

Best Practices Case Study: *Supporting High School Completion*

Susan P. Tangorre, June 2013



Whitesville Central High School

Whitesville Central School District

The vision here is for all of the kids to graduate. That is always the goal. – teacher

School Context

We are the identity for the community. We are the biggest employer in the community and we are the heart of the community. – superintendent

The Whitesville Central School District is located in a picturesque, rural, and remote section of the southern tier of New York State. The nearest towns are at least a thirty-minute drive away on twisting and narrow country roads. A first-time visitor might easily pass by the building nestled near the hills, which is “the district”; it houses the district office as well as elementary, middle, and high schools, all carefully designed in different wings. Yet this modern, well-maintained structure is a vital part of the community. It is more than a building. It was often referred to as “a home” to just over 200 students, their families, and the staff, who emphasized that it holds a special place in the lives and hearts of the people of this small community.

Over many years administrators and staff of the district have developed a highly dedicated and caring culture. Several staff expressed their fondness for the school community and their colleagues, saying, for example, “We are like a big family.” The friendly atmosphere of the school is evident from the moment one enters the front door. The principal, who is a preK-12 administrator and also the coordinator of special education, proudly shared that “everyone knows everyone.” Many members of the staff are also life-long residents of the community who have never left or who returned to teach in the district. Other staff members drive sometimes more than an hour each day because they enjoy working in Whitesville.

Whitesville High School is housed in one wing of the building and typically has fewer than 90 students enrolled. It is a somewhat back-in-time place where staff and students typically work, mingle, and communicate respectfully. Teachers exhibit a pleasant, yet friendly formality in their interactions with students. Teachers stand in their doorways to greet students when the classes are changing. The tone of the high school is reflected in the posters hanging throughout its hallways: *Be Responsible. Be Respectful. Be Your Best.*

Walking through the school, it seemed that there is an obvious effort on the part of staff to dress “professionally” or a bit formally. One young male teacher wearing a long-sleeved shirt and tie shared that he tries to be a role-model. He said, “I’m setting an example for my students.”

Another teacher spoke about why he liked working at Whitesville, stating, “The kids are so honest with you – it’s part of the culture of the school. They have a lot of respect for their teachers.” This positive atmosphere has been created by administrators and teachers who are not only caring but highly dedicated to their students’ success.

The district also enjoys strong community support despite its small size; it has withstood pressure to consolidate with nearby districts for fiscal reasons. School budgets typically pass by a 2:1 margin. The current superintendent, who began teaching in the district in 1971 and then served many years as superintendent before retiring, returned six years later to serve as acting superintendent. He is now in his fourth year in this capacity and described community support this way: “They say it takes a village to raise a child, and we have the support of the community here.”

Student Demographics 2010-11: Whitesville Central School, Whitesville Central School Districtⁱ

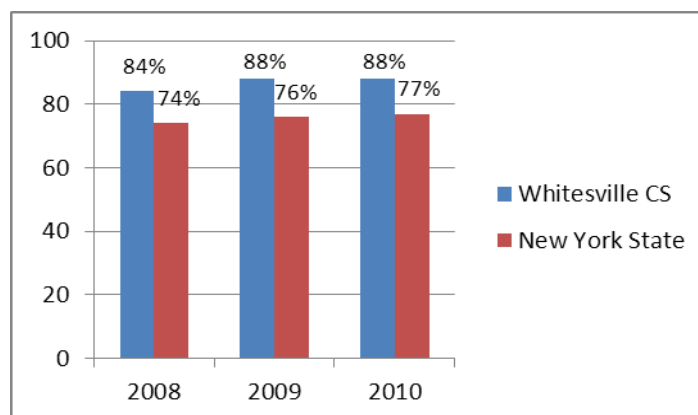
	Whitesville Central School	New York State
Grades Served: Total Enrollment	K-12: 287	K-12: 2,689,969
Eligible for Free/Reduced-Price Lunch	33%	49%
Limited English Proficient	0%	8%
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution		
African-American	0%	19%
Hispanic/Latino	0%	22%
White	100%	49%
Other	0%	9%

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

Students are racially homogeneous, with 33% eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. One teacher described the Whitesville population as “blue collar, hard-working folks.” Reflecting on the community at large, a social services staff member commented, “There is not a lot of diversity here, and I think that especially impacts [students] when they go out into the world.” Poverty is a significant factor for many families in the area, and it is not uncommon that parents have not attended college.

