

## Best Practices Case Study: *Supporting High School Completion*

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Linda Baker, February 2013

### Prattsburgh Central High School *Prattsburgh Central School District*



*We're a family.*

– multiple teachers and administrators

### School Context

Described in 1842 as a “pleasant and very romantic village” with “undisputed healthfulness” and “a character [of] morality and intelligence [that] particularly commend it to parents,<sup>i</sup>” the small town of Prattsburgh continues to take pride in both its appealing physical presence and its strong sense of community values in which its residents take pride.

Prattsburgh’s tree-lined streets feature charming, well-maintained traditional homes, interspersed with occasional restaurants or stores and a few other small businesses. As several larger companies have moved elsewhere in recent years, there are few jobs in the immediate area, and high gas prices discourage residents from commuting to cities an hour away. Agriculture, mostly dairy farms and some small vineyards, remains the principal industry in the rural areas surrounding the town, which is in the northeast corner of Steuben County in the state’s “southern tier” not far from Pennsylvania. Although close to the Finger Lakes, Prattsburgh has experienced little of the extended tourism or up-scale second-home residency that some nearby towns enjoy.

Still informally using the historic name of “Franklin Academy and Prattsburgh Central School,” the academic community honors its deep scholastic roots, which date back to 1824 at the same site as the current pre-kindergarten through twelfth-grade building. The community has always been there to support education, we were told, and has continued to build and re-build both the physical structures and the academic programs. Long-time administrative leadership over the years has helped establish the feeling of permanency and continuity that Prattsburgh families see in “their” educational system, staff members emphasized. “We reflect the culture and goals that the community stands for,” said the superintendent.

Remodeled often since the mid-1920s, the building “always has a capital improvement project going on,” commented an administrator. The school now boasts up-to-date technology as well as a new gym and remodeled library. In addition to the common areas used by all students, various sections of the building are designated for different grade levels and are outfitted accordingly.

With nearly 450 students in pre-K through Grade 12 in 2010-11, Prattsburgh has experienced a 25% drop from its high of 608 students in 1995, but the population has been holding steady in recent years, the superintendent reported. Educators said that they and other community members share the philosophy that “small is good” and fear that their children’s education would suffer if the district were to be merged with others to form a larger, less personalized school.

Prattsburgh is a community that values education and treasures its students, we were repeatedly told. The superintendent’s message on the district website attests to this idea: “[M]ost important, we are blessed with . . . bright, kind, and respectful students who come to school every day ready to learn.” Community members give credit to students as well as educators as they express pride in seeing their school listed as a “top school (bronze)” in *US News and World Report*.

**Student Demographics 2010-11: Prattsburgh Central School, Prattsburgh Central School District<sup>ii</sup>**

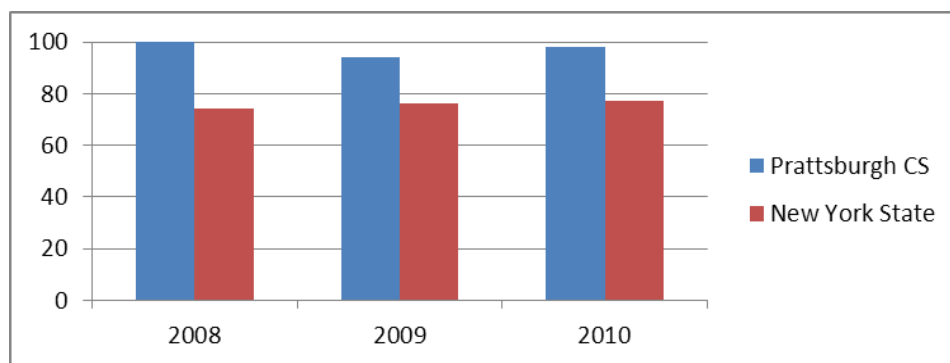
	Prattsburgh Central School	New York State
Grades Served: Total Enrollment	PK-12: 442; 9-12: 133	K-12: 2,689,969
Eligible for Free/Reduced-Price Lunch	46%	49%
Limited English Proficient	0%	8%
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution		
African-American	4%	19%
Hispanic/Latino	1%	22%
White	95%	49%
Other	0%	9%

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

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%, with 54% eligible in 2009-10, 46% in 2010-11, and 51% in 2011-12. “We’re a high need school” in terms of poverty, the superintendent noted. “The same families have lived here for generations. There is little diversity, socioeconomically or otherwise,” another administrator said. In 2010-11, 95% of students were categorized as white, 4% as African-American, and 1% as Hispanic or Latino. The district reported no students as having limited proficiency in English. The attendance rate has been 95% to 96% for some time.

