselves toward excellence. The best practices associated with the four-year graduation rates in this district include:

Extending Learning Time and Opportunity

We tell students, "The more involved you are with the school, the better you are going to do." It's the same with teachers; the more involved you are with activities of students, the more you are enmeshed in the school and have a stake in it, [the more successful you will be].
- building administrator

Whether in before school, after school, or Saturday classes, whether as part of a club or sports team, the school culture encourages going above and beyond the regulation school day. Because clubs and activities are seen as vital parts of students' involvement and subsequent success, all coaches and club advisors must be members of the school faculty. In this capacity they support academics, sometimes stepping in to arrange or provide tutoring for club or sports participants.

Working toward Mastery

We get about 92-95% through the English Regents exam the first time around, but kids will retake it because they want to achieve mastery. They'll get a 73 and say, "I can do better." We're not opposed to letting them take it again. Our goal is always 85% mastery. In our department, we have a golf poster from the Master's Tournament on which we put the names of every student who achieved mastery. It is motivation for kids to do better. Mastery is the school-wide goal.
- teacher

The bar is set high. "It's pulling it from them and getting them to do more. The challenge is really motivating them to do more, write more, think more," explained a teacher. The staff of the high school have high academic expectations, as well as high standards for appropriate conduct and behavior. "Our goal is to have them achieve and graduate and to give them the most rigorous program they can have and to give a lot of support," stated a teacher.

Responding Collectively to Student Need

Everyone is an English teacher. The [Regents] results are the result of not just the 11th grade teachers. That's the 11th hour. That preparation and language acquisition doesn't happen overnight; it happens over time. Either you're approaching it long term or you're not going to get there.
- teacher

The attitude of all teachers in this together is pervasive. This approach is celebrated by a school administrator who explained how "on the last day of school I have a brief department meeting. I read the list of our graduating seniors and say, 'You might not have taught this student, but you

might have proctored a test [for him] or seen him in the hallways. . . . These are our graduates and every single one of you in some way shape or form is responsible for their graduation.”

A Closer Look

These practices – extending learning time and opportunity, working toward mastery, and responding collectively to student need – are evident throughout the five dimensions that frame the larger 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

Mediocrity is not an option. – teacher

Starting with the end in mind, educators at Elmont know what it takes to prepare students to become productive citizens, and they work to build their goals collectively with knowledge of their students, the curriculum, and visions of the future. Supporting equity and excellence, setting academic goals, and revising curriculum provide the mechanisms to reach those goals.

Supporting Equity and Excellence

A district administrator pointed out that equity has been a long-standing issue in the district because of the segregation that exists on Long Island. “The historical issue,” she explained, “is to make sure that students are provided with equitable educational opportunities. In this building the push has been for more students to be taking the opportunity for AP [Advanced Placement] classes, pushing them toward advanced Regents diplomas rather than just the basic Regents [diploma].” To participate in an AP course, the principal explained, “A student needs an 85, a teacher recommendation, and/or student desire. To say that a student doesn’t belong in an AP class,” he continued, “denies access and equity to the underserved. Students who take AP courses are more likely to finish college in four years and we have to give kids the opportunity to take the most rigorous course. We have to create the culture.” A teacher confirmed this, saying, “Even if they don’t get 3s on the AP exams, they have the experience and the exposure.”

Revising Curriculum

Because Elmont is one of five high schools in the district, curriculum writing and revision happen at the district level and are typically led by a department chair from one of the buildings. Content area teachers from each of the five buildings sit on every curriculum writing committee, and although special education teachers are able to join these committees, their participation is currently seen more at the building and department levels, explained a teacher. The benefit of district-level curriculum writing was described by a teacher as “enlightening.” She explained, “I could see what others were doing – one was gung ho on current events, another on technology. We looked at materials and [people shared] ideas for this topic, and videos or articles.”

