

# The ABCs of graduating at-risk students on time



Promising  
practices from  
higher-performing  
high schools



# About Know Your Schools~for NYKids

Since its inception in 2004, one goal of NYKids has been to help schools learn from other schools whose students consistently perform well. To date the project has identified best practices in elementary school, including among critical needs students; middle school and middle school science; and high school, now including high schools with strong graduation rates among generally at-risk groups. Results of all studies are available in reports, case studies, best practice frameworks, sample evidence from higher-performing schools, self-surveys, articles, and presentations. To download a copy of this report or the other resources, or to learn more about the project and earlier studies, go to [www.albany.edu/nykids](http://www.albany.edu/nykids).

In addition, a set of tools, called COMPASS (**COMP**are, **Ass**ess, **Se**lect levers to improve, **Se**t goals), has been developed from this work. These tools and their associated institutes have been created to help schools put study findings to use in a continuous improvement process. For information about these tools and institutes, contact 518-442-5023.

Know Your Schools~for NY Kids is a project of the University at Albany School of Education in collaboration with private and public partners. Guidance is provided by a statewide Advisory Board; funding is provided, in part, by the State of New York and the University at Albany.

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# The ABCs of graduating at-risk students on time

Promising practices from higher-performing high schools

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The ABCs of Graduating At-Risk Students on Time:

# The Higher-Performing Schools

**Amityville Memorial HS**  
Amityville



**Brookfield Central HS**  
Brookfield



**Downsville Central HS**  
Downsville



**Eastridge HS**  
East Irondequoit



Creating a strong sense of community among disparate populations from “the two sides of the railroad tracks,” Amityville Memorial provides multiple ways to be successful and focuses on developing supportive relationships with students. Located on the southern shore of Suffolk County, Long Island, the district has a 61% poverty rate for those attending its schools; many residents of the more affluent part of town send their children to private or parochial school. The population of this grade 10-12 high school of approximately 700 students is almost 90% ethnic minority, with an ever increasing number of immigrants. Faculty and administrators are acutely aware of the difference they can make in students’ lives. Among the practices contributing to student engagement and success are flexible scheduling, rigorous courses, research-based professional development, and strong student planning for the future. Caring staff members are always willing to go “the extra mile” to help achieve the mission of “Educating for the Future.”

The 100% graduation rate at Brookfield Central School is attributed largely to a caring faculty “going above and beyond” to individualize instruction and support in a community with pervasive poverty but strong local pride. Set in “gorgeous” countryside in Madison County in central New York, the hamlets that make up the Brookfield community were once almost entirely agricultural. Organizational adaptability and continuous staff collaboration are tenets of the shared responsibility educators feel for the academic success and general well-being of each of their 250 students in pre-K through grade 12. Faculty members know each student and family well and are more than willing to personalize instruction and adjust schedules to meet each student’s needs. Teachers and administrators have embraced initiatives such as the Common Core Standards; they take satisfaction in building personal professional capacity. Both staff and students are intensely engaged in all aspects of the educational process at the school.

The “heartbeat” of this small Catskill Mountain area, the Downsville school system has achieved uncommon success, including listing as a “top school” in *US News and World Report*. Downsville is the site of a large reservoir that supplies water to New York City and provides some financial assistance to the town and school system. The school’s declining population of fewer than 300 students in pre-K through grade 12 is all housed in the same traditional but modernized building. With 63% of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, the principal diversity among students is economic. The school’s collaborative support for individual students is seen throughout its practices, including weekly faculty meetings focused on identifying students needing additional support. Faculty members have universally high expectations for students and customize the scaffolding rather than change the expectations. Teachers link evidence-informed lessons with in-depth understanding of individual students to tailor instruction.

Bordered on the north by Lake Ontario and on the east by Irondequoit Bay, the community of East Irondequoit is considered a suburb of the city of Rochester, just to its south. About 1,000 students in grades 9 through 12 attend the High School. The district has little industrial tax base, and many families are struggling economically, with approximately fifty percent of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch. Faculty and students embrace the socio-economic, racial, and ethnic diversity of Eastridge students. School leaders believe that establishing trusting relationships with students and helping every student to feel connected to the school are the foundations for academic success. Faculty members’ consistently high expectations inspire students to challenge themselves. The International Baccalaureate Program has grown, even as the school maintains consistent Advanced Placement enrollment. Educators ensure that multiple pathways for student success are provided for high-achieving, under-achieving, and at-risk students.

To provide a fuller description of the higher-performing schools in our analysis, we have published an 8-12 page case report for each. These cases are available at [www.albany.edu/nykids](http://www.albany.edu/nykids), and highlights from them appear throughout this report. We include here a brief description of each school and invite you to explore the fuller case reports. Details about our sample selection and study methods can be found on page 24.

### Elmont Memorial HS Elmont



### Otselic Valley JSHS South Otselic



### Prattsburgh Central HS Prattsburgh



### Whitesville HS Whitesville



Successfully developing a culture that “does not feed into the stereotypes,” Elmont Memorial achieved a 97% high school completion rate in 2010 and has been honored as a National School of Excellence. Elmont’s high school population of 1300 is 78% African-American, 13% Hispanic/Latino, and 1% white, with 27% eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Bordering Queens, the Nassau County community surrounding the school is tight knit, positive thinking, and infused with high expectations for student success. Learning time and opportunity are extended through a wealth of extracurricular activities as well as both formal and informal arrangements for academic support beyond the classroom. Taking pride in supporting each other professionally, faculty members feel personal responsibility for student success in all subject areas. Students are encouraged to work toward mastery levels in state testing, to take Advanced Placement courses, and to qualify for Advanced Regents diplomas.

The highly collaborative faculty of Otselic Valley Junior-Senior High School, the result of a merger of three smaller school districts, works as a professional learning community with embedded professional development. Bypassed by major transit routes, this quiet, isolated area east of the Finger Lakes, and an hour from major stores and cities, is now largely forest, sparsely quilted with abandoned farm fields and a few remaining dairy farms. Because of its small size (under 400 students K-12), relatively high poverty (almost 60% eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch), and remoteness, educators feel a particular challenge in helping to connect students to the outside world, especially to the diversity that exists beyond their isolated rural area. A recent infusion of instructional technology adds to what would otherwise be a limited range of learning opportunities. The caring culture and long-term relationships with students help the faculty to interpret and build on th of their school, Prattsburgh educators believe.

Deeply rooted in two hundred years of academic history, Prattsburgh Central High School has always prided itself on maintaining small-town educational values while continuously updating all aspects of its curriculum and infrastructure. Located in the northeast corner of Steuben County not far from Pennsylvania, this pre-K through grade 12 school serves fewer than 500 students and maintains a philosophy that “small is good.” In a community educators described as “struggling but holding its own” economically, the number of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch has hovered around 50%. Among the significant keys to success is the feeling of “family and community and home” that students experience. Educators develop team-based approaches for identifying at-risk students and then for providing instructional scaffolding and other support to help students in need. It is important for students to take ownership and share the credit for the success of their school, Prattsburgh educators believe.

A tone of mutual respect and an attitude celebrating student success permeate small, rural Whitesville High School, located in a scenic and remote part of the state’s southern tier. Educators stressed that staff members know every one of the almost 300 students in kindergarten through grade 12, especially the 90 or so in the high school wing of the multi-purpose building. Small class size, sometimes fewer than 10 students, is seen as key to the individualized instruction at Whitesville. Administrators and faculty members work as a team to monitor and support student progress. Athletic eligibility, based mostly on student grades, is a key factor motivating academic success. Although Whitesville is an economically impoverished area, the school receives strong parental support for academics, athletics, and the arts. With an overriding expectation that every student will graduate, the community is united in celebrating steps along the way, secure in the belief that every student is prepared for the future.