The larger study of which this case is one part investigated factors that promote successful high school completion among critical needs groups. Schools in the sample were selected based on their four-year graduation rates for the cohorts of students entering high school as ninth-graders in 2004 (expected to graduate in 2008), 2005 (to graduate in 2009), and 2006 (to graduate in 2010). Prattsburgh’s four-year graduation rate was 100% in 2008, 96% in 2009, and 98% in 2010.

**Percentage of Students Graduating in Four Years – Prattsburgh Central School and New York State**



Data from New York State Report Cards

## Best Practice Highlights

A commitment to nurturing a “family” atmosphere for teaching and learning combines with other aspects of the school culture to foster interwoven educational practices that educators see as contributing to consistently high graduation rates. Highlights of these processes, approaches, and established norms in which Prattsburgh educators actively engage include the following:

### Setting High Standards for All

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

Students are taught Prattsburgh’s expectations “from the first day they walk in this door,” several teachers noted: “You work hard here.” “You show respect.” “You do your best.” “You can do it.” The district has always set high standards and worked to help all students reach them. It’s a point of pride for Prattsburgh that the school required all students to take Regents-level courses long before that was a State mandate. Faculty members provide whatever help students need to meet the high expectations said more than one teacher, “but we don’t relax the standards.”

### Building a Team Approach to Learning

*If we notice a student starting to slip in one subject, we have a team conference with the parents and all the students’ teachers.* – teacher

Family, teachers, and administrators are all viewed as important members of the team helping each student to learn. Prattsburgh’s mission statement emphasizes the school’s “partnership with parents and the community.” “Trust between the community and the school system is imperative. A lot of parents in other school districts don’t trust the schools with their children, but in this one they do,” asserted the superintendent. Educators described the parent partnership as “awesome” and “much, much better than you see in other places.”

### Fostering a Feeling of Belonging

*We make this place home.* – superintendent

“There’s a sense of family and community and home they feel here,” explained a faculty member. “It’s as if they are all our own kids,” said more than one teacher. Educators work hard to create a consistently inclusive environment, they stressed, where “everyone is embraced” whether a new student, a special needs student, a student with a “different” look or background: “Every student feels accepted and knows that people care about them.” “No kid sits alone in the cafeteria.” “Kids are not bullied here.” No one feels isolated, either academically or socially, we were told.

### Developing Strategies for Helping Individual Students

*I work to be flexible, to adapt to each student’s needs.* – teacher

“If a situation arises in a kid’s life, we come together as a group of teachers and administrators to come up with strategies, a positive way to help [that student succeed],” a teacher said. “Whatever kids need, we’re here for them,” another teacher emphasized. Faculty members have developed multiple ways to provide academic scaffolding and strive to build new strategies as needed.

## A Closer Look

These practices – setting high standards for all, building a team approach to learning, fostering a feeling of belonging, and developing strategies for helping individual students – are evident throughout the five dimensions that frame the study of which this case is one part. The following sections expand on these practices within the context of the study’s framework.

### Curriculum and Academic Goals

*We set higher goals.* – teacher

#### **Expecting the Best**

“We push them to excel” was a common theme in our interviews with faculty members, who described establishing high standards of performance for students as well as for themselves. “We feel successful when we are preparing kids for things you might not think they can do,” said the superintendent. Teachers and administrators agreed that it is “amazing” what can be accomplished when “the sky’s the limit.”

Teachers emphasized that they are never satisfied with “just having students pass the Regents [exams]” or earn a diploma. “That’s easy,” one teacher said, but Prattsburgh expects more. The “higher goals” teachers mentioned include students’ “stretching” to take more difficult subjects and to achieve better grades. Students who might not be considered “advanced” in other schools are taking “upper level courses” like calculus and physics at Prattsburgh, we were told. Teachers expect “mastery” performance on tests and have even “discovered that we’re a lot more stringent about our scoring than other schools,” one teacher commented.