Another teacher described several meetings over the past two years to prepare for the Common Core Curriculum, illustrating the nature of the school and district to be proactive. To incorporate the Common Core Standards into practice, members of the district-level Curriculum Committee work together to “interpret [the Standards] and align them to what we’ve done in the past so that they can be adopted into the district given our timeline and classes. We did this last year for 7th

and 8th grade and this summer we'll do it for algebra," explained a teacher. Another teacher summed up the reaction of colleagues toward all of the changes taking place with curriculum: "Everything's changing so we just have to adjust. The attitude here is pretty calm. We're calm and we're getting through this year together. . . . The superintendent did a phenomenal job of keeping everyone at ease with that on opening day, and we've all been active members and participants in building the APPR [Annual Professional Performance Review]ⁱⁱ. We voted on it and sent it off. The union was part of it. Committees were built for it. The communication has been great on that."

Setting Academic Goals

Goal setting is generally done at the building level according to a district administrator. She shared that the principal is the anchor of most of the goals. "We aren't driven by board goals," she said. "The principal is the driving force." According to a teacher, the process of goal setting begins with individual teacher's goals. He explained that "we [teachers] come up with our own individual goals as part of the department goals. Then the department chair hands the goals for the department to the principal, and the principal builds from there." Another teacher provided an example of the process: "Our goal is to improve what we've achieved in the past. . . . The department works with the teachers: 'This is what we've been able to do; this is how our last classes worked out. What goal can we set for this year and how can we achieve it? We set a goal of 89% last year; let's try for 91% this year. Focus on students on the borderline of mastery.'" The achievement of goals is celebrated on the last day of school, as the principal "goes over results of every department . . . and gives out [various] awards, like Rookie of the Year, Outstanding Mastery percentage, etc. He does a great job of that," noted a teacher.

But the goals for Elmont High do not all have an academic focus. The principal noted that there are three goals in the building: improving academic achievement, promoting an environment of respect and civility, and promoting a positive image of the school. Explaining that "the most difficult goal is the third one because of stereotypes" about minority students, the principal continued, "Schools like Elmont have to always go above and beyond in celebrating the positives of the school."

Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building

There has to be tireless community outreach to get the community to buy in to what you're doing. You have to hire really quality teachers who believe all students can achieve success, and you have to have building administrators who support that. You have to provide the resources. My job is to try to support what is happening here. -superintendent

With strong leadership, a deliberate hiring process, thoughtful mentoring, targeted professional development, and an observation system that is instructive, the culture of excellence at Elmont is supported and sustained.

Supporting through Leadership

A collaborative structure with clearly defined roles and responsibilities positions Elmont to support an enthusiastic, dedicated staff. Led by a principal and three assistant principals – one for grades 7 and 8, one for grades 9 and 11, and the other for grades 10 and 12, Elmont also has two deans who monitor attendance – both daily and by class period – and attend to referrals. The

assistant principals are charged with responding to disciplinary needs and conducting some teacher observations. Additionally, there is a chairperson for each department within the high school who is also responsible for making classroom observations.

A school administrator described the cabinet, a group comprised of the principal, assistant principals, and department chairs, as a mechanism for keeping “abreast of what is going on. I feel as though I’m relatively well informed. . . . Everyone knows what’s going on in reference to graduation rates or in reference to curriculum or what is happening in the community.”

At the district level, the superintendent meets every other week with the principals from the five high schools in the district along with the three assistant superintendents – one each for instruction, personnel, and business.

Sustaining the Culture

“It was more like a conversation, than an examination,” is how a teacher described her own job interview. “It was like they were trying to get to know me.” With a representative committee following a standardized protocol, carefully screened teacher candidates are interviewed to see if they have what it takes to work at Elmont. Following the interviews, the pool of candidates is culled down to a select group and each teacher in that group is asked to do a demonstration lesson, to which other teachers in the department are invited. What is important in the demonstration lesson, explained a teacher, is if the candidate is able to connect with the students. The principal emphasized that “they have to have a love of kids. It has to come out in the interview. In the demonstration lesson, you can’t fool kids. . . . You can be book smart, but if you don’t have that ‘it’ factor, you can’t be successful, and that has to come out; that has to be apparent to work in this building. Our kids like their teachers.” While the principal makes the final recommendation of a candidate to the superintendent, feedback from all committee members is seriously considered in this collaborative process.