# Demographics of the Eight Higher-Performing Schools Studied

| District                                       | School Name               | Grade Span | Total Enrollment | % F/R Lunch Eligible | % EL | % African-American | % Hispanic/Latino | % White | % Other | PPE      |
|--|---------------------------|------------|------------------|----------------------|------|--------------------|-------------------|---------|---------|----------|
| Amityville UFSD                                | Amityville Memorial HS    | 9 – 12     | 701              | 39                   | 6    | 57                 | 29                | 11      | 3       | \$26,032 |
| Brookfield CSD                                 | Brookfield Central HS     | 9 – 12     | 77               | 45                   | 0    | 1                  | 0                 | 99      | 0       | \$20,712 |
| Downsville CSD                                 | Downsville Central HS     | 9 – 12     | 85               | 63                   | 0    | 1                  | 0                 | 99      | 0       | \$40,380 |
| East Irondequoit CSD                           | Eastridge HS              | 9 – 12     | 989              | 46                   | 2    | 18                 | 12                | 65      | 4       | \$19,406 |
| Georgetown-South Otselic CSD                   | Otselic Valley Jr. Sr. HS | 9 – 12     | 148              | 53                   | 0    | 0                  | 0                 | 99      | 0       | \$22,602 |
| Prattsburgh CSD                                | Prattsburgh Central HS    | 9 – 12     | 133              | 46                   | 0    | 4                  | 1                 | 95      | 0       | \$20,161 |
| Sewanhaka Central High SD                      | Elmont Memorial HS        | 9 – 12     | 1,307            | 27                   | 1    | 78                 | 13                | 1       | 8       | \$18,176 |
| Whitesville CSD                                | Whitesville Central HS    | 9 – 12     | 86               | 33                   | 0    | 0                  | 0                 | 100     | 0       | \$23,025 |
| Average of Average-Performing Schools in study |                           | 9 – 12     | 947              | 37                   | 4    | 17                 | 16                | 58      | 9       | \$24,138 |
| New York State                                 |                           | 9 – 12     | 868,718          | 49                   | 8    | 19                 | 22                | 49      | 10      | \$20,410 |

Data are from 2010-11 State report cards.

# Background and Overview of Findings

**A**lthough improving graduation rates has been a major focus of educational policy for nearly two decades, the United States has seen little advancement. The average high school graduation rate in New York State was 77% in 2012. The national rate hovers around 70%, but the rate is closer to 50% for those students most at risk of failing to graduate: ethnic minority students, English language learners, special education students, and, especially, those living in poverty and attending schools where the overall socioeconomic composition is low. Although many factors that influence graduation rates (e.g., the socioeconomic status of the student population, economic and racial segregation in housing) are not malleable by those working in schools and districts, studies have demonstrated that educators can help mitigate some of the negative influences on high school completion associated with known risk factors.

## Previous Research

A recent study of national longitudinal data (Palardy, 2013) has confirmed the influence of socioeconomics on high school completion; the socioeconomic status of both individual students and the overall socioeconomic composition of the schools they attend affect graduation rates, with low SES having a strong link to decreased likelihood of high school completion. An earlier longitudinal study (Perreira, Harris, & Lee, 2006) found that students who are native to the U.S. and have the lowest SES have the highest dropout rates. Overall, students in the most economically disadvantaged communities have an 80% less likelihood of receiving a high school diploma (Wodtke, Harding & Elwert, 2011), and many of these groups are from ethnic and linguistic minorities.

Among the strongest contributors to educational achievement is the composite quality of school climate that Hoy, Tarter, and Hoy (2006) call “academic optimism”—a culture of

cognitive focus, belief in collective and individual efficacy, and trust in each others’ shared goals and support. Some researchers have found that academic rigor or “press,” accompanied by academic and social support, contributes to academic engagement and achievement (e.g., Wilcox & Angelis, 2011). Academic press is related to academic goal-setting that includes not only graduation but preparation for life beyond high school, particularly higher education that can lead to more economic opportunities. Samel and colleagues (2011) found that goal-setting, career planning and exposure to work-based programs are critical to improving all students’ success in school. Special education students, in particular, need help from school counselors to actively plan their program with an eye to the future, and in high school these students should play an integral role in developing their academic programs (Goodman, et.al, 2011). For at-risk student populations, communication with families about college planning, jobs, and scholarships can prevent dropping out,

as can making the curriculum relevant to students' real-world experiences (Bridgeland, Dilulio & Morison, 2006). For ESL students, cultural understanding and connecting with families is important to keeping them in school through graduation (e.g., Behnke et al., 2010).

Engagement in school begins in the classroom and is dependent not just on the method of instruction but also — and perhaps more importantly in students' minds — on the relationship with the teacher (Behnke et al., 2010). Dropouts who have been interviewed by researchers often cannot identify a single adult they felt they could talk with about personal matters (Rumberger, 2011; Azzam, 2007), but those who have stayed in school report being more engaged if their teachers are caring while at the same time providing a structured learning environment with high expectations. Such engagement has been linked to increased attendance, higher grades, more credits, and a resultant increase in the likelihood of graduating (Bridgeland, Dilulio & Morison, 2006; Klem & Connell, 2004).

Academic success is clearly one key to successful high

school completion, but it is interrelated with three additional factors: attendance, behavior, and grade retention (Azzam, 2007). These four can each influence the others in either a positive or negative reinforcing cycle. Thus monitoring and addressing student performance in all areas, not just academics, is important to identifying potential risk factors early on (e.g., Suh & Suh, 2007). Issues with attendance — whether resulting from student choice, family or other caregiver circumstances, or through school policies regarding suspension and expulsions — provide one of the earliest warnings of potential trouble ahead (Lee et al., 2011). Another area of school policy affecting this cycle is grade retention; Rumberger (2011) found that students retained in high school, often in 9th grade, have a decreased chance of graduating.

Overall, the research literature points to a combination of high academic expectations combined with social, emotional, and academic support for retaining students in high school through graduation, and this is particularly true for students most at-risk of dropping out.

## Findings

The results of our study corroborate some of the earlier findings discussed above and expand on them. These results suggest that higher performance in high school completion for at-risk groups is related to the following four elements:

1. Prioritizing and ensuring structural supports for educators to collaborate and focus dialogue and action-planning on curriculum and goals targeted to mastery of content and the development of 21st Century skills.
2. Prioritizing and ensuring that potential divides are bridged (e.g. home and school; social/emotional and academic; school, district, and community) through direct outreach to parents and families regarding resources and efforts to meet students' affective and academic needs.
3. Designing evidence-based instruction focused on heightening engagement through flexible programming, differentiation using multiple modalities, and experiential options.
4. Monitoring, sharing, and using social and emotional data (behavior referrals, absences, family change, etc.) in tandem with achievement data to inform the use of interventions in a timely and individualized manner.

Each of these elements is described in more detail in the pages that follow. For study methods, see p. 24.



# 1.

## Aligning Goals and Curriculum

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

We set higher goals locally. – Prattsburgh teacher

In schools with the most successful four-year graduation rate for their most at-risk populations, educators demonstrate a constant, collaborative focus on setting high academic goals and then strengthening and aligning curriculum to support students to meet those goals. Staff in these schools are looking to the future and putting processes in place to help students achieve success not only in high school but throughout their college and career experiences. To prepare students for the world beyond high school, teachers are supported to take initiative, to innovate, and to collaborate with professional colleagues both within and outside the school and district to improve curriculum and instruction.

### Working toward Mastery and Post-Secondary Education

Higher-performing schools contrasted with average-performing schools in the nuances of their goals and expectations. Educators in the higher-performing schools are not satisfied with students meeting minimum requirements; they regard earning a high school diploma as a base-line standard. Students are encouraged not only to pass required state exams but to achieve the mastery level (a score of at least 85%) and to not only graduate from high school in four years but to have plans in place for continuing their educations. Many teachers (e.g., in Elmont, Eastridge and Downsville) stressed that reaching mastery is an important academic goal.

