Roaring Gap[1] Middle School

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[1] Roaring gap is a pseudonym

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> *I truly believe our kids need to have the best learning environment that they can have each and every day and it's up to us to create the right conditions for learning so that each child can be successful.* — district administrator

This case is one part of a comparative study of New York State middle schools designed to investigate implementation of Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS) and the Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR) as they relate to student performance outcomes on CCLS-aligned assessments. The study sample included both odds-beating and typically performing schools.

Roaring Gap Middle School was selected for study as an odds-beating school because it met the criteria for exceeding expected performance on the 2013 state assessments, which were the first to measure performance on the CCLS. The difference between expected and actual average performance was over one standard deviation higher than that of other schools around the state and statistically significantly higher in three of the six comparisons (ELA and mathematics in grades 6 through 8). Thus the school is distinctive for exceeding expected performance in multiple subjects and grade levels. In addition, this school performed well on the prior two rounds of state testing by earning the status of a "high progress" school indicating high rates of growth and closing performance gaps between subgroups of students.

The intent of this case study is to characterize the processes and practices evident in a school with a history of higher-than-expected student performance outcomes during and prior to the implementation of the CCLS and APPR systems. In the next section, we describe key features of this school and district.

School Context

Roaring Gap Middle School is located in a small rural-fringe community not far from several colleges and universities. Teachers and administrators attribute the diversity of their student population to the largest of these universities, which draws graduate students and faculty from many countries. Although Roaring Gap is identified as a rural-fringe school and is located in a large agricultural area, central office administrators report that the district enjoys a larger tax base than many rural fringe districts thanks to the big box stores and chain restaurants that form the county's commercial center. An administrator credited these commercial enterprises with helping to keep the tax rate lower for residents, while many administrators and staff commented on the high level of resources in the district that this financial situation affords them.

Roaring Gap occupies a two-story brick building on a quiet street across from modest single family homes. Its architectural style matches the period of growth in the district, when a number of new schools were built. However, it has been updated since the 1960s with a new entryway, which displays flags from all of the nations of Roaring Gap students. The principal presented the updated auditorium as a point of pride, noting the excellent acoustics and the advanced sound board as one of the opportunities for students to integrate technology and 21st century skills in the arts. The library has also received upgrades focused on technology, as well as to make it a more inviting space that emulates those found on college campuses. The school serves a fairly

diverse population of students, 66% of whom are white and about 40% of whom qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, a rate close to the state average.

At Roaring Gap MS, security guards are called "youth assistants," and hallway displays include maps of kindness, with arrows showing the flow of acts of kindness (e.g. respect, gratitude) from one student to the next; these displays report students' acts such as "Someone made my day and made me feel better." A Positive Behaviorial Interventions and Supports (PBIS) wall of fame displays the names of students embodying one of the school's character traits and is updated every two weeks.

Highlights

Among the features that stand out at Roaring Gap Middle School are the following.

Coherence and Alignment of District and School Goals

> *We define district success in terms of five domains: academic achievement, student morale and conduct, parent engagement, organizational capacity for organizational growth and resource management.* - superintendent

The superintendent emphasized a shift over the last 16 years from a "confederation of loosely coupled classrooms and schools" to "a comprehensive, cohesive school district" in which all schools contribute and share the same goals. He explained that after the district sets goals in each of the five domains, the principals set building goals in the first four domains. "It shouldn't

surprise you [that] for 16 years English Language Arts and math have been the two district priorities. And we've made tremendous gains, but they continue to be the two." He continued,

> If you're going to improve learning, you start with curriculum. You are really clear about the expectations you have around the methods of instruction that are most preferred. The schools don't have discretion on that— that comes out of our program office.

However, he noted that schools have discretion about other priorities, which in Roaring Gap included offering Earth Science and utilizing instructional technologies.

Distributed Instructional Leadership

> *I think the coaches are the biggest resource in this building.* - building administrator

> *It wasn't just leadership at the top. There was leadership from other teachers.* -teacher

The culture of distributed instructional leadership begins at the district level and filters down to the school level. Both the assistant superintendent for human resources and the superintendent identified the importance of school building leaders possessing instructional leadership capabilities. However, the principal shares instructional leadership with the assistant principal, who reported he is responsible for supervising a group of teachers. These building leaders are supported in their instructional leadership by the assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction and content area directors who reported working directly with principals on their classroom observation and feedback skills. Additionally, Roaring Gap has an instructional coach in each of the four content areas. One of these coaches reported leading the grade-level team planning meetings and working in a "side-by-side coaching model" in the classroom to provide modeling and direct support to struggling students. Teachers also mentioned the leadership roles of other teachers in taking on learning deeply about the instructional shifts required in implementing the Common Core Learning Standards and sharing their learning with other teachers.

Continuous Data-Driven Instructional Improvement

> *When you really look at data and you can make informative decisions about a district program, about a school program, or more importantly, at the teacher level, that's when you can really get into that data-driven instruction, when you are changing instructional practices based on data.* – district administrator

Instructional coaches reported that at Roaring Gap there are two teams of two teachers within each of the four core content areas. The coaches reported meeting weekly with teachers in their content area to progress monitor students using formative assessments and student work samples.

According to district administrators and one of the coaches, this process is guided by a districtwide model for school-based inquiry and a rubric developed by district staff that describes what a high-quality data meeting should look like. Both district administrators and the instructional coach described professional development on the school-based inquiry model provided to coaches and teachers. A district administrator cited the work of Paul Bambrick-Santoyo as a major influence to this effort. The principal and the assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction continue to work with teams to ensure that the goal of examining student data and creating and carrying out an action plan is met at these data meetings. At the district level, an administrator reported using student data to identify areas needing improvement, also emphasizing the use of data to drive all conversations: "We have a lot of data on every single student and we look at that by grade level, by school, by district and then we take that data to have conversations with administrators, with teachers, and with parents."

Embedded Professional Development Aligned with Priorities

> *We really believe in embedded professional development; it's really a theme for all of our professional staff. I mean, there are times we'll go to BOCES. We certainly did all the Network trainings. But within this district, we have enough critical mass of our own staff; we have a leadership staff of 40 people, where we can develop that professional learning progression in house and we are blessed to have a full-time professional development director whose primary work is with administrators and the teachers. It's a huge piece. And HR is involved in that. The AIS is obviously involved in that. We have program directors. So there is a lot of internal support.* – district administrator

The embedded design of the school-based inquiry team development is one example of how district leaders have worked to integrate professional development in teacher and building leaders' daily work. Several district administrators reported a shift away from traditional workshop models of professional development to focusing resources instead on in-house staff that contributes to embedded professional development. This model includes literacy and math coaches in each building working with teacher teams, not only in data analysis and planning but also in the classroom, modeling instruction and supporting students. One of the instructional coaches reported,

> We've moved to an embedded professional development model. So in order for me to bring strategies and best practices, changes into the classroom, I need to be in the classroom.

Additionally, central office administrators reported joining principals on classroom walkthroughs to discuss what they are seeing and make plans for principal feedback conversations with teachers. They reported that these conversations are guided by a three-step protocol that has been

adopted across the district. The director of professional development reported that professional development is driven by student learning needs.

Intentionally Nurturing a Positive School Climate and Culture

> *I think the culture is a very caring, respectful culture. I think it's modeled by the teachers as well as the principal. The teachers show respect to each other. They show respect to the children. It's a very positive environment and it's all modeled by the adults in the school, and I think that makes a huge difference and impact on the culture of the school.*
>
> > \- teacher

Teachers, building-level administrators, and district administrators all credited the districtwide Positive Behaviorial Interventions and Supports program with contributing to the positive school climate at Roaring Gap. The assistant principal identified kindness as an important PBIS theme at the middle school, and others mentioned an all-school assembly where teachers and students spoke about what kindness meant and a time others were kind to them. Teachers reported that since PBIS began students act more kindly to one another and there is less bullying, while the assistant superintendent for student support reported behavior referrals had decreased dramatically and that school-level PBIS coaches support implementation in each building and meet regularly with her around the implementation of PBIS.