High expectations extend to all members of the school community. Special education students are “held to the same high standards” as everyone else, teachers noted. “I’ve had [special education] kids amaze me,” said one faculty member. It’s particularly impressive to “see an IEP student actually earn a Regents diploma,” she added.

Prattsburgh students come to school with “a strong work ethic,” we were told. Teachers speculated that part of that ethic might come from families living on farms where children take responsibility for daily “chores” that must be accomplished without fail. Parents are strongly supportive of the expectation that everyone works hard at school.

In Prattsburgh’s pre-kindergarten through twelfth-grade learning environment, high standards and performance become “deeply engrained” and “second nature . . . by the time they get to high school,” several faculty members observed. “It’s consistent through all the grades,” they said. “The Regents [success] is not about me. It goes to every teacher along the way, pre-K all the way through,” one high school teacher stressed.

#### **Enhancing Curricula**

There was a consensus among Prattsburgh educators that “we need to look to the future” in determining academic program, not only “what we teach but how we teach it.” Prattsburgh students may come from a rural community, but their teachers and administrators have made a commitment that these young people will be prepared for the challenges and opportunities in the world beyond high school and beyond their own small town.

Staff members reported that they “look for opportunities outside this building to give to our kids.” Some of that enrichment happens through distance learning, as local 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. Prattsburgh students receive transcripts and earn credits from Corning Community College for those classes. For example, ten students are taking ACE Spanish, taught by a teacher in a neighboring school district. Through technology, students can interact with the teacher and other students, and the teacher can not only present information but also facilitate discussion and monitor students’ learning. ACE English, Calculus, and Statistics are additional courses offered through the distance learning program, although the classes take place right in the Prattsburgh building. Districts create partnerships through BOCES, so that local schools both present and receive classes using the technology.

A trip to New York City was the culmination of a “once-in-a-lifetime” learning experience extending well beyond the building last spring. PSC’s music department, computer-aided design (CAD) classes, the agriculture program, school officials and other educators 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. During the trip to New York City, the bench was delivered to the Great Hall and dedicated with a bronze plaque including the names of all students involved. At that time, the Ellis Island representative was quoted as saying, “The student, teacher, and community support and involvement is something I’ve never seen before and a great credit the school and community.” While in New York City, all the vocal music students were adjudicated at the Manhattan School of Music by nationally renowned music professors. The trip was funded by community donations and fundraisers held by the PCS music students.

Course offerings reflect the interests of the community as well as the anticipated needs of students as they “go out into the world.” “This is a huge ag community,” staff members observed, so they consider it particularly appropriate that the district offers an agriculture program, taught on a different Prattsburgh campus, about a mile away, to which students are bussed. The district considers the agriculture courses to be part of its technology program.

A strengthened focus on literacy in grades 9 through 12 has been put into place, said an administrator who recently served as principal. That’s “the biggest change,” he noted, explaining that the literacy focus involves rigorous readings and critical analysis. Prattsburgh’s school curricula were already substantially aligned with the Common Core, he added.

“Math, science, technology are going to drive the future. . . . We need to ratchet up the math and science curriculum,” Prattsburgh’s superintendent emphasized in reflecting on district priorities.

Some of the curriculum improvement effort revolves around enhancing State-mandated courses. While the curricula for most classes adhere closely to State standards, Prattsburgh teachers enjoy “tweaking the details to make it more interesting for students,” one teacher explained. Another described adding problem-solving puzzles and games to “take away the staleness.” “I hate to say it but with the pressure of students doing well on Regents, I have to teach to the test as much as I may not want to. I know what will be on it and cover that . . . , but I add as much creativity as possible,” he continued.

## Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building

*The culture has been established.* - teacher

### **Caring Administrative Leadership**

Administrators have set a tone of respect and caring for everyone “for as long as anyone can remember,” teachers reported. “It’s a trickle-down effect. They [administrators] create a family feeling with faculty. Faculty transfer that to students,” one teacher explained. “It’s a culture that starts from the top,” another teacher echoed.

Administrative transitions were occurring during the time of our visit to Prattsburgh. The previous business administrator had recently moved into the superintendency, a position he had also held several years ago. The previous principal had moved into the position of assistant superintendent, and a new principal was arriving. No one seemed too concerned about a change in leadership, however. One teacher said he was sure the continuing administrators would explain PSC’s culture to the new principal: “They’ll say, ‘This is the way we do things here. You don’t need to change anything. What we’re doing is working.’ [Having] a new principal won’t change anything.”