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. – Elmont teacher

Moving beyond mastery of high school content, Eastridge, Whitesville, and Amityville personnel emphasized their aspirational goal for students to attend college or vocational training after high school. "Take that [diploma] and move forward toward your aspirations," the Whitesville principal said. In Amityville, a guidance counselor noted how the staff emphasize a future focus by asking, "July 1: Where are you? What are you doing?"

We believe that there is a higher ed option out there for everybody. . . . It's become a mantra for our department and the school that not only are we preparing you for graduation but for July 1 after graduation. We try to make them think the next step ahead.

– Amityville guidance counselor

We have senior projects and job shadowing – those are helpful in guiding the students for their futures.

– Whitesville teacher



Belief in the students – that is a tremendous focus from our superintendent on down. There has been some evolution and development since we started. It really was to get people to see beyond the limitations of students. We see tremendous growth in that. I believe the administration and teachers believe.

– Eastridge administrator

### Teacher Leadership for Common Core Alignment

In the higher-performing schools, teachers take the lead in curriculum improvement, including integrating Common Core Learning Standards. For example, Brookfield administrators credit a team of three teacher “ambassadors” for the success the school has had in using the Standards to foster strategic improvements in curriculum and classroom instruction. Brookfield’s superintendent applauded 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, 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. . . . The staff has bought in. They’ve been terrific. – Brookfield superintendent

### Vertical and Interdisciplinary Goal Setting and Curricular Alignment

Teachers in higher-performing schools collaborate across grade levels and subject areas to establish goals and develop curriculum. Curriculum alignment focuses on ensuring that instructional content meshes with the goals or standards and that content gaps are filled and redundancies eliminated. Eastridge faculty members, for example, described a system of working with a cross section of colleagues including vertical teams, a variety of subject area specialists, and special education teachers. Brookfield teachers provided multiple examples of inter-disciplinary curriculum collaboration, such as enhancing a science lesson on hydroelectric power by bringing in information about the Great Depression and reading FDR’s speech about the Hoover Dam.

We’re a firm believer that curriculum isn’t written in isolation. We look across disciplinary areas; that’s part of the approach. We’ve been inclusive. – Eastridge administrator

### Using Evidence to Inform Goal Setting and Curriculum Development

More and more, educators are being expected to use student performance data to provide a basis for setting goals and determining curriculum changes to support the goals. In higher-performing schools, faculties have developed organized processes for using an evidence-based approach. An Eastridge administrator explained how the process works:

We have an actual system, a systematic approach. There’s a curriculum program review cycle, where content areas are reviewed every five years. There’s thorough checking the pulse, asking, “What are the strengths?” We look at academic achievement data and make suggestions for adjustments. That’s helped, in fact, driven, for example, Project Lead the Way with science and math. It doesn’t mean we wait for five years. Often it helps the focus.

– Eastridge administrator

### Beyond-the-School Networking

Faculty members in higher-performing schools have developed strong collaborative systems with colleagues in their regional BOCES and/or in state associations or online subject-matter networks. For example, Downsville and Otselic Valley use a continuous improvement process called LINKS to set goals, analyze performance, create new strategies, take action, and evaluate results. Developed in collaboration with the area BOCES, the process links together all aspects of academic planning. The area LINKS teams meet each summer to learn from each other.

Teachers, guidance counselors, et cetera work together to analyze data to make improvement plans.

– Prattsburgh administrator



Success is about changing the attitude of students to strive for excellence, not just passing.

– Amityville administrator

Every teacher gets a copy of the LINKS notebook. . . . We have LINKS meetings the second Wednesday of every month, where the LINKS planning team will meet and discuss the LINKS program, how it's going, what we need to add for the following year, what to do next. The first Tuesday of every month a LINKS report goes out to the entire faculty. We go through our steps, goals, and objectives that we have set as a team . . . and work on strategies.

– Downsville principal

In Brookfield (see above), teachers are not only taking the lead in learning how to implement the Common Core Standards, they are sharing that information with colleagues at home as well as in the broader region. In other schools, for example Eastridge and Whitesville, teachers described how they use on-line resources to gather curriculum ideas from colleagues in their subject areas.

I am always looking online and I belong to a 'listserv' for science teachers. – Whitesville teacher

## On the Continuum to Higher Performing

Differences between average- and higher-performing schools are generally differences of degree, with many of the average-performing schools beginning to adopt practices found in the higher performers. Some of these differences include the following:

### Average Performing

Teacher collaboration is limited to a few colleagues in the same department or grade level and does not routinely extend across disciplinary boundaries or beyond the local community.

Ability to support students to reach mastery is seen as limited by a lack of resources, family or student apathy.

Decision making at both school and district are hierarchical and not necessarily aligned around shared goals.

Setting of goals, analysis of data, and revision of curriculum occur infrequently and do not always involve classroom teachers.

### Higher Performing

Faculty members continuously seek networking opportunities with not only local colleagues from multiple subject areas and grade levels but also with educators in other districts.

Expectations of students reaching the mastery level and able to achieve a college degree are promoted through ambitious, student-centered goals.

Shared leadership is consciously cultivated around aligned goals.

Teachers and other school personnel are constantly engaged in systematic, evidence-informed goal setting, data analysis, and curriculum revision.



We have to be creative sometimes with solutions. The principal is already looking ahead for some specific students in the lower grades and looking for opportunities to help them.

– Whitesville school psychologist

# Otselic Valley High School

## Preparing for College and Career Readiness

The Otselic Valley Central School community will encourage decisions that give all students the opportunity to achieve their highest level of learning in preparation for a challenging tomorrow. – District Mission Statement

Proud of their school’s consistently high graduation rates, Otselic Valley educators now think beyond this accomplishment as an end point. Both teachers and administrators expressed the need to do more, to take their good efforts and “go deeper.” They care about their students, not just while they are in school, but post graduation. The superintendent posed the question, “Can we do things better so that they not only graduate, but are well prepared, . . . able to go from the small pond to the big pond and do well for themselves?”

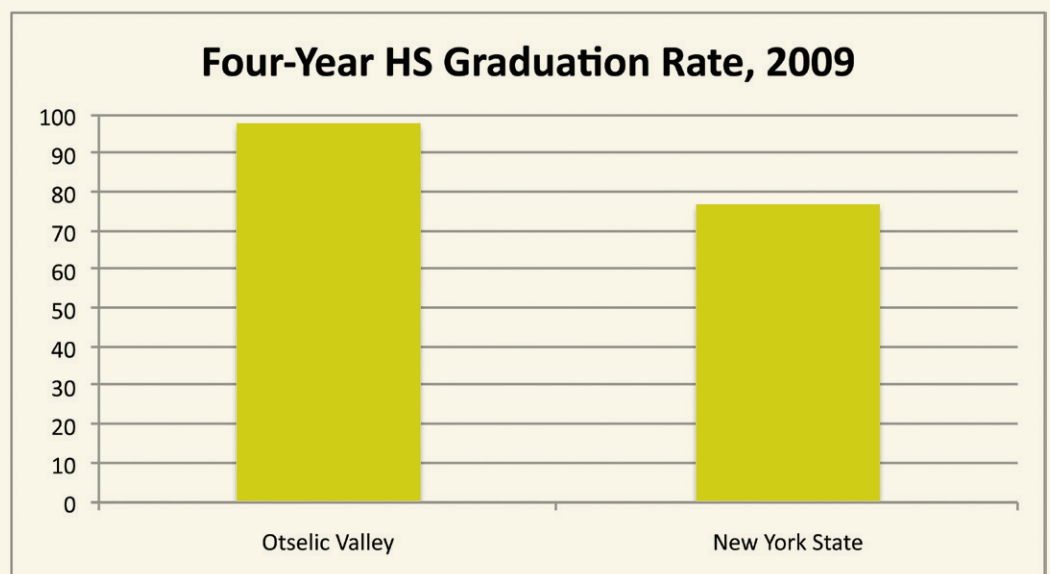
All stakeholders, from teachers to the board of education, are said to be highly involved in developing goals, echoing the superintendent’s oft-quoted statement, “We are all in this together.” Some of this work is done by the multi-constituent LINKS team, which, working with the regional BOCES, plays a leadership role in goal setting, as well as monitoring progress and building capacity. Educational expectations and hopes are shared with parents, in part through the district newsletter, *Echoes from the Valley*.