A Closer Look

Following a vignette and overview, the remainder of this report summarizes the findings from a two-day site visit to the school as well as the results of a school climate survey that was distributed to all staff members (see the Appendix). Findings are reported for each line of inquiry that framed the study: district office and school relations, alignment, and coherence; school building leadership; Common Core curriculum and instruction; teachers' instruction and practice; students' social and emotional developmental health; and family engagement strategies and community partnerships.

<u>Lesson Vignette</u>

In a grade 8 Academic Intervention Services (AIS) ELA classroom, two teachers (one classroom and one special education) and 10 students (only one of whom is not identified for special education services) power up their laptops. On the smart board screen are displayed learning targets such as "I will be able to highlight my CEI (Claim, Evidence, Interpretation) response demonstrating that I have improved in my CEI writing focus area." After reading sections of a text together the teachers guide students in identifying text features and writing gist statements.

T: What text features do we see here?

S: What are text features?

T: Thanks for asking. Do you know? (calling on a student)

S: A text feature is like a… I forgot.

T: Julie? (a pseudonym)

S: I don't know what's it's called… like that here (points to a title).

T: Right! So this is a title. What's this guy?

S: A picture.

T: Right. What's this (calling on another student)?

S: A caption.

T: Can you define caption?

S: Something added to a text feature –

T: Can you help us? Let's read it together. "Students in Indiana recite the pledge of allegiance."

S: It's to link what the picture is doing –

T: You pointed out these words in blue: These are subheadings. So we just identified like five text features. So how would we define text features?

S: It's like the title

T: That's an example, but can we define it (pauses and waits)? OK- it's anything other than the words that help us understand the article. Imagine if there was no picture—no title—wouldn't it be harder to understand?

(Students nod yes.)

T: Let's get to the article. What's that text feature in the upper left?

S: A title.

T: What is the title?

S: Debate

T: What does that mean?

S: You have to say one thing that was wrong and one thing that was right –

S2: Kind of like an argument.

T: Can you tell us again what a debate is –

S2: Where you're arguing over something.

T: If you are debating are you angry?

S3: Not necessarily.

The lesson continues with the teacher focusing on students writing gists and CEI statements based on the text.

Overview

The lesson vignette above provides an example of how Roaring Gap Middle School teachers approach instruction. Many of the strategies observed, such as probing students to identify text features, encouraging students to define academic terms such as "debate," and tasking students to cite evidence from texts are evidence of attempts to align instruction to the CCLS.

According to the Roaring Gap superintendent, the Common Core fit well with the already-existing district vision and was supported by a curriculum revision process put in place prior to the implementation of the CCLS. He spoke of "integrating the Common Core into our district curriculum." The director of professional development attributed the CCLS to prompting the revision of curriculum maps and calendars as well as rewriting common assessments. The director of professional development identified this work as contributing to CCLS alignment in classrooms. However, the director of ELA emphasized the message that teachers were encouraged to adapt instruction to the needs of their students, not implement CCLS-aligned lessons in a lock-step manner, and teachers reported working on curriculum revisions and making the curriculum a living, usable document. Teachers credited the learning targets and essential questions within the curriculum maps as helping guide daily decisions about their classroom instruction.

In general, Roaring Gap educators reported that the school could be characterized as having a positive and trusting climate for students and teachers alike and attributed that climate to the dedication of school and district leaders to creating schools where students want to be and teachers want to work. Relationships between staff were said by many to be characterized by relational trust, and this trust, in turn, was said to contribute to the ability of teachers to collaborate in teams and the ability of coaches to work productively with teachers, even around sensitive topics. For example, the principal repeatedly emphasized the importance of trust in working with teachers, saying, for example, "Trust is really important. I try to make contact with all my teachers on a daily basis." The principal was described as a "cheerleader" and "the most positive person I know" and someone who set the tone for the building. This positive and trusting climate not only made the school a nice place to be according to the educators interviewed, but also created a shared focus on student learning that was seen by the principal and coaches as facilitating teachers to work collaboratively on improving instruction.

Overall, administrators and teachers alike conveyed a sense of working together to steer the district and school in a common direction for the sake of the students. Teachers expressed feeling generally supported by district and school administrators, as well as by the structures and processes embedded in their workplace.

Summary of Site-Visit Findings

District Office and School Relations, Alignment, and Coherence

> *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.*
>
> -superintendent

Alignment and Coherence of Vision, Mission and Goals

The superintendent reported that for the past sixteen years, he has worked to eliminate achievement gaps in the district by focusing on instruction, prioritizing data in goal setting, and creating a districtwide culture of placing students at the center of professional responsibility and continuous professional development. At the middle school level, the superintendent identified moving away from traditional managerial style building leaders to principals who embrace the role of instructional leadership. The superintendent praised both the previous and current principals for their instructional knowledge and ability to take on the role of instructional leader.

In addition to emphasizing the role of instructional leadership, the superintendent reportedly has brought an increased focus on aligned goal setting throughout the district. Building administrators described the superintendent as a "systems guy" and a "data guy." The superintendent reported working with the school board, administrators and other stakeholders to set priorities and goals for the district in the following areas: academic achievement, student morale and conduct, parent engagement, organizational capacity for organizational growth, and resource management. As reflected in the quote above, this activity includes careful attention to academic achievement. The assistant principal described the resulting improvement plan as very clear, noting that it is accompanied by an action plan.

According to the superintendent, the district priorities become the template for each school's improvement plan put in place by building leaders. He emphasized that rather than being a "loose confederation of schools," each school contributes to the overall success of the district. He

stated that when the schools develop their plans, they "look at how they can contribute to the district and then also address other needs that are unique to their schools." While he stated that ELA and math achievement goals are non-negotiable, each school has different needs, leaving the details regarding school improvement plans to building leaders. He also stated that while the district has made "tremendous gains" in ELA and math achievement, these areas remain a district priority.

Several district administrators reportedly assist and support the principals in developing the school improvement plans and providing resources to help them accomplish their goals. The district has also made a significant investment in instructional coaches, who are teachers on special assignment. According to the superintendent,

> I have a full-time literacy coach, a full-time math coach, a full-time science coach dedicated to each of the two buildings. Their job is really just to work hand-in-hand with teachers. Co-teaching lessons and co-planning. Not just helping teachers understand, but also model and get feedback in a collegial basis for what the Common Core looks like.

The math coach described meeting with classroom teachers once every four days and working in classrooms alongside teachers in a "co-teaching capacity." She also stated that she works with the principal, as well as the district math director and other math coaches on a regular basis. The instructional coaches collaborate with both school and district leaders as well as work regularly with teachers in classrooms.

Tight coherence between district goals, building goals, and teacher goals was also evident. Both the principal and the superintendent identified using the Danielson Rubric throughout the district. The superintendent noted that based on data, three specific areas of the rubric were identified as districtwide priorities. The assistant principal reported that teachers choose one of these areas to focus on and collect evidence throughout the school year of their efforts and growth. Teachers at Roaring Gap referenced the focus on the Danielson Rubric and its influence upon their work, including in their classroom instruction as well as in how they directed their collaborative time with colleagues. A teacher reported, for example,

> We've been doing a new thing when we have faculty meetings just at our school; we've been sharing out ideas based on the part of the Danielson Rubric we're focusing on. We're in a group and then we share out ideas.