Once hired, a teacher is welcomed into the school community with a new teacher training course run in the fall. With weekly in-service classes targeting topics such as diffusing tense situations with students, running effective parent-teacher conferences, and understanding the services available in the district and how to access them, a different presenter each week acquaints new teachers with Elmont Memorial High School.

Teachers at Elmont are expected to take on responsibilities outside the classroom. One teacher reported, “When I first came here, one of the recommendations from the first day was, ‘We want to see you involved. You’re not just a teacher. See if you can be an assistant coach. Do a review class once a week or find a club and be an advisor. Be more than a teacher planning lessons. We want you in the life of the school. Are you really green [Elmont’s color]?’ You are really encouraged to be a part of the students’ life, of the school life.”

A district administrator added that she looks in potential hires for someone who “can rally troops, engage students, engage staff . . . their leadership potential. Really, we’re a school of many leaders.”

Professional Development

Professional development takes many forms at Elmont, with meeting time given each month for workshops instead of traditional faculty meetings, which are held only twice a year – in September and June. Typically, a series of workshops is organized and faculty members are solicited to present hour-long sessions on various topics, including cooperative learning, setting up a website, or using the e-school grade book. In addition to the monthly meetings, specialists are hired to work with teachers on specific topics, such as differentiating instruction, within an embedded, supportive structure.

Turnkey was a word heard often. The expectation is that if teachers have attended a conference or possess a certain area of knowledge, they will teach their colleagues. “Teachers who are asked are very accommodating,” said a district administrator. “They are happy to do it.” A teacher summed it up this way: “Professional development occurs when teachers collaborate and work together. We have a culture of collaboration. . . . We’re not in competition. Every time there’s a great conversation between teachers, that’s professional development right there.”

The process of observing teachers and providing feedback was seen by a building administrator as an opportunity to “teach our teachers how to teach.” With untenured teachers getting six observations a year and tenured teachers getting two – all unannounced except for a two-day observation by a department chair -- the process of having a dialogue with the teacher after the observation serves as a mechanism for teachers to become “competent reflectors of their own practice,” she shared. “One of the strongest action plans [I recommend],” she continued, “is to observe another teacher. Teachers are very willing to let colleagues in their classrooms. They open their classrooms. [I tell them] ‘Do it, watch him do it, and then try it.’”

Instructional Practice, Programs and Arrangements

We’re really pushed from the start to be creative in our teaching craft, to improve continually as well. I think it really does make a difference. - teacher

Finding ways to engage and motivate students while understanding and attending to their individual needs requires careful and thoughtful planning. Teachers at Elmont use differentiated instruction as well as varied forms of teaming, looping, and grouping within classes and within the building to meet student learning needs.

Differentiating and Tailoring Instruction

Crediting differentiated instruction as the reason for academic success, a district administrator explained that the principal has been instrumental in “setting the stage for where we want to go [in providing] strategies for more diverse learners.” For the past several years, he has arranged for an expert presenter to deliver tiered “coaching-type” training to all of the teachers. This expert is “practical and provides teachers with something they can take away and implement immediately, and that became a way of doing things,” explained the principal.

Students are actively involved in personal goal setting, indicated a teacher. She described how she conducts individual student meetings once a semester and asks students where they think

there is room for improvement and what they think their focus should be. “My goal in these meetings is to have them acknowledge where their weaknesses are and then come up with a plan of what to do from there,” she explained.

Grouping for Success

Interdisciplinary teaming occurs at the 7th and 8th grade level, as is typical in most middle grades settings, but teaming also is in place at the 9th grade at Elmont. The 9th grade teams meet every other day and talk about how they can improve student grades, enhance their lesson plans, or do cross-curricular planning. Teaming was credited with helping to intervene with behavioral issues, as the 7th and 8th grade teachers loop with their students, providing consistency and setting the stage for the high school. Looping also occurs in social studies at the 9th and 10th grade level, since the Global Regents Exam, usually taken at the end of tenth grade, assesses two years’ worth of curriculum. “What helps is the looping that we do. It helps with instruction and with behavior. Behavior issues have gone down tremendously because of that,” said a teacher.