Goals are aligned with State requirements like the Common Core Standards and data-driven instructional practices. As showcased in the school’s website banner (“Our Purpose: Excellence”), the district strives for excellence, defined by the superintendent as all students being literate and numerate at or above grade level.

A significant initiative to use technology to expand the curricula and provide a wider range of academic options for students has included providing blended learning courses in coordination with other, neighboring school districts. On-line courses, designed to make more electives available for students, include teleconferencing and in-class instruction. Some also provide college credit. A counselor noted the importance of these courses not only in opening a wider world to students but also in providing college-level learning as part of the school’s goal of helping students be college and career ready by graduation. “Taking a college course in high school [tells the students] ‘I can do this. I am capable of doing this.’ They are not so scared. They’ve already tackled it, with a support system.”

Otselic Valley’s purposeful drive for excellence is evident in the efforts of their professional learning community not only to set high goals but also to involve all stakeholders and focus everyone’s attention on long-term student success. The superintendent summarized it this way: “One reason we work so well together is that we do what’s best for students.” (adapted from the Otselic Valley case report, Tangorre & Angelis, 2013: [albany.edu/nykids/casestudies\\_higherperforming\\_hs\\_completion.php](http://albany.edu/nykids/casestudies_higherperforming_hs_completion.php))

Percentage of students graduating in four years, Otselic Valley and New York State, 2009.



# 2.

## Bridging Divides

Our strength is having to pull together as a community. – Otselic Valley teacher

Among the practices setting higher-performing schools apart from more typically performing schools is a concerted effort to bridge the divides that often occur — divides between home and school, between social and academic concerns, between school and community, and even between and among educators within a school or district. In contrast to average-performing schools, where educators sometimes see the gaps between and among different aspects of the school community as natural and inevitable, those schools with higher graduation rates for at-risk students have developed philosophies and practices that pull everyone and everything together to remove barriers that might influence some to drop out.

### Connecting Home and School

Purposeful outreach to parents and families is a constant in the higher-performing schools. Families are viewed as important members of the team helping students to learn. Educators work to communicate effectively and to identify and mitigate challenges in meeting with and/or communicating with families and the larger community.

Find out what the barriers are. Is it a financial issue at home? Are living arrangements a problem? The social workers and counselors work closely with kids and families and teachers to find out what the barrier is. What is the reason? Do you need to be evaluated [for special ed] and never were? Are there vision issues? – Elmont guidance personnel

Over time, as teachers, administrators, and other school personnel reach out to students' families, divides are bridged, and both trust and support grow. Noting that the school has become the main contact for families needing assistance, several Downsview faculty members reported that school personnel help families make arrangements for a wide variety of services, working closely with county and regional support groups, often at distant locations. In Prattsburgh, a “family worker” establishes a relationship with every family when a child enters the school and is available to help the family as the child continues, as well as to help other staff members understand relevant family situations.

Knowing every student and family well is not limited to the small, rural schools. Larger schools like Elmont are organized to make it possible to know every student, including through consistent guidance counselor assignments and having assistant principals remain with a class as it advances through the grades. In part because students enter Elmont as seventh graders, an Elmont school administrator explained, “We have the advantage of getting to know a child’s strengths and weaknesses and working collaboratively . . . to push students forward to be successful.”

### Developing School and Community Connections

The communities encompassing higher-performing schools value education; school and community support each other, in part because school personnel have worked to win that support. Educators at Amityville, for example, told of how the superintendent serves on the town’s pastoral council and how teachers interact with students in community activities. Learning extends beyond the classroom, particularly for students who have internships in



I visit every home. They seem comfortable talking about what we can offer them. I connect them to further services if they need help. I have at my fingers all the different [mostly county] services. I do parenting programs and involve parents in monthly activities. I try to make it fun. I want them to feel a part of the school. – Prattsburgh staff member

the community. Organizations and individuals in the larger neighborhood support school functions and provide the means for enriching experiences.

Community members in higher performing schools were reported to consider the school to be the “pulse” or the “heart” of the community. “School is it,” said more than one Downsville educator, explaining that the school has become the social hub and the gathering place, the source of help and the place to extend help, as well as an important part of the community’s identity.

They say it takes a village to raise a child, and we have the support of the community here.

– Whitesville superintendent

A mutually high regard between school and community is a hallmark of higher-performing schools, with staff members in both large and small settings explaining that they had returned to their home community so that they could “give back” in meaningful ways. Newer arrivals were eager to become part of the positive community culture they found.

### Linking Social and Academic Support for Students

Educators in the higher-performing schools take pride in fostering both the affective and cognitive well-being of all students. Students in these schools were reported to feel safe and supported, and they develop a strong sense of belonging.

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. – Eastridge teacher

Connecting the various aspects of student life — attendance, behavior, development of interests, and nurturing of social skills, as well as academic performance — requires interwoven relationships between educators and students as well as efforts to offer a variety of opportunities. Even in the smallest of the higher-performing schools, the number of clubs and sports offered is quite large in comparison to enrollment, as the Otselic Valley superintendent noted in a district website. A wide array of athletic programs and varied after-school options are seen as supporting the academic programs of the more successful schools. At Elmont, for example, extra-curricular activities are all led by Elmont staff and serve a large range of interests, from peer mediators to honor societies to sports teams and musicals. Elmont’s Model United Nations provides national and international travel opportunities for competitions.

### Collaborating with Colleagues

Teachers, administrators, and other staff members in higher-performing schools consult with each other often and have developed high levels of trust. They reach across the possible divides of position, subject area, grade level, or physical proximity to support colleagues as well as students. They also seek and value assistance from educational systems beyond their own schools or districts, such as BOCES or area colleges.

A notable difference between higher- and average-performing schools occurs in the trust expressed between teachers and administrators. While educators in the typical schools acknowledge obvious divides between faculty and management, those in higher-performing schools view each other as colleagues working toward the same goals and often sharing leadership. At Otselic Valley, for example, a professional climate of trust and mutual respect between teachers and administrators was evident, with leadership distributed. “We have a very supportive administration that encourages us to step out on our own and take risks,” reflected one teacher. Administrators are “open to what we want to try” reported another teacher.

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].

– Elmont building administrator



The support that the administration gives teachers is not the silver bullet, but it allows us the freedom to try new things. Having that comfort that I can try anything (is important). I work in a team, not an isolated group. – Otselic Valley teacher

Close collaboration between academic and support staff also helps to serve students well. In Eastridge and Elmont, for example, administrators, teachers, and counselors cited their collaboration as beneficial. Open communication and discussion were said to be the norm. “Your ideas matter, and what you’re doing makes a difference. It’s all of us working together,” an Eastridge counselor explained.

Teachers see particular value in bridging disciplines and grade levels in addition to working with colleagues who share disciplines or students. Teachers in several higher-performing schools referred to “teaming for success” and provided multiple examples of supporting each other, whether with general curriculum or instruction or in ways to reach particular students having difficulty.

We have a culture of collaboration. Even with APPR [the state’s Annual Professional Performance Review process that ranks teachers], we still help each other; we’re not in competition. – Elmont teacher

## On the Continuum to Higher Performing

As with all the findings, differences between average- and higher-performing schools are generally differences of degree. With regard to bridging divides, some of these differences include the following:

### Average Performing

Some staff members, perhaps including union leadership, tend to resist new educational mandates and see little purpose to them.