Student performance on State assessments has been consistently above state averages. The district has also achieved a higher-than-average graduation rate. The larger study of which this case is one

Percentage of Students Graduating in Four Years - Whitesville Central School and New York State



Data from New York State Report Cards

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 Whitesville was 87%, averaging 11% above the state average for the same years. The expectation – or the mantra, as one teacher put it – is that “all of our students will graduate.” Administrators and teachers described working hard to make that goal a reality for each student.

Best Practice Highlights

The practices listed below capture the essence of what educators in the district report as impacting their high school graduation rate.

- The school culture is characterized by a high value being placed on knowing each student and his or her family.
- Educators focus on academic success and high school graduation.
- Teachers and administrators are highly dedicated and often wear “many hats” to meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of their students.
- Celebration of student successes in academics, athletics, and the arts is a guiding principle.

School Culture. Teachers and administrators were unanimous in emphasizing the importance of creating a school community focused on knowing and caring about each student. As one teacher expressed it, “This school is very much family oriented.” The culture of the school community encourages teachers to establish caring relationships with students. For example, one veteran teacher shared why she believes the graduation rate is high by saying, “The positive relationships between the teachers and their students is the big thing.”

Student-focused. Graduation is the primary goal for each and every student. Class sizes are small (generally 10-20 students), and instruction is said to be highly individualized, which enables teachers to help students reach this goal. The teachers know their students well due in part to the fact that they may have taught the same students for four years of high school or more.

Highly Dedicated Staff. Teachers and administrators assume multiple roles, and there seem to be no limits to the support provided to help students graduate. Unlike colleagues in larger high schools, the staff at Whitesville said they may need to teach classes from 7th-12th grade as well as provide academic support services, supervise study halls, or coach sports or social programs. Teachers expressed that they work hard to provide a range of educational and social opportunities for their students.

Celebration of Student Successes. The importance of academic success is made abundantly clear to students, but the arts and athletics are also valued components of the high school. One teacher commented on the importance of sports in this small community, but he added, “The concept of the student-athlete with the emphasis on student first, is definitely big here.” Celebrations of students’ efforts are prominently displayed throughout the high school, with student art work, the honor roll, a student-staff tribute to 9/11, and trophies for academic and athletic awards highly visible.

A Closer Look

These attributes – a supportive, student-focused culture, a highly dedicated staff, and celebration of student successes 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

For students, the message is, “Graduate. Take that and move forward towards your aspirations.” - principal

Whitesville High School provides the full range of State required Regents courses and 31 electives in the arts, particularly the visual arts, business, and industrial technology. All students were reported to take the same required core courses, providing them the opportunity to earn a Regents diploma. The Student Handbook notes that any Regents exam scores less than 65 but greater than 55 would meet local diploma requirements. Teachers explained that they approach the curriculum and their instructional goals in a way that prioritizes the particular needs of individual students.

Because the school is relatively small, subject area teachers have considerable breadth of responsibilities in preparing for a range of classes – no two are the same. Some teachers instruct both at the middle school and the high school levels and others may instruct a class that is offered only every other year. At the time of this study, teachers expressed how challenging it is to provide instruction in each curriculum area to meet Regents requirements and align with the Common Core Learning Standards. One teacher explained, “We don’t have departments, really, but we do work together to look at goals.” Some teachers related the need to use on-line resources for curricula guidelines and instructional information, since their colleagues each teach different subject areas.

Graduating from high school is the consistent message for students, and district personnel understand that providing options other than attending a two- or four-year college is critical. Therefore, as one social services staff member shared, the district had carefully developed “career-minded programming.” Regional vocational programs, an alternative education program, and a GED program are made available to students as well.

Although graduation is the goal, education beyond high school is not necessarily the goal of every student – or of every family. One teacher admitted that for some students, “Directing their work ethic and helping them to place value in their education is our biggest challenge.” He also indicated that “most of the parents of the kids here did not go to college; at most, they have a high school diploma.”

To assist students in considering options beyond high school, a component of the senior year may include a 20-hour job-shadowing project for each participating student. Students prepare a written report and an oral presentation and use technology, a poster, or other artifacts to describe their job-shadowing experience. Educators credit this senior project with providing an important perspective for the students at Whitesville.

There is a collective sense of “ownership” and responsibility for each student. The academic focus and the culture of the high school are geared to serving individual students, many of whom would

be at risk of failing to graduate in four years without individualized support. A counselor who has been part of this educational community for almost 40 years reflected on their goals for students, stating, “We have done an incredible job with kids who are at risk. . . . We are working on helping them all make the transition to the real world.” The educators in this district demonstrate a genuine sense of caring about the lives of their students academically and socially and molding the curriculum to meet student needs.

Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building

*We have a very strong superintendent. His leadership is huge.
He has a good vision for the school.* -teacher

It is apparent that the superintendent and the principal collaborate in the process of selecting candidates for the district, which employs fewer than 30 teachers overall. The principal shared her perspective on potential candidates, stating, “I definitely prefer more local candidates in that they know more about what they’re getting into and that they are probably more likely to stay here long term.” Working in such a small educational setting would not necessarily be comfortable for some teachers. The staff at Whitesville typically assumes multiple responsibilities for instruction as well as sports and/or extracurricular duties at the high school. The principal was quite clear about her expectations: “Since there are so many hats that you have to wear here in Whitesville, you really have to be a good fit.”

Staff Selection. The principal described a teacher selection process in which she involves regular and special education teachers as well as guidance, with the superintendent ultimately making the final decision. In addition to finding teachers able to “fit” in this setting, an ability to “get the content across to all the students . . . cross-dimensionally so as to meet the needs of different learners” was deemed essential. The superintendent explained that over the years, “We end up hiring people who have a variety of degrees and certifications because then they can work with more students. We encourage all of our staff to have multiple specialties.”

Professional Development. Whitesville, like districts across the State, has had to make adjustments in curricula to comply with recent changes in State standards. The superintendent indicated that professional development is not a top-down mandate, but “We ask, ‘What do you need? What can we provide?’” Formally, teachers are provided just a few days each year to collaborate with colleagues, but informally they reported an ongoing discussion of students’ performance and needs. Currently the district is using a shared staff-development specialist from its BOCES to assist in providing embedded professional development throughout the school year. This provides an “in-house” resource to help teachers comply with recent State requirements, develop curriculum maps, or redesign and align their courses with the Common Core Learning Standards.

New teachers are assigned a mentor, but teachers reported that they all work together and help each other. They described a professional climate of trust and respect, and the superintendent and the principal were portrayed as a supportive administrative team.

Developing Leadership. The superintendent and the principal play a key leadership role, but building distributive leadership capacity is an intricate process. In the absence of grade-level teams, subject-area departments, or instructional supervisors, each teacher in the high school must be a skillful instructor capable of reaching students with a range of academic abilities, motivations, and interests.

Although high school teachers lack colleagues in the same subject area with whom to engage in professional discussions, they reported working with the curriculum coordinator and working together to set goals. In addition, personal initiative, for example in using on-line resources, is involved in maintaining up-to-date curriculum knowledge. Teachers were reported to willingly assume leadership responsibilities for the instructional, social-emotional, and vocational needs of their students. For example, a social services staff member claimed that “the teachers go way above and beyond ‘normal’ teacher requirements. This place is different than a lot of places.”

Essential characteristics for teachers were said to include: the ability to work cooperatively, self-motivation, and flexibility. Philosophically administrators and teachers are aligned, with their primary focus on supporting students to be successful learners and to graduate. This vision and conviction ultimately seems to be the bond that ties this school community together.

Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements

We believe we need to early-detect the issues and needs of our kids. Our classes are small and one-on-one attention is important. We provide the students with what they need. We want all of our kids to succeed. - superintendent

The high school offers the typical range of core classes as part its instructional program and as many electives as possible given the size and certifications of the staff. Smaller class size, sometimes fewer than ten students, is considered one of its greatest assets. Distance-learning or on-line courses, some with local colleges, have been incorporated as options for some students, but reportedly not without challenges (e.g., of the need for staff with appropriate masters degrees to serve as adjunct professors). It seems that teachers are given much flexibility within the curriculum guidelines to meet students’ learning needs.

Staffing and scheduling issues are complicated in such a small district, and the guidance counselor who is a veteran staff member, was credited by colleagues with working diligently to develop a schedule that is most beneficial for students. A recent shift in the high school schedule appears to be a positive change. The school day has been expanded, creating a three-hour academic block in the morning and a three-hour academic block in the afternoon, with one-hour mid-day for lunch and Academic Intervention Services (AIS) or other services or activities.

Even though class sizes in the high school are small, students present a wide range of abilities. In this district approximately, 16% of the students are identified as students with disabilities and are integrated into all classes at the high school level. (The state average is 13% of classified students.) Teachers creatively use technology to support learning, but highly developed differentiated instructional practices are essential. One teacher shared that “I have kids with a wide variety of skills and my teaching needs to be adaptable to all of the levels. I look at the lower grades’ standards, and work with the middle school teachers to make sure the students are prepared for my classes.”

One of the interventions that is viewed as an effective support for students is an after-school program called the “academic study hall.” This grant-funded program for 5th -12th-grade students is conducted four days/week until 4:00 p.m. to assist athletes as well as others who may need intermittent academic support. An extension of this program has also included some educational workshops, field trips, and visits to nearby Alfred University to expand students’ exposure to the wider world, including a college campus.