Although there appears to be strong coherence and alignment between district and school goals, there was also evidence of flexibility at the school level. The assistant superintendent for student support reported that schools have discretion in working to reach district goals in parent engagement in order to meet the needs of each unique building and the developmental level they serve as well. The principal and assistant principal also identified Earth Science as a particular

focus in the middle school building, and the social studies coach explained his focus on technology integration,

> One of my jobs is to take the building goals and the district goals and try to make them happen in the classroom. And this year there's a definite press to use instructional technology as much as I can in as many classrooms as I can, so that's been a focus of mine to kind of integrate that when I get in the classroom.

Leadership Structures, Strategies, and Philosophies

Supporting effective instruction structures what leaders do and how they do it in the district and at Roaring Gap MS. Several district administrators spoke about working directly with principals to support their work as instructional leaders. They stated that they will observe teachers alongside principals to facilitate conversations about what instructional strategies they saw and how to provide helpful feedback to teachers. District-level staff also identified regular meetings with principals and coaches as a way to communicate district priorities and provide support for carrying out those priorities. One of the curriculum directors reiterated that the team approach at the district and building level supports success for all: "I think in my own words, what I have found in this district is that there is a belief that ALL students can achieve and we can all work together to get them there." District-level administrators expressed and demonstrated confidence and trust in building leaders. Similarly, both the principal and assistant principal at Roaring Gap expressed a philosophy of collaborative and distributed leadership that is supported by reciprocity of trust and engagement on the part of both teachers and leaders. Such reciprocity was exhibited in such statements as, "I think it [success] comes from a visionary at the top, you know, starting with the superintendent. . . . how do you move 25 elephants? He can make it happen," said one teacher. Another teacher described the importance of the visibility of the superintendent in both the school, as well as the district: "He's a presence for sure in this district."

The district has experienced stable and committed leadership exemplified by the superintendent having served the district for 16 years. The assistant superintendent for human resources stated that teacher turnover is relatively low and attributed this to the ownership of the faculty and support staff, as well as their close knit relationships and the positive school climate.

Cradle-to-Career System Building

At the time of this study district staff members were preparing for a public vote on the school board's plan to reorganize the district to increase classroom space to accommodate full-day kindergarten and increasing enrollments. Although the director of special education reported full-day kindergarten was currently available for students with special needs, materials on the district's website identified full-day kindergarten as an important priority for all students. Information available on the district's website also indicated that the reorganization would allow

the district to continue to offer small class sizes at all schools despite growing enrollments. The resulting reconfiguration is framed in district materials as providing increased support for younger students through redistributing support staff and providing wrap-around services, as well as increasing opportunities for middle school students to begin taking high school course credits and for high school students to enroll in AP and college level coursework. As of the writing of this report, the district's website reported that the initiative passed by a 3-1 margin.

Also according to information on the district's website, limited spots of half-day universal pre-K are offered in partnership with community organizations, some of which provide extended day care at the parents' expense. The director of special education noted that her department works closely with the preschool and nursery programs in the district. Working collaboratively with the preschool teachers, special education teachers, school psychologists and related service providers develop IEP plans for incoming students. The district director of special education also reported that kindergarten special education teachers and psychologists also observe preschoolers before they enroll in the elementary school to get a head start on building relationships with new students.

At the other end of the spectrum, the district's website highlights the college and career resource center within the high school guidance office. According to the website, this center provides career shadowing and internship programs and brings representatives from local and regional colleges and universities to campus. A district curriculum director noted that the vision of this district has shifted over time: "You know, the words have changed over time – so now we say college and career ready. We used to say one student at a time." In part this change may be attributed to the focus of the Common Core Learning Standards. According to the superintendent, "When we talk about the Common Core, we see it as a set of learning expectations that are being driven to this question: What do kids need to know, understand, be able to do, to be successful in college and careers?"

Technology is seen by some to be part of the answer to that question. For example, one of the district curriculum directors stated, "We *can* develop more of a way to have students become college and career ready by incorporating technology as a tool to use in the classroom" and identified classroom technology, particularly Chromebooks and Google Docs, as also facilitating feedback to students:

> For instance, we may use Google Docs and have a teacher responding to different students as they write, or there are examples of teachers that will get on to their Google Docs and they'll see that a student's working on their homework. So she'll get on and give feedback at night.

Students were observed using Chromebooks in ELA classrooms for writing assignments, and the principal touted the use of technology in the arts, noting individual digital work stations in the art

room and the use of a 3-D printer. He stated, "I feel like there's a need for kids to pursue fields for jobs that don't really exist yet and *now* is the time to explore for kids to create pathways for them."

Resource Allocation

A district administrator reported, "We are tremendously well resourced. Tremendously," and noted the district's commitment to small class sizes, with a target size of 22 at the middle school level. These plentiful resources appear to be used strategically to support district goals. For example, the assistant superintendent for human resources identified classroom technology use as a means for differentiating instruction, and the assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction identified technology as a way to support the development of 21st century literacy skills.

To meet these goals, a five-year technology plan has been developed. The superintendent reported the district acquired funds to support one-to-one computing using Chromebooks at the middle school level, starting with 7th grade and with the expectation to expand to other grades. He stated his belief that,

> If instructional technology is going to be integral to teaching and learning, you have to have three things: You have to have on-demand access to the technology; you have to have on-demand professional development support; and you have to on-demand technical support. That means every kid and teacher needs to have seamless access to the computing devices and internet access.

He noted that the Wi-Fi infrastructure has been updated to accommodate the use of web-based Chromebooks. Students were observed opening documents from Google Docs in an ELA class and teachers reported that they use multiple Google tools, including Google Docs and Google Drive to promote efficiency and transparency in accomplishing established district goals. For example, the assistant principal mentioned that he and the principal use Google Docs to write teacher observations. In addition to the Chromebooks, there are iPads and iPods with translation software available in the library for ESL students to use. The expansion of technology infrastructure also appears to support the ELA goal of increasing identified students reading abilities through the use of the web-based Read 180 program.

In addition to these reported investments in technology, the district also invests in human resources through the provision of professional development aligned with its goals. One district administrator, for example, stated,

> We are a district that truly believes that you can't ask people to do something that you're not able to do yourself. To be fair, if you're going to ask a person to do something, you also have to provide the resources and remove the barriers.

An example of such support is the use of instructional coaches to provide what the superintendent identified as "embedded professional development." Another example of this commitment is the provision of formal trainings to teachers on instructional technology. Teachers also indicated they have made concerted efforts to learn how to utilize these new tools, including working on a district-funded study group that has identified a self-selected focus on the use of Google Apps. This professional development opportunity is supported by the district by paying teachers for ten hours to work together on a topic. Additionally, the superintendent reported that new media specialists have been hired with the technology skills to provide on-demand support for teachers, as well as professional development.

Another example of the alignment of district goals and resource allocation is the professional development provided to support the development of the school-based inquiry teams for data-driven instruction. The assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction noted that professional development funds were used to provide training and ongoing embedded professional development to support the development of the school-based inquiry model of data-driven instruction. However, the director of professional development mentioned that due to the budget cuts associated with the recession, she had not been to a professional conference in some time.

Lastly, while neighboring districts reportedly cut student support staff during the recession, the assistant superintendent for student support stated that because of the superintendent's commitment to educating the whole child and understanding the link between social and emotional health and academic achievement, the district has retained the same number of social workers and psychologists. At the middle school each grade cohort is assigned a counselor that stays with them from 6th through 8th grade, and counselors reported having fewer than 200 students each in their caseloads. They stated that smaller caseloads allow them to get to know the students, collaborate with teachers, and participate in the Response to Intervention (RTI) process.