Educators work largely independently of one another with little clarity as to how their efforts coalesce to meet students’ social, emotional, and academic needs.

School staff experience difficulty surmounting barriers to partnering with families.

School staff strive to develop mutual respect but are hampered by communication disconnects and problems from the past and/or changing staff.

### Higher Performing

Union leaders and administrators work together to implement state requirements and promote improved graduation rates.

Teachers and administrators share leadership and collaborate continuously around social/emotional and academic supports students need, reaching across possible divides of titles, subject areas, and grade levels.

Educators have developed friendly, systematic approaches to reaching out to families and building trust.

Mutually reinforced pride in student success pervades the school and the community, with educators aware of the need to keep earning that pride.

I love the community. I can’t preach enough [about] how good it was for my development. I really thought that I could make a difference and come back and pass that along to future generations. – Otselic Valley teacher

People really care about each other. – Downsville teacher

# Brookfield Central High School

## Creating and Maintaining Connections

With that relationship with the school and the community, kids don't feel like they're in it alone; they can get help. – Brookfield teacher

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.

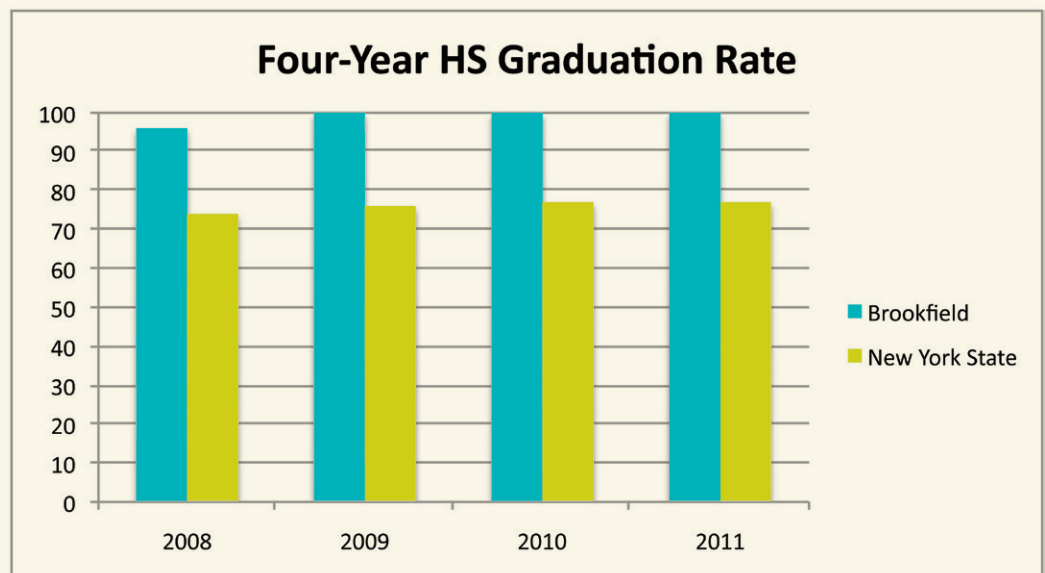
“I particularly enjoy working in this community because it is a rural community and if you can make a difference educationally for one of these kids you have really changed their life,” said the principal. “We have a very supportive professional community,” a colleague emphasized; “it’s very warm. The 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.

“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. A high level of trust has developed between school and community, between home and school, and among educators themselves. “Brookfield has such a strong sense of community. The community very much wants to keep their own school. . . . They value their kids’ education. . . . Parents have a strong sense of wanting their kids to get an education and to get an education in this community,” a teacher emphasized. (adapted from Brookfield case report, Baker, 2013: [albany.edu/nykids/casestudies\\_higherperforming\\_hs\\_completion.php](http://albany.edu/nykids/casestudies_higherperforming_hs_completion.php))

Percentage of students graduating in four years, Brookfield and New York State, 2009.





# 3.

## Crafting Engaging Instruction

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. – Brookfield principal

In my class ideas are flowing all the time. All the students are involved. – Downsville teacher

Central to the study's findings on graduation success is the nature of classroom instruction, particularly the role of student engagement. Contrasts in both the content and the methodology of instruction were apparent between higher-performing schools and those with average performance. Educators in higher-performing schools create instructional experiences focused less on "old-style" imparting of information and more on active student involvement in the learning process. Attention to enhancing student engagement is seen as a top priority and a key to high school completion for the more successful schools in the study.

### Instruction Designed to Promote Higher-Order Thinking

"We're now teaching how to think not what to think," a Prattsburgh teacher explained. Critical thinking, analytical reading and listening, inquiry skills, problem solving, and resource analysis were among the terms educators used to identify the higher-order thinking skills viewed as essential elements of instruction in those schools with the most success in high school completion for at-risk students.

Content revolving around higher-order thinking includes strengthening literacy skills, or, "Everyone is an English teacher," as one Elmont teacher put it. Increased attention to the "why" and "how" is also important. Teachers who were already using Common Core Learning Standards in their classrooms provided multiple examples of how their focus has changed to emphasize higher-order thinking and connecting of concepts.

We don't want students to tell us a right answer so much as we want them to voice their thought processes. – Prattsburgh teacher

In the higher-performing schools, interdisciplinary connections are common both in classroom instruction and in enrichments offered beyond the classroom. For example, a trip to New York City was the culmination of a "once-in-a-lifetime" learning experience for Prattsburgh students. The school's music department, as well as teachers of computer-aided design (CAD), social studies, agriculture, and other departments partnered with BOCES to facilitate distance learning classes from the Manhattan School of Music for the women's chorus and from a National Parks Service Ranger at Ellis Island for history and other classes. CAD students designed and Ag students built a 12-foot bench identical to the original ones in the Great Hall on Ellis Island in the early 1900's. While in New York City, all the vocal music students were adjudicated at the Manhattan School of Music by nationally renowned music professors.

### Evidence-Informed and Technology-Enhanced Instruction

Instructional content in the higher-performing schools is tailored to specific student needs based on detailed analysis of student performance data. For example, a Data-Driven Instruction (DDI) Team and School-Based Inquiry (SBI) Team help Downsville teachers to interpret

What do we do different at Brookfield? We teach our kids to think. Always remember that. – Brookfield retired teacher (quoted by multiple Brookfield educators)



Whenever I ask them something, I want the why. – Prattsburgh teacher

data and develop plans for lessons. “When they bring their Excel sheets to you, . . . lots of times teachers have [already identified] things to focus in on. Lots of times before we ask the questions, teachers have the answers,” a Downsville DDI Team member noted. A member of the SBI Team said, “We touch base, [asking] ‘Did you change that? Did it work for you?’” Teachers often give the principal a copy of the spreadsheet and a copy of the test to document their evidence-informed instructional efforts.

An emphasis on varied course content is another hallmark of higher-performing schools. Whitesville is among the schools offering students increased options in course subject matter through distance learning and online courses, some with local colleges. Prattsburgh students take courses offered in partnership with area colleges and/or other schools; the Accelerated College Education (ACE) program allows students to have dual enrollment in high school and college and earn credits in both.

Infusing interactive technology into day-to-day instruction is also notable in higher-performing schools. While technology has a significant presence in all New York State schools, in more typically performing schools, students often lack opportunities to engage or interact with the technology in the classroom themselves. Prattsburgh and Brookfield are among districts using interactive display boards, connected to the Internet, on which students and teachers consistently present material and connect ideas via note taking on the white board. Otselic Valley is one of three high schools in the State selected to use Apple iPads as part of their instructional repertoire, giving every high school student and teacher an iPad and an email account.

