

Practices and Processes of Odds-Beating Schools: Examples from Representative Cases

Our vision, as simple as it is, is learning for all, whatever it takes. Our belief is that all children can learn.

-Bay City superintendent

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Introduction

A research team at the University at Albany School of Education recently completed a study designed to identify policies and practices shared by elementary and middle schools whose students performed better than predicted on the 2013 administration of the Common Core assessments.

The team also studied similar schools whose students performed as predicted on those same assessments and analyzed the data to find if and how practices differed between the two groups.

Although there is some variation between elementary and middle schools because of their different configurations, nevertheless, odds-beating schools at both levels share some common characteristics, including:

- Positive communica-

What practices and processes distinguish odds-beating elementary and middle schools from more typically performing but similar schools, as measured by their performance on New York State's Common Core Learning Standards-aligned assessments?

- tions, trusting relationships, and well-aligned visions between central offices and schools;
- Proactive, adaptive, and flexible leadership broadly shared at both district and school levels;
- Capacity and readiness to implement significant changes;
- Anticipating and preparing to implement new policy mandates (like the Common Core Learning Standards, new Annual Professional Performance Review, and Data-Drive Instruction

before the mandated timeline;

- Clarity about mandates and expectations with some degree of professional autonomy regarding how to meet those mandates and expectations.

This brief shares highlights of processes and practices from two elementary and two middle schools. The findings are organized by the six tenets of the state's Diagnostic Tool for District and School Effectiveness (DTSDE) 2.0. All names are pseudonyms.

School Selection

Schools were selected for the study based on their performance on the Common Core assessments in 2013 as well as on prior state assessments.

On the 2013 assessments, the odds-beating schools sampled for the study performed at least

one standard deviation above predicted based on the demographics of their students. Typically performing schools performed exactly as predicted, based on their student populations. All schools in the sample had also been classified by the state as in

good standing or better in both 2011 and 2012.

Altogether, 18 schools were studied, 12 odd beaters and 6 typical performers. Schools were evenly distributed across urban, suburban, and rural communities.

DTSDE Tenets

- District Leadership and Capacity
- School Leadership Practices and Decisions
- Curriculum Development and Support
- Teacher Practice and Support
- Student Social and Emotional Developmental Health

I lead by example. My sleeves are up, just like anybody else's. I would never ask anyone of them to do something that I wouldn't be willing to do myself. . . . That goes from unclogging a toilet . . . to sitting inside with a student reading. . . . So there's really nothing I can't ask [of teachers]. And most times I don't have to ask. It's no different than what you do as a teacher in a classroom. You model the behaviors you want to see.

-Eagle Bluff ES principal

The changes that came with Common Core were not shocking to us. – teacher leader
Sage City MS

District Leadership and Capacity

What we do each year is go through the process of very careful diagnostics. I do it with the board through a community forum with the school administrators. We have gatherings of stakeholders and basically we go through the state of our district. So in the area of academic achievement, we go through all of our programs and services. We talk about what the data suggest about what our kids are doing well and what they're not doing well. And then what we do is identify the areas of student learning that we consider to be most problematic and needing of attention, and they become our district priorities.

- Roaring Gap MS superinten-

The quotation above clearly conveys the Roaring Gap district leadership's philosophy, approach to goal and priority setting, community involve-

ment, and use of data to continuously monitor progress. In addition, the goals inform resource allocation, including professional de-

velopment, which includes instructional coaches so that teachers are not asked to do something new without support.

School Leadership Practices and Decisions

Eagle Bluff ES is characterized by an atmosphere of purposeful fun, led by a principal who shares leadership and leads by example, seeking input from all with an open-door policy.

As an instructional leader, the principal tries to be in every classroom every day. In addition to providing feedback during formal observations, she leaves teachers written comments

after walk-throughs, noting the importance of always leaving teachers a positive note along with constructive feedback.

She has incorporated professional development around instructional strategies into faculty meetings and tries to take as much off the teachers' plates as possible to allow teachers to focus on teaching and learning.

She sometimes makes unilateral decisions, such as the one forbidding the use of test prep materials in classrooms so that instruction can focus on meaningful activities.

Teachers credit her with setting the fun and relaxed tone for the building, with prioritizing positive relationships, and with increasing involvement in the community.

Curriculum Development and Support

Like all the other odds-beating schools, educators at Sage City MS began planning to implement the Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS) years before the mandated timeline for adoption.

Both grade-level and vertical teams examined existing curricula and the CCLS to identify necessary changes. However, because teachers had always emphasized the

thinking behind problem solving, they did not see the CCLS as a major change in instruction.

Post adoption, they have been using a wide variety of data gathered from formative and summative, informal and formal assessments to monitor progress and establish goals to meet individual and group student needs on an ongoing basis.

The school focus has

been on building competence and capacity to teach to the CCLS, and teachers have autonomy to decide how to teach the content within clear expectations. For example, they are expected to adapt -- "put their own stamp on" -- CCLS-aligned curriculum materials.

Professional development, including formal and informal mentoring and technology, supports implementation.