School Building Leadership

His [the principal's] leadership is exemplary. He knows his teachers. He guides his teachers. He's not punitive. He works with people. He gives people time to be together to have common planning time. But he also knows how to nudge people – in a good way.
<div align="right">- teacher</div>

Distributed Instructional Leadership

The superintendent praised the principal's capacity for instructional leadership. Teachers and other non-instructional staff described the principal as an instructional leader who not only expresses a vision for effective instruction and positive outcomes, but who also supports their

instructional efforts. The PBIS team identified the principal and assistant principal as setting expectations and priorities for learning in the classroom. The school climate survey corroborates this finding, with 100% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement, "The principal sets priorities, makes plans and sees that plans are carried out." Similarly, 100% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that "[t]he principal communicates to the staff what kind of school he or she wants."

The principal highlighted the importance of being in every classroom every day and reported that he will post pictures in his daily emails from classrooms of examples of district priorities in action, including student engagement and the use of technology. In addition to the principal, Roaring Gap has an assistant principal with whom responsibilities are divided. The principal observes ELA, math and science teachers while the assistant principal observes science, art, music, physical education and social studies teachers. The assistant principal noted that he and the principal also do "drop-ins" on the teachers they don't supervise. The assistant principal takes responsibility for the PBIS implementation in the school. Additionally, there is a teacher on special assignment that serves as an administrator for the 6th grade, and four content area coaches provide additional instructional leadership, working directly with teachers on instruction and data-driven instructional planning. Although the building administrators report they are highly visible throughout the school day in the hallways and cafeteria, the assistant principal stated that the majority of his workday is devoted to instructional leadership.

The instructional leadership of the principal and assistant principal is complemented by the work of four instructional coaches. These coaches report working with grade-level teams within each of the four core subject areas. They stated that they participate in weekly grade-level data meetings, helping teachers create action plans from their analysis of formative classroom assessments such as exit tickets, quizzes, and student work samples. One coach described her work as,

> two pronged . . . working with students and working with teachers . . . because I can do more one-on-one or with a small group of kids. Routinely, I can identify some of the barriers or struggles that some of the kids are dealing with that might not be so obvious in a larger classroom setting.

Trusting, Collaborative Relationships

The assistant principal and teachers commented on the principal's positive attitude, which sets the tone for the building. The importance of relationships to the principal's leadership style was also observed. Teachers praised his ability to connect with each of the school's 450 students. One teacher stated,

> When our kids walk in this building in the morning, they are greeted by the principal right there. He says hello to every single kid. He knows every kid's name. I don't know how. And he knows something unique or specific about each of them.

The principal stated he believed part of his job was to set the positive atmosphere at the school and get to know all of the kids. He stated he keeps lunchtime sacred to spend with students and is joined in the cafeteria by the assistant principal. The assistant principal and principal were reported to be visible in the hallways during passing time. On the tour of the school, the principal was observed greeting teachers, students and support staff, engaging in conversations with staff about their lives outside of work, and joking with students.

The assistant principal reported that the principal puts students first but also "takes care of the staff." The principal reported he believes his job is to support teachers and provide them resources to be successful. He also stated that part of his work is gaining teachers' trust in order to be able to provide support and feedback around instruction. This was reflected on the survey, with 100% of survey respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that they felt supported and encouraged by the principal; all respondents also agreed or strongly agreed that they respect and support the principal.

Additionally, one of the coaches spoke at length about building trust with teachers in order to build relationships that allowed her to have difficult conversations with hem. She said,

> Have I had to have some frank conversations? Absolutely. But I feel like I can do that now because I have developed the relationship to say, "Time out; let's just talk about this." I know it feels uncomfortable. Personally, my personal growth happens when I'm uncomfortable.

Another coach also reported that his work to meet the district's and school's goals of integrating technology has been well received because of the level of trust and collegiality. The assistant principal stated that the round tables used in the school symbolize the commitment of the administrators to sit and talk with staff to work through things together. Similarly, the principal noted the importance of building trust between staff so they could use student data collaboratively to improve student learning. The high level of trust was also seen in the survey data. All of the respondents reported that they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "I feel accepted and respected by most staff members." All survey respondents also agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "Overall, school staff members respect each other and interact in positive ways." The survey also reflected the high levels of collaboration reported by coaches and teachers in their weekly team meetings, with 97% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement, "Staff members routinely cooperate and work together at this school."

Vision, Mission, Core Values, Focusing on Middle School Students

In describing the vision of Roaring Gap, the assistant principal stressed the importance of not just learning but also of whole child well-being. The principal reiterated this vision for Roaring Gap, stating,

> My vision for this school is that the kids have a place to come where it's safe and they can learn and that they can go to any staff member and we're going to help. Help them not just become better learners, which is our primary goal – the community expects us to do that – but to also make good decisions that reflect on their character as well.

He also stated his belief in the importance of culture at the middle school level:

> You've got to have a culture where kids enjoy coming to school, where they feel safe to take risks, and we're going to challenge them, and it's ok if they don't reach it the first time.

The principal credited PBIS with contributing to a positive culture in the school that places students at the center and in which teachers take responsibility for "their own kids and their own classrooms." A counselor concurred that PBIS, in concert with the leadership of the principal, has created a positive environment that focuses on kids. A teacher also identified the leadership of the principal in creating this culture, but also noted the contribution of teachers:

> I think the culture is a very caring, respectful culture. I think it's modeled by the teachers as well. The teachers show respect to each other. They show respect to the children. It's a very positive environment, and it's all modeled by the adults in the school, and I think that makes a huge difference and impact on the culture of the school.

Another part of the positive culture identified by the principal was the importance of a shared growth mindset:

> You might not be able to do it yet but sooner or later you will. So we really focus on our culture first and that has allowed us, I think to really push our kids, and we've really worked on that -- the attribute of perseverance with our kids, stick to it and keep working hard.

He continued to explain that this is a perspective that he, and the previous principal, had worked to get the whole staff rallied around. One special education teacher spoke of maintaining high expectations for all students:

> And no matter if you're a high-achieving student or significantly below grade level, the expectation still *is* we expect you to do your *best*. We expect you to show growth, make growth.

Similarly one of the counselors stated,

> I define success as growth, not necessarily always meeting standards that are set, but showing growth, if they're learning. I'm not 100% satisfied with that but I can work with it. I think that's the most important part.

Common Core Learning Standards and Implementation

> *When you look at the Common Core, as it has come across as a set of curricular expectations, how can you argue with it?*   – superintendent

Commitment to Standards for All Students

The superintendent stated he took care to separate the Common Core Learning Standards from the state testing and APPR in his communications in order to focus on what students should learn, rather than allowing his message to be muddied by frustrations over the assessments or their use in teacher evaluations. Teachers stated that when the Standards, along with APPR, were rolled out in the district, administrators did not just tell them they were doing it, but explained why the Standards were good for kids. Teachers cited the strong leadership not only of administrators, but also of teachers who shared their understandings of the Standards with one another, as creating a positive energy around the Common Core. While one district administrator noted resistance on the part of some teachers, most teachers articulated positive aspects to the Standards. As an example of this pattern, a teacher stated, "I love that we've raised the rigor." A special educator expressed commitment to the CCLS for special education students, stating,

> It's enhanced our ability to know what our target is. It's narrowed it. It's focused it and when we talk about it, everybody – all the kids – it doesn't matter – they're *all* our kids. These are the competencies they're going to have to demonstrate along with their gen ed peers. In my mind [the Standards] kind of leveled the expectation of that playing field— of the playground that we're all on. I think it's great. I really do. I think it gives us a common target, a common goal to work towards.

Special education teachers, such as the one quoted above, identified the CCLS as a source for IEP goals and spoke about the depth associated with the Standards providing their students with additional time to meet the Standards. Likewise, an ESL teacher stated that after a difficult first year, the ELA modules for English Language Learners on EngageNY were providing both structure and the means to differentiate for her students while also helping her help them to access the curriculum. Survey results support teachers' sentiments that all students can learn, with 100% agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement, "I believe all students can learn." Teachers expressed taking ownership of that learning, with all survey respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statements, "I feel it is part of my responsibility to help all students learn and achieve" and "I am certain I am making a difference in the lives of the students."