Top administrators have almost always been hired from staff members “moving up through the ranks,” we were told, and there have been only five superintendents in the last 56 years. “Each superintendent has held all the roles in the district,” the current superintendent said, “and has truly understood and cared about this district.”

### **Staff Continuity and Selection**

“Faculty turnover is so rare it is almost non-existent” was a recurring comment. Teachers were unanimous in saying that they “love this school” and would never want to leave to teach anywhere else. “I wouldn’t go anywhere. I know people who drive an hour to get here.” “I would never leave this job.” “Once I got here, I’m not going to leave. This is where I belong.”

The few hiring opportunities for new teachers are usually the result of teacher retirement rather than population growth or replacement of teachers who have gone to another district. “We have a great staff,” faculty members agreed, often noting that anyone looking for a job at Prattsburgh would have to be prepared to adapt to the established culture. Qualities they said they would look for in a new teacher included good communication skills (“Communication supersedes everything”) and compassion coupled with high expectations (“Care about kids but hold them to the standards”). There are currently no “new” teachers in the building. Even the substitute teachers are experienced at Prattsburgh and are primarily retired teachers. “They know our culture. They’re all still family,” a teacher said.

### **Staffing to Support Students’ Overall Well-Being**

The district has a philosophy that academic achievement must be strongly supported by concern for students’ emotional and physical well-being. “One of the strengths the school has is a strong belief in providing mental health support,” said a faculty member. A school psychologist and a mental health counselor from the county each spend several days a week providing services to Prattsburgh students. Counseling is available for any students who express an interest.

Having both “outstanding” aides and caring teachers guide extra-curricular activities is seen as an important part of helping students develop the feeling of ownership and belonging. “Any

student who wants to be part of any activity can be,” we were told repeatedly. “There’s a place for everybody – Student Council, athletics, music, or drama. If someone wants to be on a team, they can be. If someone wants to be in drama, they can be. If someone wants to be in band, they don’t have to have had piano lessons when they were 7,” the superintendent emphasized.

One district employee spends part of her time as a liaison helping families. Originally created through a grant to the then experimental pre-K program, the “family worker” position involves establishing a relationship with every family when a child enters pre-K and then being available to help the family as the child continues through school. “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,” the staff member explained. Often, the help extends to other needs: “I have a whole closet full of coats, boots, snow pants. A teacher could notice that a kid needs a coat. I talk with the parent [and provide it.] The other day I gave gloves to anyone walking out the door without them. We just started a new program in conjunction with the food pantry. We send food home in their backpacks. I talk to parents beforehand.” Communication is key: “I do a lot of connecting with parents to meet needs, to make the child more comfortable and able to learn. Because I know the parents, they call me as the child gets older, right on through high school. I’ve been here for 24 years. . . . I have parents now that I remember when they were in preschool.”

### **Professional Development**

Prattsburgh staff development activities often focus on collaborative meetings, sometimes with “outside experts” brought in to facilitate. “We have a lot of opportunity,” one teacher commented. Teachers mentioned voluntary after-school workshops that provide credit toward increased pay and “typical, mandatory” teacher conference days that include professional development components. They also noted that much of the development they experience is more informal, with faculty members sharing great ideas and “cool” websites they have found.

A Teacher-in-Residence program, which brings a BOCES professional developer to Prattsburgh one day a week, was described by several faculty members as particularly helpful. Teachers explained that faculty groups meet with the Teacher-in-Residence to map goals, strengthen strategies, and learn to use new resources, particularly technology.

Faculty members have frequent opportunity for staff meetings before and after school. Most school-wide faculty meetings are at 7:50 a.m., when teachers report, and conclude before classes start at 8:13 a.m.. After-school staff meetings are held between 2:49 p.m., when students leave, and 3:10 p.m., the official end of the teacher day.

### **Union Support**

Prattsburgh’s professional association is “supportive of the culture,” both administrators and teachers agreed. “It shows that support by its actions,” the superintendent commented, pointing out that the union “helps us to keep ourselves stable” and that there had never been an impasse in contract negotiations. “We almost had a grievance once, but we ironed out the problem. We haven’t had a written complaint since 2002. Teachers feel free to communicate openly. It’s not us versus them,” he added. Teachers reported that they routinely put in time at school well beyond that established in the contract. A union officer reinforced the idea of a “really good working relationship” between the teachers’ association and the district.

## Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements

*Give the students a voice. Don't be a Charlie Brown teacher.* - teacher

### **Active Student Engagement**

Students learn best when they are interacting and involved in the classroom conversation, not just listening, was a common theme in discussion of instructional practices. Teachers described themselves as “facilitators” rather than providers of information and often contrasted their teaching styles with the traditional stereotypes of teachers sitting behind desks or putting information on a chalkboard to be copied.

The key to learning is having students feel engaged and excited about concepts they’re exploring, we were told. “I have to be excited, too, because if I’m not they won’t be,” one teacher stressed. “Every student gets called on every period here,” several teachers said, often adding that they don’t call on students “just to give answers” but to share different ways of solving a problem, to ask questions, and to engage each other in concept-related conversation.

### **Emphasis on Thinking Skills**

Critical reading, problem-solving, and resource analysis were among the terms educators used to identify the types of thinking skills they viewed as the most essential elements of instruction. Both teachers and administrators observed that classrooms are evolving so that they are less a place where students receive information and more a venue for interpreting ideas and building on them. “We’re now teaching how to think not what to think,” one teacher explained. “We don’t want students to tell us a right answer so much as we want them to voice their thought processes,” said another faculty member.

Students need to access multiple sources of information and analyze them critically, administrators and teachers commented. There’s a particular challenge students have when analyzing online information, teachers said. Teachers help students to choose sources wisely and then ensure that they cite their sources, online or otherwise. “I also want them to think for themselves. I show them how easy it is to get caught if plagiarizing,” one teacher observed.

### **Team-Based Learning**

Prattsburgh is working toward “less emphasis on individual performance and more emphasis on group learning,” the superintendent reported, stressing the importance of team approaches and group problem solving. Students need to learn how to work in groups, he explained, since that’s the way of the future.

Teachers incorporate group learning into their classrooms in a variety of ways. Seated in groups in many classrooms, they work on and present projects or explain and present homework solutions (sometimes with clever strategies such as creating rhymes). Students conduct science labs with two to four partners. Students “get a lot out of it” when they work as a team to present a project or lead a discussion, teachers said. They need to be able to work in groups to prepare for the team-based work they’ll experience in college and on the job, several educators suggested.

### **Use of Technology**

“It’s crazy how much technology I’m using in the classroom today,” one teacher exclaimed. The latest technology-aided instructional equipment, now installed in classrooms throughout the school, is an interactive display board that connects to the Internet, can present the material from



a laptop screen, can be used for presentations, and turns into a white board on which notes can be written. “We were working with chalkboards until we got these [interactive] boards four or five years ago. What a difference! I still do a lot of PowerPoints but now embed video clips and use the board to display them while saving half the board for notes,” the teacher explained.

A Homework Hotline allows students, parents, and faculty to access homework assignments posted by teachers. Parents can also access attendance and grade information through the online Parent Portal. “This has been so helpful in communicating with parents,” one teacher noted.

The district has been a forerunner in supplying the latest technology to teachers and students. Every teacher now has an iPad, we were told, and some students have technology for recording responses to classroom discussion. Equipment facilitating the use of distance learning is the focus of a new technology room and is also available as two portable units.

### **Setting a Good Example**

Having pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade in the same building is seen as an instructional advantage for everyone. “It’s really positive for kids’ learning,” teachers said. Younger students look up to older students, and older students are very conscious about setting a good example for younger ones. The nurturing, “family” relationships bring out the best in everyone, we were told.

“The expectation for how people treat each other here is unbelievable,” an administrator said. “A lot of it is the way we talk to kids. Seniors take seriously how to talk with five-year-olds. There’s so much that goes into it. We never want to lose that,” he continued.

### **Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data**

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

### **Monitoring Individual Student Achievement**

The district uses a six-week marking period, with progress reports every three weeks. A great deal of monitoring occurs less formally and on a daily basis, however.

Prattsburgh educators say that they “use the student database all the time” to look at transcripts, grades, or indications of missing work. Classroom teachers check to see how students are doing in other subjects. Guidance counselors, special education teachers, and the school psychologist track the progress of students they are assisting.

