

Best Practices Case Study: *Supporting High School Completion*

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Otselic Valley Junior-Senior High School Georgetown-South Otselic Central School District

*Every kid counts is more than a slogan.
I don't think it's the paperwork that makes us unique.*
- principal

School Context

A visit to Otselic Valley Junior-Senior High School involves driving a scenic country road that curves one way then the other, many miles from any city, major grocery store, or mall of any kind. The school is nestled in a valley about an hour south of Syracuse and east of New York State's Finger Lakes, where the hillsides are dotted by farms and fields. As one teacher explained, the valley has been bypassed by major roads and railroads, and so it remains relatively isolated from the outside world.

Over time, three smaller districts have merged to form the Georgetown-South Otselic Central School District, which in 2010-11 served 389 students in grades K-12. Currently the district consists of two school buildings: a Kindergarten through Grade 4 Elementary School in Georgetown, ten "country miles" away from the Junior-Senior High School, which serves Grades 5-12. At the time of this site visit, plans were underway to move the elementary students to the other campus the following September. Teachers at both levels reported that they look forward to the move as an opportunity to work together more closely to meet the needs of students.

Knowing each student well both in and out of school is a hallmark of the high school and district. Many staff members are life-long residents or have returned to this community. As one teacher explained, "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." The school is said to be the heart of the community and plays a vital role in the lives of students and their families. Going to high school involves more than just an academic or vocational program. Sports and afterschool clubs are important. Future Farmers of America, for example, is a thriving, essential club for many students.

Because of its small size, relatively high levels of poverty (58% of students in the district are

eligible for free or reduced-price lunch), and remoteness, one challenge for educators is to help connect students to the outside world while preserving the values of this rural community. “We have to bring the outside to them . . . so they have more experience” and are prepared for life beyond high school or outside the valley, explained a counselor. This includes finding ways to introduce the diversity that exists in the larger world but is mostly lacking in the school.

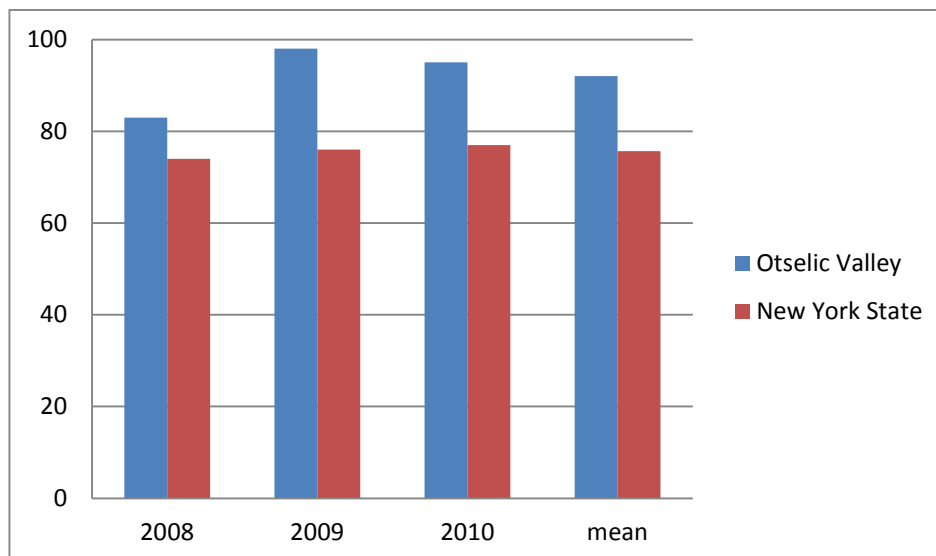
Student Demographics 2010-11: Otselic Valley Jr.-Sr. High School, Georgetown-S. Otselic Central SDⁱ

	Otselic Valley Jr.-Sr. High School	Georgetown-South Otselic Central SD	New York State
Grades Served: Total Enrollment	7-12: 204	K-12: 389	K-12: 2,689,969
Eligible for Free/Reduced-Price Lunch	53%	58%	49%
Limited English Proficient	0%	0%	8%
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution			
African-American	0%	1%	19%
Hispanic/Latino	0%	0%	22%
White	99%	99%	49%
Other	0%	1%	9%

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

Otselic Valley has consistently achieved a higher than average graduation rate. The larger study of which this case is one part was conducted to investigate factors that promote successful high school completion among critical needs groups. Schools in the sample were selected based on their four-year graduation rates for the cohorts of students entering high school as ninth-graders in 2004 (expected to graduate in 2008), 2005 (to graduate in 2009), and 2006 (to graduate in 2010). Across those years, the mean graduation rate in Otselic Valley was 92%, averaging 16% above the state average for the same years.