A Continuous Improvement Approach to Curriculum

As a district administrator stated, "The goal is to have that well-defined, guaranteed curriculum." A curriculum director reported that the Common Core Standards have helped the district unify its curriculum, stating,

> I definitely think there was a "used to be" and now there's a "now we…" and the biggest example was under the older standards, everybody did their own thing. Now we are saying, "These are the units. This is how we are going to consistently make sure these anchor standards will be addressed and assessed."

This district administrator also identified conversations about curriculum as one way the district works to meet the needs of all learners:

> With the whole idea that all students can get there, sometimes we have to have conversations about how to break down the work in order to get all students there, and sometimes we have to have conversations that are programmatic conversations.

A district administration stated that data from formative assessments, district assessments, and state assessments are used "to identify the areas that we need to improve upon in our program." The demonstrated culture of continuous improvement at both Roaring Gap Middle School and the district office appears to have supported the CCLS instructional shifts and increased consistency from classroom to classroom.

An important feature of Roaring Gap with regard to how the CCLS were received relates to this ongoing attention to revising the curriculum that reportedly began prior to the implementation of the Standards. The instructional coaches and directors said that similar to curriculum work they had done before the CCLS, they worked with teachers to crosswalk the Standards and their existing curriculum. A director noted, "We have really tried to work on filtering through things so that, instead of just saying that everything's new, we're incorporating the Common Core standards." Now in the third year of implementation of the CCLS, Roaring Gap educators and leaders expressed an understanding that the changes needed to achieve targeted student outcomes would be incremental. Teachers and content area directors spoke of the work done by teachers over the summer to review and revise the district's curriculum maps, and the math director identified geometry as an area for curricular revision next summer.

The superintendent described the process of integrating the Common Core instructional modules into the district's existing curriculum:

> What we do is when we get the units, we use them, we implement them, and then we analyze them and look at which aspects of these units do we think help our kids become

more successful and then we incorporate them into our district curriculum and those that we don't, we throw away and that's what our instruction office does.

Instructional office staff at the district concurred. The ELA director noted that she will be working with the teachers, and particularly teacher leaders in her content area, to determine whether to integrate more of the modules or whether to continue to develop their own instructional units. In creating new units, she stated they have been vigilant about ensuring the texts used are at the appropriate Lexile levels for each grade and moving texts between grades as needed. The math director spoke of the work done to integrate the new Standards into their common assessments, as well as curriculum mapping work done every summer. She noted that teachers from all grade levels and all of the buildings come together to develop curriculum maps, which are then entered into the Rubicon Atlas program for all teachers to access at will and use. She reported this work places the Standards at the center and uses student assessment data to guide revisions. The math director also noted that the math departments at the two middle schools meet monthly to discuss unit assessment results in the context of the curriculum. As evidence of the continuous and ongoing refinement of the curriculum and common assessments, a common phrase repeated by staff and administrators was, "We are not there yet."

Curricular Coherence and Teacher Flexibility

I do believe that it's important for us to have a curriculum that identifies what every student needs to know, understand and be able to do. And that curriculum needs to be taught consistently in every single classroom. Now each teacher might have a different way of teaching it, but it's important that at the end of the unit or the end of a course or the end of a grade level that we know exactly what every child was able to master to the best of their ability for that given year or course. – district administrator

District administrators expressed an expectation that teachers follow the curriculum maps and calendars, and teachers reported expectations to use the aligned essential questions and learning objectives. However the need for flexibility in teaching the curriculum was also identified. One director stated,

I think that they [the teachers] do need flexibility and they do need to explore their own path of instruction. So if one teacher is more apt to incorporate more fish bowl as a strategy or more technology as a strategy, I *want* them to have that flexibility, but Standards are consistent and the core text is consistent and we have developed a calendared curriculum so that we know when different Standards are going to be taught and assessed.

Special education teachers also reported flexibility in working with their students, teaching things in multiple ways, depending on the learner. The emphasis on flexible implementation

appears to relate to the emphasis on differentiated instruction to meet individual needs identified by the superintendent and the assistant superintendent for human resources.

Although flexibility in instruction and differentiation were cited, there were a number of similarities in the classroom instruction observed. In the ELA classes, for example, teachers allotted time to review learning objectives and draw attention to targeted vocabulary. These teachers provided a mix of explicit instruction and guided practices, with opportunities for students to work in pairs and small groups to practice independently. Similarly, math instructors utilized a mix of modeling and whole-class guided practice with small-group, paired and independent practice. In one math class, students were grouped based on assessment scores, and each group was tasked over a period of time in moving through leveled sets of problems at their own pace.

Approach to APPR

> *We have a very collaborative approach to it [APPR] when it comes to working with the teachers' association and the district and the leadership staff. They made sure it was a very collaborative process and they built off the strengths that were there already. Obviously, complying with the state regulations, but also trying to incorporate the district culture into that and I think there's been a real attitude of professional growth.*

Administrators at both the district (as exemplified in the above quote) and school level appear to have taken a strengths-based approach to APPR implementation, with a focus on professional growth in order to support student growth. The superintendent stated that the APPR plan focuses more on common assessments developed in the district than the state assessments. As an example of the alignment of the APPR plan with district goals, a district administrator reported,

> There's something unique in this district called the structured review, which is an additional activity that teachers do, where they pick a goal to focus on from Danielson and they gather all the evidence.

At Roaring Gap, three focus areas of the Danielson Rubric were chosen: setting instructional outcomes; establishing a culture of learning; and engaging students for learning. The assistant principal noted that in addition to these districtwide goals from the Danielson Rubric, he's encouraged the teachers he supervises to make questioning and discussion techniques one of their personal goals, as well as encouraging Earth Science teachers to focus on demonstrating flexibility and responsiveness to support engaging all students to be successful in preparation for the Earth Science Regent's Exam. He provided an example of how he tallied questions and wait times in an observation to provide a teacher with feedback around questioning techniques.

Many administrators in the district reported viewing APPR as a tool to improve teaching and learning. One stated, for example, "When you truly get your teachers up there in those four areas

of performance, that's where we're going to see more improvement with our kids." Both the assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction and the assistant superintendent for human resources noted that teachers are on a continuum and that they need to support teachers that are developing by providing resources. The director of professional development noted that one of her major goals was to help teachers learn what they need to in order to do the APPR process well.

Resources appear to have also been committed to support building administrators in carrying out their observations and providing feedback to teachers. A district administrator noted the use of video clips, modeling, and peer observation activities to support principals. The assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction and the curriculum directors reported conducting walkthroughs with principals to compare notes and provide feedback to principals in their approach to working with teachers around instruction. The director of professional development reported modeling for coaches and administrators the type of conversations she would like to see, using videotapes of conversations and having teachers provide feedback on conversations about instruction. The district has taken the approach from the book *You Don't Have to Be Bad to Get Better* to structure work with principals and feedback to teachers. Both the assistant superintendent for human resources and the professional development director mentioned summer leadership development for principals. One district administrator described the previous summer's work as being, "really around, 'how do we take APPR and the whole system from being just a compliance issue for teacher evaluation and making it, transforming it, so it's also a -- more so a vehicle for professional growth and the ongoing conversations?'"

At the building level, the principal identified the importance of trust in the process of working with teachers around instruction, stating,

> My goal this year is to give feedback in a way that is that people can hear it and value it, because I want them to feel like they are a really important part of our process. To me, trust is really important.

The principal stated that the book, *You Don't Have to Be Bad to Get Better*, has provided strategies for providing feedback to teachers that makes them feels safe so that they are able to hear and process these conversations. Similarly, the math coach reported using her first year in the building to develop trust with teachers that allows her to have the kinds of difficult conversation with teachers that she feels contributes to their professional growth. The math coach, along with the assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction, noted that keeping students at the center of these conversations has helped teachers be more receptive to feedback.