Classroom teachers’ database recording of student assignments and performance has provided an organized way of communication that assists in the team effort, so that parents and school personnel can access the information they need to help keep each student on track.

Monitoring the progress of special needs students with Individual Education Plans (IEPs) or 504 accommodations involves a great deal of paperwork, but that, too, has become more computerized and is more easily accessible to all who need the data.

Additional monitoring of some at-risk students occurs through a process called the Black Book. Students assigned to the Black Book program have a daily communication log with every teacher indicating homework completion and academic progress. Both the teacher and the parent must sign the log daily. The principal looks at the book every day to make sure it has been signed and

follows through with the student, revoking privileges if signatures are lacking. Sometimes, there are no students in the Black Book program, while occasionally there are as many as four or five.

### **Standardized Test Data**

Teachers reported that doing item analysis of standardized tests, especially Regents exams, is an important responsibility that helps them to improve instruction. “If students are routinely missing some questions, it’s my fault. If 40 kids take the test, and 20 miss a question, that question is on me, not on them. I didn’t cover it well enough, and I need to re-teach,” one teacher explained. “Yesterday I asked if I could have some time to do an analysis of [student performance] on the January Regents exam,” another teacher reported, adding that administrators are very supportive of any analysis that might help students.

### **Emphasis on Qualitative as well as Quantitative Data**

In a small school with constant communication, much of the data faculty members use is observed or anecdotal and qualitative in nature. “It’s a small school. I don’t need statistical data. I know which kids need what kind of help. I can see the need and may hear about it from other teachers. Stats can be misleading. I know,” one teacher emphasized, as he made the case for carefully watching and listening to students.

### **Interventions, Adjustments, and Recognition**

*“Don’t wait for students to come to you. Go to them.” – teacher*

### **Creative Adaptability**

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 the buses have left, staff members said. “Teachers are willing to work together and be creative for the kids,” making constant informal adaptations, a faculty member commented.

Because “Everybody knows every kid and every family,” it’s rare to have to create a formal intervention plan, the superintendent noted. “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.’ Teachers don’t have to make appointments with the principal. They see him between classes or after school. They may say to a student, ‘Let’s go down and sit with the counselor.’ There’s no bureaucracy, no rules and regs about who can do what. People just step in,” he explained.

Several teachers noted that they provide one-on-one academic help to students who might be misunderstanding a concept or needing to rethink a process: “We can’t always just let them do what they are doing,” one teacher said. “We have to provide corrective action and do everything we can to help that student succeed.” Sometimes the extra help takes place after school in the library, which is open until 6:00 p.m. for students who “need that extra boost,” another teacher noted. The “boost” includes snacks as well as academic help, several staff members noted. “A lot of students use the library. They may not have a conducive atmosphere for study at home.”

Particular intervention and faculty adaptability are required for students from the few families that are not long-term residents. The family may rent a house, perhaps a dwelling that was

designed as recreational, but may have trouble finding long-term work and may move back out when the weather gets cold. “We become accustomed to it,” the superintendent said. “We try to make the transitions as positive as possible. We make sure the students join something, get involved right away.” New students always receive a lot of attention from both staff members and other students, we were told, and they hate to leave. “Sometimes they come back, and we start all over,” a faculty member observed.

### **Ample Opportunity to Improve**

Attending extra help sessions beyond the school day, even in the evening, is part of the culture. As one teacher explained, “They’ve been brought up this way, to understand how important it is to attend review class. Before a unit test or state test, attendance at review class is phenomenal. They want to be here. If they’re brought up that way, it sticks with them.” “I had eight or ten review classes from 6 to 7:30 [at night]. I gave the kids a calendar, didn’t even contact the parents. I was missing only five or six kids,” she added.

As much as possible, tests are scheduled so that students can re-take them to improve their grades. Even with Regents exams, educators try to provide ways for students to re-take exams if they fail or are not satisfied with their grades. For example, all grade 11 students took the Comprehensive English Regents in January. “We get 90 to 95% through in January. Those who don’t pass re-take the exam in June—and August, if needed. A few re-take the exam just to improve the score. In Regents courses, we emphasize the importance of the 85% mastery level. Some kids who don’t reach mastery come in over the summer,” a teacher explained.