Percentage of Students Graduating in Four Years – Otselic Valley and New York State



Data from New York State Report Cards

As stated by a teacher, the current goal is that not only will all students “walk across the stage but that they have a plan for beyond high school.” This statement echoes the district mission statement:

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.

Educators' efforts are helped in this respect by a community ethos of work. Another teacher described the students and community this way: "Students have a strong work ethic; they are surrounded by people who are working hard. Poor, but working hard. Most of our kids have jobs when they graduate. They know what it's about – having to work." The principal, who has been in his position for only a year and a half, reflected on the values he has found in the community since coming here, stating, "One of the things . . . here is the foundation that it is important for kids to complete school. . . . Family and spirit and togetherness . . . have been here for generations."

Best Practice Highlights

The practices listed below capture the essence of what educators in the Junior-Senior High School report as impacting their graduation rate. These highlights reflect what the teachers and administrators who were interviewed indicated as having a significant impact on student performance.

- A school culture that values knowing each student both in school and in the community outside of school.
- A highly collaborative school community (K-12) that works in "pods" to enact the concept of a professional learning community and embedded professional development.
- Consistently high expectations for all students to perform at or above grade level, with teachers using differentiated instructional strategies in a systematic and rigorous, but caring style.
- Technology innovations that have been infused throughout the curriculum and into instruction to provide a wider range of learning opportunities for high school students in this rural setting.

A Caring Culture

Teachers and administrators were universally described by their colleagues as committed to their students' success. As a special educator put it, "I think that middle school and high school staff as a whole go above and beyond. They give up a lot of their own time; they stay to meet with kids and they don't get paid for it. They want students to succeed."

Collaboration and Professional Learning

Teachers also feel supported, both by colleagues and administrators. They are organized into pods of small data groups organized by curriculum area and working across all grade levels, K-12. The pods also serve as professional learning communities, as data analysis leads to goal setting and modifications to curriculum and instruction.

High Expectations

Not satisfied with simply having a high graduation rate, the district is shifting emphasis to better preparation for college or career, as well as better mastery of skills before students reach high school.

Technology

Technology is one of the tools being used to not only better connect students to the outside world but to also teach them the ways of learning and working together they are likely to encounter in college and the workplace.

A Closer Look

These practices are evident throughout the five dimensions that frame the study of which this case is one part. The sections below expand on each of these practices within the context of the study's framework.

Curriculum and Academic Goals

One Purpose: Excellence. – banner on the district website

New York State learning standards speak to the importance of high school graduation, and, as indicated above, graduation rates at Otselic Valley have been consistently high. However, Otselic Valley educators are now thinking 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. Part of this concern comes from hearing incidentally about former students who attended college only one or a few semesters or dropped out of a technical program. This concern has led to talk about what the school could have done to better prepare them. 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. Some of this work is done by the multi-constituent LINKSⁱⁱ 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*. Its articles clearly reflect the culture of the school community and provide detailed information about, for example, the district's mission, board of education goals, State regulations, and new programs and their impact on teaching and learning. Additionally the superintendent encourages parents and community members to contact him by email or use Twitter or the blog on the district webpage.

The superintendent, high school principal and high school staff proudly shared their multi-year goals for students, noting approval and support from the board of education. Goals are aligned with State requirements like the Common Core Standards and data driven instructional practices. As stated in its banner, the district strives for excellence, defined by the superintendent as all students being literate and numerate at or above grade level. In explaining the goal-setting process, the superintendent said, “I tell teachers, ‘We are all in this together.’”

At the high school there has been a significant initiative to use technology to expand the curricula and provide a wider range of academic options for students. These efforts include providing blended learning courses in coordination with other, neighboring school districts. These 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 webinar courses not only in opening a wider world to students but also in providing college-level courses 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." This effort is seen as successful so far, and the high school staff is hoping to expand such options in the future.

Educators characterized the educational community as caring, collaborative, and creative. Their approach to curriculum and instructional goals is designed in a way that prioritizes the unique needs of their students. Their purposeful drive for excellence is evident in these efforts. The goals of their professional learning community are focused, and all stakeholders are involved in the goal-setting process: the board of education, the superintendent, the principal, and the teachers. The superintendent summarized it this way: "One reason we work so well together is that we do what's best for students."

Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building

I have so much support. If I'm working with a student and the kid needs help, I walk upstairs. For [one class] . . . I have 2-3 aides with me . . . We have enough staff to make sure each kid has opportunities to have all the questions answered. It always has been this way. - teacher

As expressed by the superintendent in the district newsletter, the key to continued growth is professional development. And the key to professional development, according to teachers, is communication and collaboration among all staff members. Not only is collaboration a high priority for them, but they credit it for their success. For the approximately 40 teachers in grades K-12, the professional development team created a system of "pods" or small data groups organized by curriculum area and working across grade levels. These teams play an instrumental role in helping meet school and district goals. The principal characterized the pod teams as professional learning communities, and teachers described their pods as a critical component of their professional development. These teams focus on student data and student learning outcomes as part of a continuous and embedded process. The structure is both formal and informal. Formally, Superintendent's Conference Days at the beginning and throughout the school year bring teachers together for extended periods of time to work on curricular or instructional goals. In addition, teachers meet in their pods at least twice a week for ongoing professional development. Informally teachers have created a support system for each other. One teacher noted, "We are our own learning community. . . . No one is alone."

Nor is the Otselic Valley school community alone. Several initiatives involve collaboration with other schools and districts. For example, a group of high school teachers is participating in a cognitive learning study with a professor at the nearby state college, who provides training and expertise. They are working in coordination with teachers from three nearby districts on cognitive training and how it applies to student learning as part of a regional professional development program. In addition, teachers reported attending a variety of professional learning opportunities offered by their regional BOCES.

New teachers benefit both from formal mentoring and an informal culture of mentoring. One recently hired teacher reported, "All the success I've had I can attribute to collaboration."

Everybody is so supportive of everybody else. I'll get an email from a math teacher, who says, 'I found this for social studies while I was looking for something on the internet.' Everybody is always looking for ways to improve themselves. . . . Everybody is looking out for each other." Another new teacher described the school climate as "very open, very welcoming, very supportive (of teachers)." Whether provided formally or informally, the support from other teachers or administrators is felt and appreciated.

Both administrators and teachers are aware that not every candidate for a position in Otselic Valley will be a good "fit." Teachers are selected to participate on interview teams, helping to identify candidates who possess a great deal of skill, flexibility, and a willingness to work collaboratively. The interview team's recommendations go the superintendent for presentation to the board of education.

The camaraderie among the teaching staff was evident and said to serve as the constant through several years of administrative changes. As one teacher described the past several years, "We had a high turnover in administration for years. They come and are here for a few years and then are gone, and we've withstood that because of the camaraderie that develops with the faculty. No matter what the administration did, that [camaraderie] didn't change and kind of insulated us."

Currently, however, a professional climate of trust and mutual respect between teachers and administrators is 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. "It's innovative . . . visionary!" And a third summarized it this way: "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." For his part, the principal described the people in the high school as professionals who, when he suggests a new practice, respond, "There's an idea! When can we start?"

It is clear that the superintendent and the high school principal are aligned philosophically. They are supportive of each other and work together to meet the needs of staff and students. Only in his second year in this district, the high school principal is perceived as a leader and a disciplinarian who cares about students, "tough enough to demand a great deal from everyone, and . . . tender enough to encourage the heart"ⁱⁱⁱ. He brings his rich experiences from much larger school systems and clearly appreciates the possibilities offered by this smaller setting.

Overall, their high graduation rate is not seen as just a statistical accountability measure on the School Report Card. Rather, it is about the lives of students before and after graduation.

Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements

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

The instructional programs and practices developed at Otselic Valley Junior-Senior High School are the result of ongoing input and review by classroom teachers, other staff, and administrators. Teachers report being given wide latitude within the curriculum guidelines to meet students' learning needs. They have the freedom to be innovative with the curriculum and to take risks to create a learning atmosphere that is individualized and creative.

As a result of small class sizes (c. 22 in the core subjects of grade 10 in 2010-11) and students' wide range of abilities, teachers consistently reported using differentiated instructional practices. At the high school, special education and subject area teachers work collaboratively, since all the students who have been identified as needing a 504 plan or an IEP are in Regents-level^{IV} classes. In some classes, paraprofessionals also work closely with teachers to support students.