Meanwhile, district administrators mentioned growing pains in implementing the new APPR plan and teachers expressed some frustration with the process. Special education teachers, in particular, expressed that the rubric did not fit well with their work. Although there was some

tension around the use of student scores for these teachers, they expressed support of the growth model used for students with special needs. Another special education teacher expressed somewhat grudging acceptance of the use of assessment scores, saying,

> I've turned the corner on APPR – to grow and learn. I've accepted that I will never be highly effective – it's going to be difficult – the kids are going to grow – but only 59% pass the test.

Teachers' Instruction and Practice

> *Within the last 2 years one of the biggest things [in response to the focus for instructional change] has been to ask the questions, use the wait time, and have them [students] talk with one another.*   – building administrator

> *We just found a new [computer] program that allows us to video a lesson but stop the lesson and ask kids questions while they're engaged in it, so now we know they are not passively involved in it. It's going to make them a little more actively involved. It's all new. It's a combination of mini-lessons, whole-group lessons, and group work. You saw that. So the flow of instruction is very different. It's not stand and deliver.*
> - instructional coach

Engaging Lessons

> *What it [effective instruction] looks like when you go in the classroom? That the kids are all cognitively engaged. How do I know they're cognitively engaged? They can tell you what they're doing. They can tell you why they're doing it, and their voice is heard in the classroom. It's not just a teacher's voice.*   –principal

Engaging students in learning was reported to be one of the districtwide goals, and the principal stated he looks for cognitive engagement during walkthroughs and observations as expressed in the quote above. He also stated he expects to see students learning together and teachers providing individualized feedback, explaining, "Students have to engage in resourcing the materials to be successful." Observations revealed teachers engaging students in whole-group guided instruction during which teachers used scaffolding by questioning and reviewing previous material. Teachers made connections to prior learning as well as student interests, for example quoting from *Harry Potter* in a lesson on mythology, and students providing examples of facts and opinion from *Star Wars*.

Teachers were observed making use of paired and small-group work, providing students an opportunity to practice skills together as well. In an ELA class, a teacher provided silent reading time for students to engage with the mythology texts and then directed students to move around

and discuss what they had highlighted in the text in what he called a "mix and mingle." One special educator highlighted that such opportunities support students with special needs, stating,

> Students have multiple opportunities to speak with one another before giving an answer in class. So I think just hearing their classmates' interpretation of something or their background knowledge, utilizing each other, you know, like a classroom community, helps instead of just the teacher being the sole dispenser of knowledge.

A similar approach was seen in a math class where the teacher assigned students to leveled problem packets, allowing students to work individually or in small groups. In one group, students were observed keeping each other on task, checking each other's work, and encouraging one another. In another math class, students worked in small groups on a set of problems, and teachers circulated to the groups to provide feedback. In the third math class observed, turn and talks were observed within the teacher's guided practice.

Both the principal and the math director noted the importance of using learning objectives to engage students. Learning objectives were evident in both ELA and math classes – on smart boards and the like, with teachers referencing them to pull students in and focus on the task at hand. In interviews, teachers reported using learning objectives that align with the curriculum map and unpacking them with their students. In an ELA class two teachers set the overall learning target of writing a gist statement and then the immediate task at hand, highlighting facts and opinions to support their gist statement:

> Teacher 1: We have two targets: I will be able to write gists about an article - - this subheading here – is our next chunk – we will be writing a gist about a patriotic exercise – that will be step 2.
> Teacher 2: Maybe you can help me with this -- we need highlighters – highlight 3 facts in pink and 3 opinions in yellow – turn and talk – what's the difference between a fact and opinion?

In addition, administrators and teachers identified technology as an important strategy to engage students. The use of one-to-one computing was observed in several classrooms with students using Chromebooks. In an ELA class, students used the Chromebooks to access a digital visual organizer as well as an article from *Scholastic*. They also used the Chromebooks to write their gist statements. In a math class, students also had Chromebooks where they could access the answer keys to the problem set if needed. Another math teacher referenced the videos that accompany the text series. One math teacher used an iPad to write on and project onto the smart board. Although the videos mentioned by teachers and the math coach were not observed, students in one math classroom asked about whether there was a video for the lesson. An ESL teacher stated that while she does not have her own set of Chromebooks for students, she is able to take her class to the library to make use of the iPads and iPods loaded with translation and other software.

Positive Classroom Dynamics

Teachers' creation of a positive classroom climates echo the principal's desire to make Roaring Gap a school where students want to be and teachers want to teach. In several classroom observations, teachers were seen engaging with students around their extra-curricular activities and interests, their family members, or other activities in an effort to draw out prior experience and background knowledge at the service of the learning. In classroom observations, a comfortable banter between teachers and students was noted, along with students demonstrating their desire to please their teachers. In one math lesson, students genuinely cheered for one another as they corrected their math fluency exercise. In another math class, students working in groups encouraged one another as in this short vignette:

> Two students work together on leveled math problems.
> Student 1 checks Student 2's work and says, "Ta Da!"
> Both students express a sense of accomplishment and move onto the next, harder set of
>   problems,
> Student 1 says to Student 2, "You can do this!"
> Although Student 2 responds "Not really," he starts the problem anyway.

Student engagement in the classroom was supported by what teachers described as manageable class sizes. School board documents identify 24 students as the maximum at the middle level, and the superintendent cited the Tennessee STAR study as a rationale for maintaining small class sizes throughout the district. Teachers identified small class sizes as contributing to the development of strong relationships between teachers and students. Additionally, the districtwide approach of using inclusion/push-in models for students identified for special education services, AIS, and ESL further increase the contact between students who might otherwise be isolated from mainstream classroom teachers and peers. A special education teacher stated,

> I think in many classrooms, because there are so many adults, from teachers to special
> education teachers to paraprofessionals to itinerant teachers who are there, [like] reading
> specialists, I think there's multiple opportunities for student-teacher engagement one-on-
> one.

As evidence of this inclusion/push-in pattern, in a classroom observed, a lead teacher, special education teacher, paraprofessional, and a student teacher worked with 18 students; and in another classroom, an ELA teacher was joined by social studies and AIS teachers to support 10 students. The ESL teacher also reported pushing into classes to provide support to English language learners.

Instructional Shifts and Continuity

> *They did a tremendous amount of work on the shifts in both ELA and math, and really understanding, "What does that mean in terms of classroom teacher and student behavior?"*
> — district administrator

District administrators emphasized the work of integrating the instructional shifts of the Common Core into the district curriculum. In ELA, reported or observed instructional shifts included: assuring appropriate Lexile levels for core texts at each grade, the use of nonfiction texts, focused attention to academic vocabulary, and emphasis on the use of text-based evidence in student work. Additionally, the assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction emphasized the need for students to engage with technology in order to develop digital and global literacies. In one ELA class (excerpted in the vignette above) these shifts were evident by the use of a nonfiction text from Junior Scholastic in a lesson on using Claim, Evidence and Interpretation (CEI) in a written response to the text. The objective of this lesson was to use the article to answer the prompt, "Should the words 'under God' be removed from the Pledge of Allegiance?" The teacher engaged students in a review of related academic vocabulary, including "violate" and "disrespect." In building to the main lesson, the teacher also asked students to share examples of fact and opinion with one another and reviewed the text features, including subheadings and pictures. The teacher then led the students through a guided practice of writing a gist for the first portion of the text, reminding them to go back to the text for details. As discussed earlier, students were directed to highlight fact in one color and opinion in another color as they were reading. This teacher reported that the CEI was a helpful strategy to guide student writing.