Ninth-grade teaming had been discontinued for a few years, due partially to the constraints that it imposes on the master schedule, but it was reinstated in 2011-12. A district administrator provided the reason for reinstatement: “We find that the teaming is very successful for students. It allows teachers to come together and develop instructional plans, work with the kids, and develop individual plans for the kids. A lot of the success is because we personalize it. We take every single kid and make what works for that kid. [That’s] a lot of what we do.”

Teachers also reported grouping and teaching in multiple ways to meet the needs of the students in their classes, for example, using “paired work, cooperative learning groups, and hands-on work.” “It’s not just about knowing the curriculum,” a teacher explained, “but knowing students and how to reach them.” He relayed that he and many of his colleagues use “learning style surveys and then plan activities around them, incorporating visual and kinesthetic [activities]” such as standing and moving around a line to illustrate the concept of locus in a geometry lesson. Another teacher reported that within a forty-three minute period he may have as many as five different activities. His approach to “active learning” is to keep students constantly engaged by varying the tasks.

Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data

We look at data a lot. We have implemented department quarterlies and [after they are scored, we sit together and say] “Here are the highs and the lows. Let’s talk about what happened in our class versus what the other teachers did.” We learn best practices from each other and build on that. On a quarterly basis, we are really able to move forward.
- teacher

Teachers and administrators described the varied ways in which data are reported, analyzed, and used to make critical decisions within the High School. To keep teachers positive in a time when data are often used in a punitive fashion, a school administrator explained, “We keep saying that we know what they do. The scores don’t define the kids or the teachers. We utilize data so regularly that they are not fearful of the data. They don’t see it [low assessment scores] so much as a personal failure as an opportunity to get better.”

Assessing to Measure Progress

With the idea of improving student performance, progress is monitored by individual teachers during their classes using various types of formative assessments. Several teachers talked about using a scannable form to perform quick assessments to ascertain the success of a taught concept. “For every exam we give [using that form] we get an item analysis back. I can look at what questions students got wrong. . . . I go over it in class . . . they get it again for a ‘do now,’” explained a teacher. Additionally, teachers reported using a web-based tool for assessment and analysis to gauge student performance on questions that are aligned with the Common Core Standards.

Although common assessments are not yet in place in all areas, teachers in several departments reported that they give department-wide midterms and final exams. “We are to have the same midterm, the same post assessment or final exam,” said one teacher.

Formal progress reports and report cards are compiled eight times per year, four as report cards and four as progress reports. Guidance counselors are actively involved in careful review of transcripts, monitoring for students who need to take particular Regents Exams in order to graduate. In February, a list of students who are at risk of not graduating is compiled and counselors were said to be extra vigilant in attending to this group.

Making Data-Based Decisions

“Our principal is a stickler for statistics,” shared a teacher. “Student failure is teacher failure,” she continued. “He always looks at the number of students who didn’t pass a class. Did the teacher improve by the next marking period? He might not have a direct conversation with every teacher, but he’ll tell the chair, ‘Look at this teacher.’ He looks at graduation rate. At the end-of-the-year meeting, he would broadcast all of the Regents scores – US History had a 97% passing rate, 80% mastery rate, etc.”

Based on careful analysis of those statistics, decisions are sometimes made to alter courses. The principal noted the change from a two-year algebra course to the current one-year course with a lab attached for students who need the extra support. This change was made because analyzing the data showed that spending two years in algebra reduced the likelihood that students could take higher-level mathematics courses. He described the class: “The teacher meets with thirty students on day 1, followed by a double period with fifteen of those students one day and the other fifteen the next. The same teachers teach the lab class. That helped.”

Recognition, Interventions, and Adjustments

The key [to keeping kids from dropping out of schools is] relationships. You can do anything you want as far as putting in programs – it’s the relationships. If you don’t make relationships with these students, it’s not going to matter – relationships with them and their families.
- school administrator

With hallway bulletin boards covered with hundreds of photos of smiling students, and the main office described by a teacher as the “hub of the building,” Elmont is a proactive building where

teachers and administrators report that students are comfortable seeking extra help, participating in afterschool and Saturday study sessions, and engaging in a wide variety of extra-curricular activities. “We just do so many positive things around here. We kill them with kindness and it works,” affirmed a teacher.