Several educators said, “We really care about the kids” and described instructional practices based on these caring relationships. A teacher may work with the same students in the same subject area for four years, if not more. Courses are highly individualized, due in part, to the smaller class sizes, the hour-long class blocks, and an instructional approach designed to meet the needs of a wide range of learners. A variety of instructional arrangements were observed, with engaged students working in large and small groups and individually with teachers. One teacher said, “You can individualize and no one slips through the cracks.”

The superintendent and the principal are highly visible and engaged with students as well. Administrators and teachers alike shared that they have respectful relationships with students and they really don’t have discipline problems in the high school. The principal noted, “We have good teachers who take care of their own classrooms with consistent discipline.” One teacher stated, “I think (that) the fact that we don’t have behavior problems definitely helps the graduation rates.” Another teacher spoke about their way of dealing with problems: “As teachers we set the tone. If anything comes up we have an individual conversation about the issue.”

At the high school the successes are celebrated. Despite the challenges, administrators and staff have a positive attitude and a confidence that the instructional programs and practices at Whitesville provide what their students need to succeed. For the most part staff reported that families are supportive of the school and the teachers in particular. A social services staff member described her work in this way: “The family issues definitely aren’t different [at Whitesville], but the way we deal with those issues is different. This place is nurturing and warm.”

No doubt the graduation rate is the result of many factors, but one teacher summarized their efforts to meet student needs this way: “There are no excuses here for kids slipping through the cracks. We are like a big family.” A social services staff member reflected on the reasons for their success with their students saying, “Because of the individualized attention, which is hard to measure, I would say that we all contribute to their success. We do things for them, not to them.”

Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis & Use of Data

This isn’t the kind of place where things get easily overlooked I think there is a lot of nurturing that goes on. I think that the kids really feel cared for. - social services staff

Traditionally, Whitesville’s graduation rate has been consistently higher than in similar districts. Performance is monitored on an ongoing basis through both a formal and an informal review process. Administrators and teachers, particularly the guidance counselor, regularly share information about students’ progress. Teachers reported reviewing students’ performance on State assessments as well as their own quizzes, tests and assignments and using these data to meet the individualized needs of their students. Detailed five-week progress reports are provided for parents.

The school nurse also provides a weekly report of attendance to the principal, who monitors absenteeism. The principal or other school support staff work closely with students or their families if any social-emotional or attendance problems interfere with performance. Attendance data, formal testing data, and classroom assessments are monitored by staff to assess students’ academic progress, but more than any particular piece of data, students are just known – well known. One of the more veteran teachers shared her perspective stating, “I think our biggest positive is that we are a small school. We know our students and we have known them for their whole middle and high school careers, if not since they were in pre-K.”

The principal, who had been a special education teacher, was clear in stating their process: “We look at the individual students here. We know that not all students are traditional students. We have also looked at students who have dropped out in the past and we try to figure out why. We focus on getting all of our students into the appropriate programs.” The district administrators stressed their emphasis on early intervention. A review of a student’s needs is immediate and prescriptive as part of the Response to Intervention (RtI) program or the Committee on Special Education (CSE) process, if indicated.

Again, all of these individualized and caring efforts are directed toward the final goal: graduation. As a counselor stated, “Graduating isn’t optional here!” The administrators, school psychologist, guidance counselor, and teachers work as an educational tag-team creatively determining any plan, modification, or service that would better meet the needs of each student.

Recognition, Intervention & Adjustments

We do a lot of mentoring of all of the students. I really have personal relationships with my kids. - teacher

The academic vision here is for all of the students to graduate from high school. “That is always the goal,” said one veteran teacher. In keeping with this vision, the expectation is that all students follow a Regents track, and intervention starts as early as possible. There is a pre-K through grade 12 perspective to academic intervention.

The principal reported that the Response to Intervention (RtI) program, although relatively new, seems to be very effective at the elementary/middle school levels, and will eventually have a positive impact for high school students. Students who have been identified as needing special education services or 504 plans or testing accommodations are typically integrated into high school classes with their peers. Also high school students are provided Academic Intervention Services (AIS) for as little or as much time as needed. As the principal stated, “We do not enable here. We want our students to be as independent as possible.”

Teachers are able to refer students for AIS by making a verbal request, which is followed up by the requisite letter to parents/guardians. These services are prescriptive and may be provided one-to-one or in small groups during the mid-day block or before/after school. A range of special education services are available for students as well. Some students also attend vocational classes outside the district for part of the school day. A social services staff member reflected on the manner in which intervention might happen at Whitesville, saying “When we know someone is in trouble, we intervene early and quickly and we get involved. . . . All of a sudden, this kid who is struggling . . . [has] all this support.”