### **Arrangements for Meeting Special Needs**

The district serves as many of its special education students as possible right in the local building. A very few severely disabled students are receiving services elsewhere. Ten students from nearby districts attend special education classes at Prattsburgh. “Sharing resources and having most kids staying here works well for us,” the superintendent said. “We’ve taken the approach that those classes should look just like any other,” he continued. “They have lunch with everyone else. They’re in phys. ed. with everyone else. They are graduating. They are making it.” “Thirty years ago those kids would not have been here,” he noted. When the decision was made to educate those students locally, “a few teachers led the way, being an example to other teachers. Now all of our teachers take a lot of pride in the accomplishments of these kids. Getting a 65 or 66 on a Biology Regents means more than a bright student who gets a 95. Everyone works tirelessly with these kids. Sometimes the kids from other districts do so well that they don’t want to go back to their district school. They want to stay here. Taking that 15% of the population is always a risk, but we’re getting them through.”

### **Eligibility for ExtraCurricular Activities and Privileges**

Part of the positive recognition for students who are doing well occurs through the Pupil Eligibility Program (PEP). Students want to be able to participate in extra-curricular activities. “Student Council is huge here. Yearbook. Music. All the sports,” several teachers said. Coaches and extracurricular advisors “make sure kids are caught up on their work. It’s a huge incentive,” staff members commented. A student who is failing a class is put on the ineligibility list. “Our goal is to keep kids off that list,” said one teacher.

There are other “carrots” as well, a staff member explained: “Eleventh and twelfth graders can go over to town for lunch, and any high school kids can go to the gym if they’re not on the list. If

students make a particular grade point average, they are on the Lounge List, which means they can go the lounge instead of study hall or the cafeteria for lunch.” Teachers also described a Senior Hall Pass, for twelfth graders who maintain at least a 70 average, allowing them to go wherever they’d like during periods when they don’t have class.

### **Recognition of Success**

Students need to feel not only “respected” and “safe” but also “appreciated,” the superintendent pointed out: “They need to feel important.”

Teachers and administrators observed that recognizing students’ efforts is “a constant” at Prattsburgh. They also stressed the significance of special recognitions such as National Honor Society—“a huge thing for our students,” a faculty member commented. Another teacher expressed particular pride in seeing “our first special education student make National Honor Society. It took thirty years, but it was very nice.”

In general, everyone needs to feel that they share the credit for the success of a school, several educators noted. “If I were to run the [entire] educational system, I’d break it up into small schools,” the superintendent emphasized, noting the importance of students and faculty feeling ownership and pride in the accomplishments of a small group of people that they know well.

### **In a Nutshell**

The caring, personalized instruction and “family” environment of a small school are seen as key to Prattsburgh Central School’s academic success. Educators partner with parents and the community in setting high standards for all, building a team approach to learning, fostering a feeling of belonging, and developing strategies for helping individual students.

**Prattsburgh Central School**  
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<sup>i</sup> *Annual Catalogue of Officers and Students of Franklin Academy*. Prattsburgh, Steuben Co., NY, 1842-1843, cited on the district website: [www.prattsburgh.wnyric.org/ourdistrict.cfm](http://www.prattsburgh.wnyric.org/ourdistrict.cfm).

<sup>ii</sup> This case study is one of a series of studies conducted by Know Your Schools~for NY Kids since 2005. In 2012-13, research teams investigated 13 high schools; eight of these schools had consistently higher than predicted graduation rates among at least two critical needs groups and five consistently achieved average graduation rates, given their student demographics. Schools were selected based on the four-year graduation rates for the cohorts of 2004, 2005, and 2006, as reported on their state report cards in 2009-11. (Each year’s report card states the graduation rate for the cohort that graduated the prior year.) In 2011, the mean free and reduced-price lunch rate for the higher performers was 44%; for the average performers, 36.8%. The state average was 49% for that year. Seventy-five percent of the higher-performing schools are classified by the state as having high needs to resource ratios. Average-performing schools were matched as closely as possible to the higher performers in terms of student poverty levels, geographic location, size, and student ethnicity. Researchers used site-based interviews of teachers and administrators, as well as analyses of supportive documentation, to determine differences in practices between higher- and average-performing schools in the sample. Results of the cross-site analysis and details regarding the project, its studies, and methods may be found at [www.albany.edu/nykids](http://www.albany.edu/nykids).