When you walk into a study hall now, what’s typical is to see their iPads are open and they are working – collaborating . . . It’s a field of dreams. You build it. . . You have to see it to believe it.” – Otselic Valley principal

### Strategies for Active and Broad Participation

Teachers in higher-performing schools use multiple pedagogical methods to involve students fully in their own learning. In contrast with average-performing schools, where educators sometimes referred to teachers using static presentations or lectures, educators in higher-performing schools emphasize student voice, interaction, and ownership of learning. Teachers in higher-performing schools described themselves as facilitators or coordinators of learning rather than providers of information and were careful to distinguish their teaching styles from the traditional stereotypes of teachers sitting behind desks or putting notes on a chalkboard to be copied.

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

Give the students a voice. Don’t be a Charlie Brown teacher. – Prattsburgh teacher

Differentiated instruction was reported to be the norm in higher-performing schools. For example, an Elmont teacher, who explained that “it’s not just about knowing the curriculum, but knowing students and how to reach them,” said that he and many of his colleagues use “learning style surveys and then plan activities around them, incorporating visual and kinesthetic” activities.

Co-teaching and Inclusion of special education students in mainstream classes, including Regents courses, are common practices in higher-performing schools. Special education and subject area teachers work collaboratively to differentiate instruction as needed. As one Amityville teacher said, “Everyone’s brain doesn’t work the same way.”

In addition to tailoring instruction to a variety of learning styles and student needs, teachers in higher-performing schools stressed the importance of keeping students



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. – Elmont teacher

It’s crazy how much technology I’m using in the classroom today. . . . We were working with chalkboards until we got these boards four or five years ago. What a difference! – Prattsburgh teacher

constantly engaged by varying the activities, noting that it would not be uncommon to have as many as five different types of activity in a class period. Facilitating variety in learning experience by changing participation from whole group to individual to small group, teachers reported frequent use of cooperative learning groups, paired tasks, and individual hands-on work.

### Experiential Opportunities

Learning in the higher-performing schools goes beyond the classroom, extending to work experience, career shadowing, and job coaching opportunities. Faculty in Amityville, for example, described the use of internships as one among a variety of pathways. “About half of our kids are doing some kind of internship coupled with work. Sometimes it’s during the day, sometimes [later] in the afternoon,” explained a guidance counselor. Brookfield students 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. – Brookfield principal

## On the Continuum to Higher Performing

As with all the findings, differences between average- and higher-performing schools are generally differences of degree. Some of the differences between average- and higher-performing schools related to engaging instruction include:

### Average Performing

Instruction is traditional, typically teacher lecture dominant, and not crafted around students’ needs, interests, and 21st Century learning goals.

While faculty members exhibit a high level of caring for students at risk, less emphasis is given to tailoring high quality, engaging instruction through shared efforts among classroom teachers and support staff.

Most learning is expected to take place in traditional classroom settings.

Academic performance data are available, but educators have not developed consistent, school-wide strategies for using the data to inform instruction.

### Higher Performing

Instruction is designed to be relevant to students’ lives, focused on developing higher-order, critical thinking and inquiry skills, and engaging through the use of technologies and differentiation.

The emphasis is on high-quality teaching for students at risk of dropping out; this is a shared effort among classroom teachers and support staff.

Multiple learning pathways have been established, providing alternatives beyond the traditional classroom experience.

Careful analysis of data partners with personalized knowledge of students to guide instruction, with teachers making constant adjustments to meet student needs based on data.



[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 time 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. – Brookfield teacher

# Eastridge High School

## Challenging and Engaging Students

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

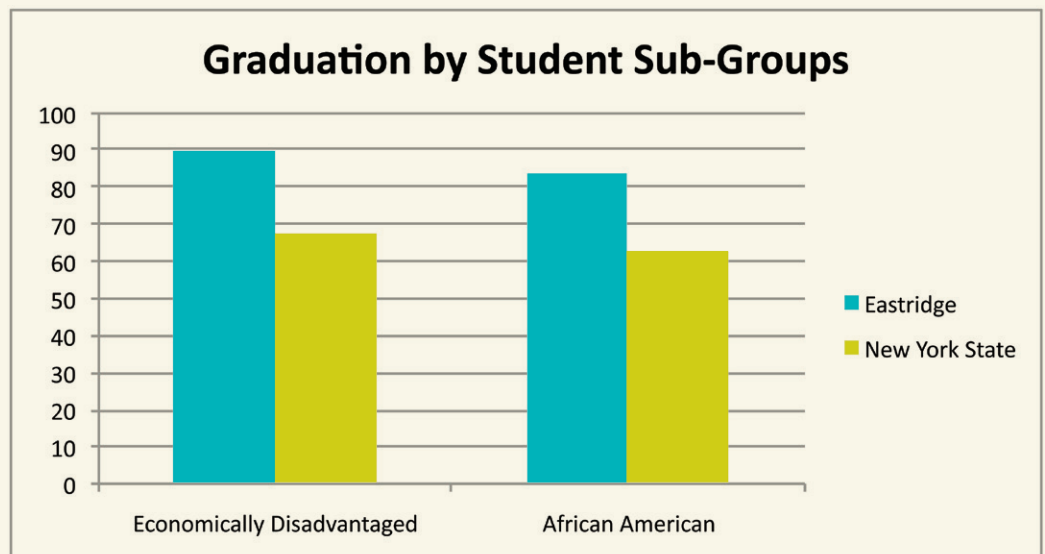
The consensus at Eastridge High School is that effective instruction involves using engaging and student-centered activities, building student-teacher relationships, and challenging students. A district administrator defined quality teaching as “Students fully engaged in learning at the highest level of Bloom’s Taxonomy and being able to apply [what they have learned].”

Teacher collaboration and professional development contribute to a shared vision of high student expectations and achievement. Professional learning communities (PLCs), a joint initiative of the teacher’s union and district, are organized by grade and department and provide time for professional conversations, often centering on student engagement and instructional strategies. With no specific instructional pedagogies mandated by the district, teachers said that they have a great deal of opportunity for professional development. “It’s huge here,” one teacher explained. According to a district administrator, the district goal is to offer only meaningful professional development courses that are directly related to instruction.

The more rigorous programs are open to all students with no preliminary entrance requirements. “The goal of this district is to get every kid to challenge himself in some way,” one faculty member said. The International Baccalaureate (IB) Program has grown, even as the school maintains Advanced Placement (AP) enrollment. The board of education demonstrates its commitment to these rigorous programs by paying all IB and AP fees for all students. 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.

“We have an outstanding group of teachers in classrooms and on the front lines with the students,” Eastridge’s principal said. Teachers emphasized the importance of building strong relationships with students in their classrooms. As one teacher explained, working to engage students in strong positive relationships “plays a major role in our students’ success.” (adapted from the Eastridge case report, Nickson, 2013: [albany.edu/nykids/casestudies\\_higherperforming\\_hs\\_completion.php](http://albany.edu/nykids/casestudies_higherperforming_hs_completion.php))

Percentage of economically disadvantaged and African-American students graduating in four years, Eastridge and New York State, 2011.



# 4.

## Driving a Whole-Child Intervention Loop

An amazing thing happened [as] teachers saw the value of evidence-informed instruction.

– Downsville principal

We believe we need to early detect the issues and needs of our kids. – Whitesville superintendent

Higher-performing schools monitor, share, and use student social/emotional data in conjunction with achievement data to inform the use of timely, targeted interventions in a whole-child intervention loop. The differences between the average- and higher-performing schools with regard to monitoring and data use are nuanced. While all schools in this study are using some kind of student management software that provides information about behavior referrals, attendance, and academics, average-performing schools are not necessarily using these data to inform classroom instruction or interventions outside the classroom in a timely and consistent manner, if at all, and they are less likely to be sharing data across content areas.