Graduating for some students may mean a Regents diploma, for others, completing a vocational program, yet for others, a GED diploma. There seems to be no limit to the level of intervention, assistance, or support that district educators will consider for students or their families when an academic, social, and/or emotional issue threatens to interfere with learning.

Although academic performance and graduation for students are priorities, participation in athletics and the arts is highly valued as well. According to the principal, “all students here need to go out for athletics,” clarifying, “we often get the award of academic achievement through sports.” The superintendent offered his personalized walking tour of the school boasting about their sports teams, the art projects, and outstanding music concerts. Proudly exhibited in glass cases are sports

trophies and plaques for contests, science fairs, and other extracurricular events. It is a tribute to their students' accomplishments over the years. The honor roll is prominently posted on the wall near the high school hallway. A delightful array of student projects and art work are displayed everywhere! One area had a touching tribute to the heroes of 9/11 that had been created by a teacher and some students. At Whitesville, student efforts and successes are recognized in many, many ways.

From the superintendent to instructional staff there is a serious and caring commitment to the success of each student. A counselor related how "Teachers stay after school to help kids – almost completely extra and unpaid." Supporting struggling learners with academic, social or emotional problems is an intensive group effort at the high school and typically involves communicating and working with the parents as well. A counselor spoke genuinely about some of his efforts to prevent students from dropping out. "Well," he said, "it isn't a formal process. I know the kids, I know their parents, and often their grandparents."

The principal shared her perspective also: "I think that personal connections with parents are key. We have the parents' support. And the children all have at least one person (on staff) whom they connect to. We all work as a family here. We are all working together for that child." Teachers also function as mentors to their students. Communicating with students and their parents and having long-term relationships is credited with contributing to high graduation rates.

In such a small, rural district sports are a very important extracurricular activity for students and their families. One teacher shared his belief that "sports involvement positively contributes to our students' lives." Another teacher who spoke to the importance of sports to this school community said, "The culture of the community is the school. Everything revolves around the school – the sports games are the social culture here in Whitesville."

Another highly valued aspect of the academic program at the high school, though, is the expectation for students who participate in interscholastic sports to be academically successful. The Student Handbook notes that this is "privilege." "Athletic eligibility is a really big deal here," explained one teacher. "If they aren't eligible, they have to go to study hall after school."

It is obvious that these athletic activities are the source of much pride for the students, the staff and even the superintendent. He delighted in sharing his stories about the various building projects that resulted in the current district structure – especially the gym! This large, modern gym is the hub of the school, and obviously the pride of the community – it would rival a gym in any large, suburban district.

The image of a rousing basketball game drawing the community together is symbolic of the character of this district. The support from the superintendent, to the principal, the teachers and the staff for these students, both as athletes and as scholars, is an important value in the Whitesville Central School District.

Throughout the hallways of the high school are those posters reminding students of the expectations: *Be Responsible. Be Respectful. Be Your Best.* These are not just empty mottos. Relationships are essential to promoting success. These posters describe the way educators mentor their students and the way students conduct themselves. They are an expression of the strong values of the educators in the school and district.

Reflecting on his personal relationships with students, one of the newer teachers related a story about helping some of them tie their ties before the senior prom, and then he spoke fondly about graduation. He said, “Last year was my first year where my first group of ninth graders were seniors. That class was really special to me, I had this one group of guys . . . they were all like my little brothers.”

“We work hard to celebrate successes at this high school!” the principal proudly proclaimed. High expectations, caring relationships, and individualized support are some of the ingredients for the academic successes of the students in the Whitesville school community. It seems that there is much to celebrate.

In a Nutshell

The number one thing is that we are here for the kids. –superintendent

When administrators and teachers talked about the Whitesville Central School District they created an image of a pleasant, one-of-a-kind place where everyone works cooperatively and tirelessly to reach their collective goal: “An expectation that all of our kids will graduate,” as one teacher put it. The superintendent affirmed the shared belief of the school community, saying, “Everybody here is working to do what’s best for the kids.” Whitesville is an economically impoverished area, yet the district continues to receive strong parental support for academics, the arts, and athletics. Parents trust the staff and hope that their children will have the opportunity to graduate from high school and perhaps to go to college or learn a trade. Each student who enters the school is known and cared for from that first day of school until the last, as nearly every senior walks away with a high school diploma. The passion and persistence of this small group of educators is making a difference in the lives of these students and their families.

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ⁱThis 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.