Intervening Proactively

The transition from the three elementary buildings that feed the junior-senior high school is detailed and carefully articulated. A district administrator reported relying “on information that the elementary schools provide. We build on those soft data over the next six years.” Many details, including state assessment scores, family data, teacher recommendations, social/emotional factors, attendance, and organizational skill are gathered and taken into consideration in placement decisions. A school clinician noted, “We identified seventh graders potentially at risk of dropping out through recommendations from the sixth-grade teachers.”

With the knowledge garnered from the intake process and continuous monitoring of student need, various types of interventions are put into place. For example, a clinician spoke of helping students with setting up schedules for homework completion and with ideas for waking up in the morning. Academic and social supports, such as AIS (Academic Intervention Services), before- and after-school support groups, connections with outside agencies, home visits, Algebra Academy, and character education lessons are a regular part of school life at Elmont High.

When it comes to ensuring graduation, a teacher reported that guidance counselors are extra vigilant in following a student who may need a specific course to graduate. He explained, “We’re proactive rather than reactive. Some kids try to fly under the radar, but that can’t happen here. Maybe they can do it for a marking period, but everyone is catching it before it gets to [the point of] not graduating and holding him accountable.”

Extending Learning Time and Opportunities

Operation Success is a program overwhelmingly endorsed by teachers and administrators. This program runs before school and again until late in the evening and on Saturday morning. Saturday school has become so much of an institution that a teacher said, “It’s expected. Students are asking, ‘When is the extra help? Can I come on Saturday? Kids know that we do this for them and they take advantage of it. They come. [While it is not a condition of employment], you start working here and you see what it takes – and either you do it or you leave.’”

One teacher attributed Elmont’s high graduation rate to review and said, “We give them every opportunity possible to be successful. We offer review on Saturday. With Title 1 money we are compensated for Saturdays.” He described the building on a Saturday morning: “There would be at least four review classes going on with four different teachers. The building would be filled with kids reviewing for the Regents and AP [Exams]. On any given Saturday, we generally have 100 – 120 kids.” The superintendent endorsed the program, saying, “We have maintained a budgetary dedication for each building to provide extra support before school, after school, and on Saturday. Title 1 is [generally] the money that goes to provide additional support.”

Extra-curricular activities encourage a large gamut of interests, from peer mediators to honor societies to sports teams and musicals. One program praised by teachers and administrators is the

highly decorated Model United Nations Program, which provides national and international travel opportunities for competitions. Of particular note with extracurricular clubs and activities is that every advisor and coach is “in house,” meaning that they are a member of the school staff.

Celebrating Students and Teachers

Teacher of the Year, Student of the Month, Spartan Spirit, Good Citizenship, Rookie of the Year, and Going Above and Beyond are but a few of the awards given to students and staff. As a teacher emphasized, “Teacher motivation directly impacts student motivation.”

A district administrator described that in Elmont High “the culture and climate are directly correlated to the success. It is a warm and inviting building where students feel very loved and nurtured; they are greeted by folks who care about them and will report to you that they feel connected. Relationships, relationships, relationships...” A school clinician summed this up from the staff perspective, saying, “Staff feel very comfortable with the ways that they can help students. They don’t feel limited. In this day and age of budget cuts we haven’t felt limited in the way we can help students. We can get things done.”

In a Nutshell

Advice from a teacher expresses the spirit of Elmont Memorial High School: “Treat kids with respect, be positive with them, make sure they are actively engaged in the learning process, and vary activities in your class every single day.” By providing extending learning time and opportunity, working toward mastery, and responding collectively to student need, the Elmont school community has consistently supported nearly 100% of students to graduate in four years.

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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 A new APPR system, including increased accountability for teachers based, in part, on local and state assessments, was required by the State in the 2012-13 school year.