### Organized and Collaborative Data Monitoring and Analysis

Higher-performing schools contrast with average-performing schools in sometimes subtle ways. For example, in higher-performing schools, guidance departments provide ongoing tracking and reporting of grades, state testing, and college entrance requirements as well as other data, often available to be accessed online by teachers, students, and families. Teachers in average-performing schools were somewhat less likely to describe being engaged in organized, collaborative accessing and analysis of data. A school administrator explained the monitoring and analysis at Eastridge High School:

The spreadsheet we use is a living document on every student junior to senior year: how many credits they need, the exams they still need, PSAT and SAT scores. That's definitely the lifeline. We have weekly meetings every Wednesday with ed services and the assistant principal who's the head of the alternative program. We talk about students we're worried about. We compare notes, test scores, [and updates]. – Eastridge school administrator

Educators in several schools emphasized the personalization of their monitoring efforts and noted that attendance and/or behavioral patterns were important indicators of students needing extra attention. At Brookfield, for example, educators said that they looked at individual students' interest surveys, attendance/tardiness records, and discipline reports but also based data analysis on person-to-person observation and conversation. Brookfield's principal reported that the school nurse alerts her when a student is beginning to establish a pattern of poor attendance; the principal then contacts the student, and usually the parents, to seek better understanding of the underlying situation.

The emphasis on monitoring and understanding the “whole child” extends to student participation in extracurricular activities. Eligibility for participation in sports and clubs is often tied to academic success, attendance, and low numbers of behavioral referrals.



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.

– Brookfield administrator

We have Wednesday faculty meetings that focus on which individual students need help and how that help can be provided. That means that on Thursday the student is talked with and put back on track. We are always looking out for those signs, flags that a kid is heading in the wrong direction.

– Downsville teacher

At Prattsburgh, for example, coaches and extracurricular advisors “check to make sure kids are caught up on their work. It’s a huge incentive,” staff members commented.

Higher-performing schools use baseline, quarterly, midterm, and summative department exams to inform instructional needs. Analyzing test data has become the norm. Elmont is one of those with departmental quarterly exams. After the exams are scored, an Elmont teacher reported, faculty discuss “the highs and the lows” and “what happened in our class versus what the other teachers did” so that “we learn best practices from each other and build on that.”

We looked at individual as well as group [performance] and analyzed test questions. We looked for patterns, [noting, for example, that] many students missed this question and asking, “Is the problem with the question itself or is it the skill?” We came together with the teacher [to identify] the next step. Is it to reteach? Cycle back? Provide AIS?

– Downsville teacher



Progress reports or report cards are distributed frequently, at least every five weeks, in higher-performing schools. Prattsburgh uses a six-week marking period, with progress reports every three weeks. At Elmont, formal progress reports and report cards are compiled eight times per year, four as report cards and four as progress reports.

Professional Learning Communities, sometimes organized by departments, provide focused time for analyzing student performance data in higher-performing schools. Otselic Valley, for example, has a formal process that begins with the district-level LINKS team and then involves professional communities of teachers meeting in “pods” or data teams. Through this process, “the synergistic effect starts to grow,” the superintendent reported.

### Timely and Targeted Interventions

The differences between the average- and higher-performing schools with regard to interventions, adjustments, and recognitions are few, and these are not extreme contrasts. For example, while average-performing schools offer Academic Intervention Services (AIS) in accordance with state mandates, higher-performing schools provide daily AIS or learning labs focused on engaging students in developing strategies and thinking skills specific to each subject area. Whitesville’s schedule has a one-hour, mid-day block for AIS and other activities. Faculty at Amityville and Downsville were among those explaining how AIS has changed.

AIS is now a structured class, with skills to be mastered, rather than just help with homework. I used to have one or two sections of AIS every other day, with one or two kids. Assignment was based on test scores. This year I have three 9th grade AIS classes every day [with six to eight students in each]. . . . We’ve called it English lab. It’s skills based. We do word play. We read essays about writing and try to emulate the skills one at a time. The goal is to teach more basics than 9th-grade English but to keep it interesting. We do grammar for a period. They love it. – Downsville teacher

After-school content instruction several times a week, often with Special Education support, is typical in higher-performing schools. Teachers in these schools were described as going “above and beyond” or “overboard” or “the extra mile” in providing instruction beyond the classroom. Teachers adapt academic scaffolding and their own schedules to the differing needs of students. They are in the building working with students long before the buses arrive and long after buses have left, said administrators in many of the higher-performing schools.

While not officially interventions, a variety of electives as well as opportunities to do work study or credit-bearing internships that offer alternative pathways to graduation are available to students in higher-performing schools. Eastridge offers programs designed for

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.

– Eastridge superintendent

Lately I’m looking at data constantly. Parents can do that also.

– Prattsburgh teacher

high-achieving, under-achieving, and at-risk students, including: Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) courses; Project Lead the Way, a rigorous pre-engineering program to challenge students; Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) to inspire and support students who have the potential to go college; The Ninth Grade Academy, which provides intervention for all high school freshmen to ensure their success during that foundational year; Alternative Education for 9th and 10th graders who are under performing or have behavior difficulties; and STAY [in school] for seniors in jeopardy of not graduating.

A team approach is used for intervention with at-risk students in the higher performers. School-level teams are not limited to Instructional Support Teams for students with Individualized Education Plans. Depending on the size of the school, the teams include representatives from teacher and school service groups or, in some cases, the entire faculty. Prattsburgh and Downsville provide examples of meetings focusing on individual students school-wide, and Eastridge faculty told of “Senior Jeopardy” meetings to develop plans for helping at-risk twelfth graders.

We do meet every Wednesday morning to talk about any student where we have concerns — what’s being done for this kid, do we recognize the issue? Somebody steps up and helps to formulate [strategies] to make this successful. It’s not a written plan for every kid. We do have educational contracts for kids that lay out progressive steps, maybe discipline or academics, [indicating] ‘This is where you need to be by when.’ – Prattsburgh superintendent

## On the Continuum to Higher Performing

Differences between average and higher performers in terms of attending to the whole child are nuanced and include the following:

### Average Performing

After, before, and during-school instruction is offered, but less than twice a week, with no special education support or alignment to classroom learning objectives.

While a variety of assessment data are collected, report cards or other academic progress reports are issued on a quarterly basis.

Attendance records are available, but analysis and intervention plans are not in place or are not implemented consistently or immediately.

School personnel are aware of the increasing need for social services and recognize the difficulty for families to access them but do not play a key role in helping families access and sustain participation.

### Higher Performing

After, before, or during-school instruction is offered, often with special education support and close linking to classroom learning objectives.

Baseline, quarterly, midterm and summative department exams provide data for reports on students’ academic progress: These reports are distributed every few weeks and used to make decisions about interventions in a timely manner.

Systems are in place to closely track student attendance online and intervene early, including going to the home and contacting family.

Even if the school cannot provide some of the social services students need, school-level teams proactively work with families to help them locate the necessary services.



When I walk into this building what I see is a teacher could be eating lunch and tutoring. At 7 in the morning and late in the day teachers are here. It’s really being available to students who need the extra work and help.