In another ELA class observed, a lesson was informed by the expeditionary learning units of study that can be found on the EngageNY website. Students were engaged in similar work, following these two "I can" statements (i.e., learning objectives): "I can get the gist of my expert group," and "I can collect details from my myth to determine a theme." Students independently engaged with a variety of mythology texts and had the opportunity to discuss them together in small groups. The teacher also provided support and guidance through questioning individual students as they were reading. The long-term objective was to develop a literary essay based on the mythology themes. This lesson was informed by an EngageNY ELA instructional module. Such uses of the expeditionary learning instructional modules along with other units were reported to be common practice by the instructional coach.

In math, instructional shifts observed or reported included fluency practice, conceptual understanding, and application, including teachers' encouragement of students to use multiple strategies to come to an answer. In one math class where students were working on operations using fractions, following the warm up, the teacher had students do a timed math sprint. After reviewing the warm up and the sprints, the teacher divided the class into leveled groups to work

on more problems, which the teacher indicated was application of the skills they have been working on. In another math class, a teacher working on distance problems emphasized the concept of absolute value and rational numbers, walking students through an example of finding range and probing their thinking. Students then applied the concept of absolute value in finding distances working in small groups. In the third math class, students were solving word problems using algebraic equations and graphs, as well as other strategies like skip counting and tables.

A district administrator mentioned one of the challenges with Common Core math was skills moving from one grade to another, yet this difficulty was mitigated by implementation of a Common Core aligned math program early in the implementation. A teacher hailed the quality of the math program they implemented,

> I love it [the math program]– if we didn't move to it three years ago we wouldn't have been ready for Common Core. It was written for Common Core. Without this we would have only been guessing.

Math teachers also lauded the program for its use of videos that students can watch on the Chromebooks, and the ability for homework to be done online.

Continuous Assessment to Guide Instruction.

The assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction stated that she believes the push for accountability and the use of assessments has brought testing to the forefront and created a focus on how students are responding to instruction and in turn providing important information to transform teaching and learning. District administrators have created their own assessments that they believe align with the Common Core Learning Standards and the district curriculum maps. One administrator stated, "We believe in multiple measurements, so we do have different data points." She described these assessments as existing on a continuum, including on-demand multiple choice and short-response assessments, embedded performance tasks, and formative assessments. She identified using this range of assessments as an important strategy in monitoring student performance. A curriculum director also mentioned "using the NWEA map reports and using them to really inform our practice."

The NWEA and Read 180, along with the Linkit program used for district common assessments, all provide access to student test scores directly to teachers. Teachers, working in their grade-level school-based inquiry teams use these data along with formative assessment data and student work samples, to create action plans for improving instruction. As mentioned above, these school-based inquiry teams are guided by the work of Paul Bambrick-Santoyo on data driven instruction.

In alignment with the assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction's identification of the importance of formative assessments, teachers were observed using them in class. These formative assessments took the form of math warm ups and exit tickets, as well as continuous questioning by teachers to check for understanding. Additionally, a teacher was observed asking students to evaluate their own learning using fist to fives and thumbs up/thumbs down strategies. In one math class students were asked to jot down their learning for the period. Teachers and administrators noted that the use of Chromebooks and Google Docs also allowed teachers to assess student writing in real time and provide immediate feedback.

Student data are also used to create student groups. In follow-up conversations to classroom observations, two teachers noted the use of groupings based on assessment data. In one case, students were assigned to start at different levels for math problems and in the other, students were grouped by what part of the Claim, Evidence, Interpretation structure they most needed to work on. These groupings were reported to be flexible, based on data, allowing students to move between groups as needed.

Multiple sources of assessment data are also used to provide tiered interventions to students. The assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction reported that they use the state assessments, along with the NWEA assessments, class performance, running reading record information, and the district's writing rubric to determine which students need additional support. Additionally, the director of ELA noted that the decision to purchase the Read 180 program to support struggling readers in the 6th grade was based on student assessment data. This online program provides data on student reading levels, and the director of ELA noted that in only nine weeks students have shown growth in their Lexile levels.

Differentiated Support

District administrators reported setting the expectation that teachers tailor instruction so that it meets the needs of individual students. A district administrator identified multiple tools available to teachers so that they can track individual student progress and adapt their instruction or utilize interventions as needed. Another identified differentiated instruction as the key skill he looks for in new teacher hires:

> We're looking for people who know how to differentiate and meet all learners' needs, who know that level one RTI stuff and are able to do it in the classroom and are able to work with different strategies and to be tenacious about it.

He described differentiation in the classroom as,

It's that understanding that I may need to tweak a lesson depending on students' needs and it's really about my grouping strategies. So I think, when I boil down differentiation and I go into a classroom, the thing that's a telltale sign for me, on the most basic level is, if it's whole group there's a problem. If it's done with flexible groupings or different regrouping of kids throughout the day or the week or the unit, that means that the person is differentiating to some degree.

This type of differentiation was in evidence in the classes we observed. Teachers were observed grouping students and were supported in meeting the needs of groups by instructional coaches, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals in the classrooms. One teacher stated she used heterogeneous groupings based on student data and rotates the groups halfway through each unit. She also noted that some groups have multiple students with special needs, allowing a special educator or paraprofessional to work more easily with a small group inside the classroom.

The principal voiced his expectation for differentiating instruction and personalized feedback, "You should see some sort of assessment, feedback . . . by the teachers for *individual* kids." Teachers were observed moving around to individual and small groups of students to provide feedback. As an example, in an ELA class, a teacher provided this feedback, "How come you underlined this then erased it? You found the detail . . . now in your own words you write what it means." This teacher also engaged with a student around her word choice,

T: Is this the word you wanted? Some interesting words…boast – what does that mean? Tell? Yes – why wouldn't they just say, "She said?" What is it called when someone goes around school and says, "I'm really pretty, I'm the best," . . . what's another word? Starts with a b ends with a g.
S: Brag?
T: Good!

Such one-on-one interactions were common in the classrooms we observed and suggest a shared strategy among teachers to provide individualized support through the use of questioning and feedback to students as they complete work in groups, pairs or independently.

Student Social and Emotional Developmental Health

PBIS has really changed the culture in a lot of ways, too. It's not so much looking for kids to do their own things, but to try to create an environment where we're really encouraging them to do the right things.   - counselor

It's a really welcoming environment. The kids are all great. Like I have not seen too much of any kind of bullying or any kind of negative attitudes between the kids. They are all really supportive of one another. The teachers are very positive.   - teacher

Positive Behavior Intervention Supports and Positive School Climate

District administrators, teachers, staff, and building administrators all noted the positive climate in the building as mentioned earlier, and many attributed it to the implementation of Positive Behaviorial Interventions and Supports at the middle school, as well as at the elementary schools that feed into the middle school. A curriculum director stated, "PBIS is another huge factor in the success of the culture of the school," and "PBIS has created a nurturing environment for teachers and for students to students." A coach stated,

> [The] PBIS program here . . . I think has been wildly successful. . . . I feel there's a heart here. The kids genuinely like each other, that there's a sense of this place being theirs. You know I feel that's really a sense here. There's like, you know, less meanness, like the idea of kids kind of respecting each other is something that happens every day, and I'm always catching kids doing that.

At the middle school, PBIS implementation reportedly revolves around five character traits, which the principal identified as being "respectful, responsible, caring, trustworthy, and ready to learn." Building administrators and teachers also spoke about perseverance as a character trait they hope to develop in students, particularly in the face of the new challenges students face in achieving well on the state assessments.

The principal and teachers credited PBIS as giving staff a common language and providing tools for teaching students what respect and responsibility look like. The counselors and support staff reported that the PBIS behavior expectations are so well known that students will help each other stick to them and help new students learn the ropes. Responses to the survey revealed a similar sense of the consistency in dealing with student behavior. Of those that responded to the survey, 94% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "Rules for student behavior are consistently enforced by staff in this school."