Administrators are highly engaged with the staff and the process of teaching and learning for students. The superintendent spoke about the "need to focus on great teaching and high expectations." The high school principal discussed making changes to the schedule that have positively impacted student learning. The revised schedule created hour-long periods in a 6-period day on a 3-day cycle. He referenced research showing that this was the most efficient regarding teacher:student contact hours. This change increased time in class and reduced time in the hallways.

Another new initiative reflects the school's approach to instruction that prepares students to graduate and succeed beyond high school. Otselic Valley High School is one of three high schools in the State selected to use Apple iPads as part of their instructional repertoire. Every high school student and teacher has an iPad and an email account. Much time initially has been spent on training both students and staff, with technical support for staff provided both by a technology coordinator (through BOCES) and an assigned Apple consultant. Although the iPads are transformative, "We have to keep making sure [their use] is grounded in solid pedagogy," cautioned one teacher.

The iPad project demonstrates the district's embraces of an opportunity to be innovative and seek creative ways to better access the outside world. The principal proudly described the impact of the iPad on student learning: "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!"

Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data

We had good graduation rates, but now we're getting deeper. – superintendent

Administrators and staff at Otselic Valley regularly share and review assessment data in order to better meet the needs of students. This process primarily takes place formally through the district-level LINKS team, mentioned previously, and then by small groups of teachers who meet regularly in their "pods" or data teams. The LINKS team consists of teachers and administrators who meet monthly with the superintendent to develop and monitor academic performance from a K-12 perspective; the team also works in coordination with other districts through the regional BOCES. Each year the team typically creates district goals that they recommend to the board of education. District goals become the focus of the districtwide teacher pods in a coordinated and collaborative process. The "official unveiling" of the goals at the beginning of the year is a celebratory event.

Traditionally the district has achieved a graduation rate more than adequate in comparison to similar districts. Some, including current administrators, think that the school and district can do more than "get the kids through" high school and are working to change the school and

community “mind set” to increase expectations for student performance while in school and better prepare them for success beyond graduation. This striving for excellence flows from the board of education’s multi-year goals, which in 2012-13 are articulated as: “All students will be literate at and above grade level; all students will be numerate at and above grade level; and all students will graduate” (district newsletter). The high school principal reflected on the perspective of the board members saying, “They don’t just want graduates to be ‘just okay’. . . . It’s not okay that we finish in the middle; it’s not okay that a bunch of kids pass the Regents [exams]. Now we’re addressing issues of mastery of skills.”

To help create a shift in thinking about student performance teachers and administrators are looking at data deeply. For example, data analysis showed that some students taking Algebra I who had passed the Regents Exam^{iv} then struggled with higher-level math. They had difficulty with geometry, then couldn’t take trig or calculus. As a result, the school created a second year of Algebra for students who do not score 80 or above on the Algebra Regents Exam and focused this course to target the specific areas where students’ exams revealed gaps. It is not simply a repeat of Algebra, and students can exit once they score 80 on the Algebra Regents Exam. This intervention is a direct result of data analysis with the goal of better preparing students to succeed in upper-level high school math or college courses.

Through professional development, primarily in their pods, as well as collaboration and communication, teacher teams are learning to take a more detailed and comprehensive look at student performance data. This dovetails with State requirements for setting benchmarks in each curriculum area, and the Otselic Valley teams are collaborating with other educators in neighboring districts in their efforts to create regional benchmarks.

When discussing the value of the LINKS team and the thorough and thoughtful way in which administrators and teachers are now using data, the superintendent proudly stated, “The synergistic effect starts to grow. “He praised the efforts and the development of the teacher-directed pods and their deepening use and analysis of data, tied to professional development designed to improve instructional practice.

Recognition, Interventions, and Adjustments

*Almost all students know that there’s somebody here who cares
and is going to help them if they can. – special educator*

The confluence of a commitment to the success of every student, the small scale of the school and district, and the stability of the community means that individual students are known. They are known and cared for by their teachers, the bus drivers, the custodial and lunch staff, and administrators. When a student is at risk of dropping out, the guidance counselor will enlist any and all of these people, “Because you need as many support systems as possible.”

In a rural community with many still active farms, some students will stay and farm, and their interests may or may not be college. Students who may benefit from a more “hands on” program attend the regional BOCES technical programs in grades 11 and 12. As a special education teacher stated, “The long term goal is college and career readiness” whether in the valley or beyond.