Teacher Practice and Support

Teachers at Bay City ES have considerable autonomy to act based on their own expertise and judgment. For example, they were given leeway by the district to interpret for themselves what they would use from the CCLS-aligned modules. These decisions were made collectively across grade levels.

They have a common planning time for grade levels, receive feedback on their instruction, and reflect on it with instructional coaches.

The art of keeping students involved and interested is seen by teachers as a component of high-quality instruction, and they express particular concern about serving the individual needs of their diverse population, whether language or ethnic minority, low income, and/or in need of special education services. They use a variety of instructional strategies, including teacher whole-group facilitation, small-group activities, pairing, co-

teaching, student-led whole-group discussion, student use of white boards and smart boards, one-on-one conferencing, clickers, and hand signaling.

Both administrators and teachers use data to inform instruction and plan interventions. The data team, consisting of teachers and a teaching assistant, plays a central role in monitoring students' progress school-wide and making it available in data binders.

It's really key to provide instruction that keeps the students ... involved and interested. . . . They have to . . . participate in discussions. That's difficult for some students, but I think it's the teacher's job to find ways to connect each kid and get them involved.

- Bay City ES Teacher

Student Social & Emotional Developmental Health

Sage City MS faces multiple challenges in its dedication to supporting students socially and emotionally while holding them to rigorous academic standards. Not only do their students face the turmoil of adolescence, but new students may enter classes each month, and the newcomers may have limited reading or few English skills.

The school has devel-

oped a culture of respect for diversity and programs designed to build character and acceptance. Staff are careful to model such behavior.

To address the kind of complex needs presented by their diverse population, educators work collaboratively with counselors and other support specialists, seeking to anticipate and address difficult situations.

The school provides a variety of extracurricular activities, with participation open to all; students may join a club or team at any time. To help ensure that participation remains an incentive for classroom performance, academic eligibility is determined day-to-day rather than seasonally.

Other groups address special needs such as goal setting and getting along.

I really enjoy seeing students progress academically, socially, emotionally, setting the expectation high. I think we set high expectations for each of our students, and it's wonderful to see them set goals and achieve goals and feel like a part of the school community.

- student support specialist
Sage City MS

Family and Community Engagement

In the district of Roaring Gap MS, parents are invited to take part in the district's goal planning, both through surveys and a parent advisory council. One of the five focus areas of the district improvement plan is parent engagement.

To allow for the fact that this looks different at each level, each school is able to develop its own plan to

meet this goal.

One of Roaring Gap MS's goals is to establish positive relations with families before they ever have to talk about "a less positive" situation and school leaders encourage teachers to do the same.

To that end, both teachers and administrators reach out through a variety of technologies – letter, phone,

electronic. For example, the principal uses an online tool to send information to parents, including photos of classroom activities.

Partnerships with local colleges and universities provide professional development for teachers, coaches, and other specialists. They also provide enrichment opportunities for students.

There are lots of way to [communicate with the community]—the technology and the old-fashioned eyeball-to-eyeball kind of thing. I think it's important to do both.

- Sage City superintendent

The Schools

Bay City Elementary School: Teachers at urban Bay City greet their 500 plus students at the school door each morning, using this opportunity to see if any students are having a rough start to their day. This is one way they enact the school and district mission of catering to children's individual social and emotional as well as needs academic needs. Like instruction, professional development is becoming more differentiated through the use of instructional coaches and the principal as an instructional leader. Although nearly 100% of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, in 2013, the school's performance on the State ELA and Mathematics Assessments was nearly 1.8 standard deviations higher than other schools in the state with similar student populations.

Eagle Bluff Elementary School: About 400 PK-6 students attend this rural school. Most are white, and about half qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Performance on 2013 State ELA and Math Assessments was one standard deviation higher than schools from across the state; in 2012, at least two-thirds of students in grades three through five had scored a three or four on those assessments. Overall, the staff tries to make learning fun within a caring, student-centered school culture that emphasizes mutual respect and collaborative relationships, family engagement, and organizational structures. Collegial support, dialogic mentorship and clear unity of purpose all contribute to a safe environment, setting favorable conditions for change and continuous improvement.

Roaring Gap Middle School: The school serves a small rural-fringe community with a commercial center and institutions of higher education, which together provide a strong tax base and diversity of population. The district focus is on academic achievement, student morale and conduct, parent engagement, the capacity for organizational growth, and resource management. These priority areas are revisited in a continuous quality improvement cycle using multiple sources of data to drive yearly goal setting. Instructional leadership is distributed among administrators as well as instructional coaches. The coaches provide embedded professional development and meet regularly with inquiry-based data teams to examine student data and develop and carry out action plans.

Sage City Middle School: Urban/suburban Sage City is very diverse, with more than half of students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch, and as many identifying as Hispanic/Latino, although only about 25% are classified as English language learners. A safe, nurturing environment embraces diversity. Teams use planning time to share best practices and to coordinate instruction. Instruction and support are differentiated for individual students, with an emphasis on becoming college and career ready. A wide variety of data, including normative assessments, benchmarks, reading level measures, homework, and quizzes help determine instructional changes or interventions, both for groups of students and for individuals. Students are taught to reflect on their own progress, so that they can "reset" their course in any subject, as needed.

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