– Elmont special education director

# Amityville Memorial High School

## Supporting Students through a Continuum of Service

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

– district administrator

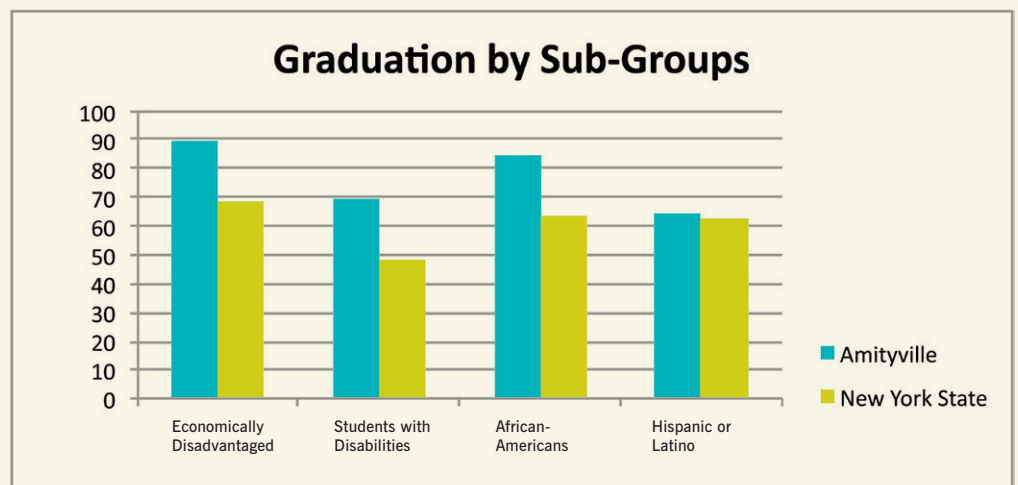
The Amityville school community provides many levels of supports for students, adjusting intervention to meet student needs. Collecting and analyzing data on course completion, assessments, and daily attendance provide a roadmap with which teachers and administrators guide student progress. Structures within the high school, such as the attendance team, the guidance team, and department-based teams, as well as individual teachers, utilize these data to inform their decision making. Interventions include extra lab classes for academic help, formal programs for English Language Learners and students with disabilities, and a school-wide effort to individualize and personalize assistance for students.

Academic support through AIS (Academic Intervention Services) is scheduled for students as “lab” classes. The schedule for AIS students “is lab heavy. It is almost automatic [to schedule] lab classes for weaker students in the five Regents courses like Global Studies,” said a guidance counselor. For example, weaker students who take Global Studies “have a Global Studies course and a lab attached to it every other day. The lab class is taught by a social studies teacher, but not necessarily their own social studies teacher,” she explained. To meet the needs of English Language Learners at the high school, the ESL teacher works with mainstream core content area teachers in a variety of ways including pushing in and co-teaching using an approach that emphasizes language acquisition as well as content learning. For students identified as disabled, Amityville provides a full continuum of supports ranging from out-of-district placement to a life skills class to consultant teacher services. Co-teaching is one of the options and is a model used in both Regents and non-Regents classes in the high school.

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

Whether with flexible scheduling and non-traditional programs or through classroom practices that differentiate instruction and employ a variety of assessment options, teachers and administrators let students know that “there are multiple pathways” to a diploma, said an Amityville guidance counselor. (adapted from the Amityville case report,” Collen & Angelis, 2013: [albany.edu/nykids/casestudies\\_higherperforming\\_hs\\_completion.php](http://albany.edu/nykids/casestudies_higherperforming_hs_completion.php))

Percentage of students in four at-risk subgroups graduating in four years, Amityville and New York State, 2010.





# Conclusion

We think all students will be successful. No excuses. – Prattsburgh administrator

**T**his study evolves from the socio-ecological perspective that individual student performance is best understood within the framework of the interdependent, nested levels of the social system within which they learn, specifically the micro-level of the classroom, the exo-level of the school and district, and the macro-level of the community and broader society (Bronfenbrenner, 1993; Wardle, 1996; Wilcox, 2013). The relationships between students and teachers, teachers and administrators, schools and families, schools and communities all play an integral, interwoven role.

The social systems within and around those schools achieving the highest levels of school completion for all sub-groups are infused with a collaborative, “can-do” belief identified by Hoy, Tarter, and Hoy (2006) as “academic optimism”—an intertwined belief in group and individual effectiveness, a focus on cognitive development, and a deep trust in each others’ shared goals and support—extending throughout the micro, exo, and macro levels.

The findings from this study revolve around expectations and practices that engage all facets of the school community in contributing to and, in essence, “owning” student success. In the higher-performing schools, the interwoven relationships and culture of caring are strengthened by focused collaboration, purposeful academic planning, organizational support and adaptability, strategic use of data, flexibility in programming, and personalization of support based on in-depth knowledge of students.

At the micro level, classroom teachers in the higher-performing high schools engage students in active learning using a variety of differentiated instructional methods, including interactive technology. Lessons are built on content mastery goals and skill development preparing students for 21st century college and career readiness. Formal and informal academic intervention, provided by teachers skilled in the subject area, focuses on helping students develop content-based cognitive strategies and study skills. Teachers not only care about the students as individuals but also use academic and affective data coupled with personal observation and collaborative discussion to adapt learning and support to the needs of each student.

Higher-performing schools have developed an exo level of both ongoing and immediate support for students and faculty, including strategic planning and goal-setting, meaningful professional development, structured curriculum revision, varied pathways for student success, collection and analysis of affective and academic data, and collaborative focus on helping students both collectively and individually. Educators in more successful schools have developed high levels of trust and interaction that bridge the divides that sometimes occur between teachers and administrators, among teachers of differing disciplines or grade levels, and between academic and social/affective aspects of students’ lives. These schools have established cultures in which “everyone goes above and beyond” and “no student falls through the cracks.”

The macro level of the community and broader society also plays a role in the success of the higher-performing schools. Educators reach out to the community—engaging parents in the educational process, helping families to access school and community resources, communicating with area organizations (including faith-based groups) on common goals, sharing pride in student success—and communities respond with heightened support. Higher-performing schools are likely to embrace state and federal mandates such as the Common Core Learning Standards and to lead the way in improving local instruction through their use. Educators in higher-performing schools are more likely than their counterparts to engage in regional planning and sharing of creative ideas and resources.

# Research Methods

This qualitative study, one in a series of six best practices studies, sought to investigate factors related to higher graduation rates among populations generally at risk of failing to graduate — ethnic and linguistic minorities, low-income, and special education students. Questions focused on the high school completion rate for at-risk students in five key areas. How are academic goals and curriculum developed, revised, and utilized to support graduation? What practices related to staff selection, leadership, and capacity building support higher graduation rates? What instructional programs and practices support graduation? How are data gathered, analyzed, and used to support high school completion? What interventions, recognitions, and adjustments are used to support high school completion?

Of the 13 schools in the study, eight were identified as “higher performing” based on consistently higher than predicted graduation rates among at least two groups of students generally considered as at risk of failing to complete high school; five other schools consistently achieved average graduation rates among the same groups. Schools were selected based on the four-year graduation rates for the cohorts of 2004 (expected to graduate in 2008), 2005 (to graduate in 2009), and 2006 (to graduate in 2010), as reported on their state report cards. Because students in low socioeconomic composition schools graduate at lower rates, the sample favored such schools, using free and reduced-price lunch

rates as the measure of school poverty. In 2011, the mean free and reduced-price lunch rate for the higher performers was 44%; for the average performers, 36.8%; and the state average was 49%. 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.

Data collected include interviews and documentary evidence. Teachers and administrators were interviewed during two-day site visits by two-person research teams for 40 minutes to an hour each. Interviewees typically included two to five administrators and five to ten teachers totaling 144 individuals interviewed across all schools. Documentary evidence collected includes school and district plans, curriculum maps, and pacing guides; professional development information/materials; teaching evaluation information/forms; staff selection materials; unit and lesson plans; school schedules; district, school, and classroom assessments; and AIS and RTI-related documents (62 total). Interview data were coded inductively using a constant-comparison method utilizing qualitative software. Documentary evidence was used in triangulating findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Individual research teams crafted case studies for each school, and cross-case analyses of all higher-performing and average-performing schools were conducted to identify promising practices in supporting high school completion of at-risk students as discussed in this report (Yin, 2005).

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**Brookfield Central HS**, Brookfield CSD  
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**Eastridge HS**, East Irondequoit CSD

**Elmont Memorial JSHS**, Sewanhaka Central HSD  
**Otselic Valley JSHS**, Georgetown-South Otselic CSD  
**Prattsburgh Central HS**, Prattsburgh CSD  
**Whitesville HS**, Whitesville CSD

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—KW, LB, JA

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