A robust athletic program and after-school offerings are designed to support and motivate students and promote excellence. Recently, despite a limited budget, the school has been able to expand some after-school options. In the district newsletter, the superintendent noted, “As for our program choices, the number of clubs and sports we offer continues to be quite large in comparison to our enrollment. Our students tend to get involved so we continue to look for new ways to meet their needs.” A 45-minute block at the end of the school day before practices or games allows time for teachers to work with students. Before or after school tutoring, summer school programs, and Liberty Partnerships are also designed to support student academic achievement.

Students who have been identified as needing special education or 504 interventions are typically integrated into all their high school classes. The goal is for all students to be independent learners. Only three students in the district have alternative testing. Special education and classroom teachers work closely together to meet student needs. The special education teacher works in a resource room called the “Achievement Lab” that provides daily intervention as needed, but typically students work in their classrooms, where, teachers reported, they and their colleagues throughout the school use differentiated instructional practices.

The district is developing a comprehensive K-12 approach to academic intervention services (AIS) relying on a Response to Intervention (RTI) approach. It is reported to be having a positive impact and targeting students with needs earlier. “The professional development for teachers on things like RTI and differentiated instruction... is ongoing, it’s ongoing,” noted a special educator. An example of an intervention program designed to improve student skills before they enter high school is an intensive English language arts/math program at the middle school for a smaller group of students at risk because of lack of basic skills. One teacher explained, “What we’re trying to push with these kids is not content but the skills they need. . . . We try to link everything together so that the skills they are working on in one class they can use in the next one.”

A special education teacher reported that she does a lot of transition planning: “My kids are all in Regents-level courses. They follow the Regents-level track, so my focus is making sure they’re prepping for classes . . . getting organized. . . . I’m really big on kids becoming advocates for themselves and being able to do that because if they can’t [they won’t succeed on the] college level.” The focus for these students, as it is for all students at Otselic Valley, is to graduate from high school prepared for the world of work or further education.

The guidance counselor knows and follows each student’s academic and career goals. She believes that the reason for the low drop-out rate at this high school is that “Each student gets so much attention. You get help; teachers know you, and the graduating class is so small. We have so much time to spend, to talk with students.” For those students who may be at risk of dropping out, she explained, “We try to find the reason why and I involve as many people as I can.”

The high school principal, a former athlete himself, uses his experiences in sports and coaching to engage and motivate students, some of whom are reluctant learners. He supports a morning “sports academy” and believes that the more students are involved in before and after school events, the more they can be motivated to study. “Championship teams don’t sleep” is the motto he uses to push for excellence whether in sports or academics. He spoke of the importance of sports to motivate students to be in school, function on a team, and perform better academically.

An Athletic Booster Club supports athletic teams and proudly displays items for sale on the district website and at a local coffee shop. The club describes itself as “a group of individuals dedicated to enriching the lives of students and the community through sports.” However, all students, not just the sports teams or athletes are referred to as our “Vikings” in district publications. Both academics and athletics are important and a source of pride in this school community.

In a Nutshell

The board of education, education leaders, and the staff of the Georgetown-South Otselec Central School District work collaboratively to set goals. They have developed a professional learning community and work to support the aspirations of each student. Educators within the high school and district at large have created and sustain a culture of community and caring for their students and families. They strive to balance an appreciation for the “world” of Otselec Valley while offering connections to and a vision of the “outside world” to be sure all students will be college and career ready by graduation. Their high school graduation rates exceed State averages, yet beyond any formal performance measures, the high school principal described their beliefs in this way: “Success is defined by being a successful, productive adult within the community.”

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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 achieve 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 45.3; for the average performers, 36.8. The state average was 49% for that year. Seventy 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 LINKS is not an acronym but the name of a process of continuous improvement introduced to Otselec Valley and other schools by the Delaware-Chenago-Madison-Otsego BOCES, which continues to bring the schools together to focus on goal setting.

ⁱⁱⁱ T. Sergiovanni (2000). *Leadership for the Schoolhouse: How Is It Different? Why Is It Important?* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, p. 185.

^{iv} The governing body for all schools in New York State, its Board of Regents, requires all high school students to take and pass five Regents Exams to graduate with a state-sanctioned, or Regents, diploma. The courses tied to those exams are known as Regents courses, and they are generally more challenging than non-Regents courses.