The assistant principal, who deals with discipline, stated he may go a month without seeing a student sent from class for behavior issues, and teachers agreed that behavior is not a problem in the school, crediting the behavior expectations, as well as a caring and respectful school climate. The assistant superintendent for student services also noted that since the district implemented PBIS, behavior referrals are down. One teacher said,

> I think that there's caring from the top right on down, and we think of people as individuals, and the kids really do care about each other. They don't always act as best friends, but they, for the most part, they just care about their learning. They care about each other. They care about the building itself. They care about their teachers.

The principal was credited with setting this tone, and teachers mentioned that through collaboration and co-teaching, teachers model respect for students.

The PBIS team reportedly is responsible for character trait assemblies, and the assistant superintendent for student services described a recent one on kindness where teachers spoke about what it means to be kind and students shared examples of times people were kind to them. As mentioned in the introduction, a hallway display of arrows traces acts of student kindness towards one another. A PBIS hall of fame is also posted in the hallway, updated every two weeks with students chosen by their teachers as exemplars of the five character traits.

Like most everything else in the school and district, PBIS implementation is reported to be a collaborative team effort. The PBIS team at Roaring Gap is led by a social worker who is the PBIS coach for the building and a team of approximately twelve staff who volunteer. This group includes members from across all three grades. The assistant principal reportedly takes a particular interest in bullying prevention and oversees the PBIS team. Also in keeping with district priorities on using data, PBIS team members reported that the team works to gather feedback from teachers and students through surveys, focus groups, and monthly meetings. Such feedback has helped them address particular issues, such as when students brought classroom disruptions to the team's attention.

The principal credited PBIS with contributing to a positive climate in the school for both students and adults, noting PBIS is about the behaviors of everyone in the school: Children and adults. Reflecting this, the principal reported the student survey data showed that 86% of his students reported they enjoyed coming to school every day. A social worker reiterated this, stating: "Kids really like coming to school at Roaring Gap and I know it's not because they're messing around with their friends in the hallway." The survey results collected in this study showed similar high levels of respect, with 100% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement, "Overall, the students at my school respect and respond to adults."

The careful attention to the implementation of PBIS in the school reflects the middle school teachers' and principal's philosophy of the importance of educating the whole child at the middle school level as well as the district mission to nurture a culture that supports the development of the whole child.

Extracurricular Activities

Emphasis on involvement in activities outside of the classroom is also a trait at Roaring Gap, where an after-school bussing initiative enables a large number of students to participate in extracurricular activities. One administrator reported, "There's more active clubs here I think than [at] our high school, which is amazing." The school offers an impressive array of clubs and

activities that show strong participation, and educators demonstrated a willingness to expand the array when students indicate interest. The assistant principal noted that the principal has made efforts to ensure clubs match a wide range of student interests beyond athletics such as chess and robotics. The ESL teacher stated a couple of her students were on the soccer team, and the coach would reach out to her for support in working with them. Educators indicated that if students show an interest, there seems to always be a willing adult ready to "step up" and provide the opportunity for them – whether or not they get paid for doing so.

Family Engagement Strategies and Community Partnerships

I think our parent communication in this building is superb, and we have a parent portal. We have letters sent home all the time and communication before there's a failure. I just think it's pretty amazing work.   - teacher

Positive Family Relationships

Faculty and administrators indicated that the school has a prominent place "in the center of the community." The superintendent identified parent engagement as one of the five focus areas of the district improvement plan and according to the assistant superintendent for student support, each school is able to develop its own plan to meet this goal. She stated that this allows each school to take into consideration that parent involvement naturally looks different at the middle-school level than it does at the elementary or high school level. The assistant principal reported a strong turnout at parent teacher conferences, with one session during the school day and one in the evening for parents who cannot attend during the day.

While parent engagement strategies were typical for this type of middle school, administrators, faculty, and staff consistently articulated that relationships with parents and the community are positive. One school administrator attempts to establish relationships with parents "before we have to talk in a less positive situation," and encourages the faculty to do the same. A teacher reiterated the importance placed on "communication before there's a failure." This communication takes many forms, including phone calls to parents and newsletters from the principal. A teacher also identified teacher letters and the online parent portal as supporting communication with parents.

Such technology assists communication with parents both at school and district levels. One teacher reminded students of an upcoming exam, stating, "emails went home." The principal reported that he uses an online tool to share information and photos of classroom activities with parents. Teachers reported that the principal also uses Twitter and Facebook to communicate about the PBIS work at the middle school. Administrators noted that parents have online access to teachers' grade books, allowing them to easily keep up with their child's work as well. Additionally, a lengthy YouTube video of the superintendent explaining the proposed

restructuring changes could be found easily on the district's web site during the lead up to the full-day kindergarten and reorganization vote.

Administrators look to parents for district goal setting. The superintendent and a teacher on special assignment mentioned the use of parent surveys in the annual district goal setting, and the assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction noted conversations with the parent advisory council also play a role. The principal is reported to be appreciated for his attendance at events such as concerts and games and his efforts to interact with families within such venues.

Partnerships with Institutions of Higher Education

Roaring Gap Middle School and the district are located near several colleges, and administrators have active relationships with three of them. The district has partnered with one private university to provide professional development. The math coach described week-long professional development activities with the university faculty, and the ESL teacher mentioned going to a training on the campus. The director of special education also noted that a teacher and school psychologist have received training in behavior consultation from university faculty.

The district partners with one college to provide a technology program for female and minority students that allows them to take classes on campus and provides Saturday classes, tutors, and college tours. The assistant superintendent for human resources mentioned he was pursuing a new relationship with one of the public colleges to host student teachers as a way to build a pool of potential candidates for the few openings they have and to see teachers in action before hiring them. He added that in the future, he envisions this college being able to provide methods classes in the district's schools, which would also benefit in-service teachers in the district.

In a Nutshell

District goals, developed using student data and input from multiple stakeholders, guide the school improvement plan at Roaring Gap. The district has established structures and processes to support teachers and administrators in meeting these goals, such as instructional coaches and embedded professional development on school-based inquiry. District administrators work closely with the school-building leaders around classroom instruction. The intentionality of the district is also seen in the commitment to PBIS, character education, and maintaining small caseloads for social workers and counselors who provide support for social and emotional development.

Appendix: School Climate Survey Results

Prior to the University at Albany team visit to Roaring Gap, a school climate survey was distributed to all middle school staff members, including instructional staff, administrators, and support staff. This survey was designed to explore how the school's personnel feel about the quality of school life and character. The survey was distributed electronically. A total of 33 responses were received. To keep responses anonymous, no identifying information was collected. School personnel were asked to respond to a series of questions about their perceptions of the school's principal, their beliefs about student behavior at the school, their beliefs about student learning and engagement, and their beliefs about school climate and respect. They were asked to respond to statements on a 4-point scale (Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, or Strongly Disagree). Responses are reported here in aggregate form, as a percentage of total responses, as shown in Table 1 and summarized below.

Respondents' Attitudes and Beliefs about the Principal (Part A). Overall, respondents were overwhelmingly positive in their responses about the principal. All (100%) respondents reported that they either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that the principal sets priorities, makes plans, and sees that plans are carried out. All respondents also agreed or strongly agreed with statements that they feel supported and encouraged by the principal and that the principal communicates what kind of school he wants. Furthermore, all of the respondents also agreed or strongly agreed that the majority of staff members respect and support the principal.

Respondents' Attitudes and Beliefs about Student Behavior (Part B). Respondents were generally positive about student conduct. In fact, all (100%) respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the students respect and respond to adults. Respondents also reported positive beliefs that the principal backs them up when addressing student behavior; 100% strongly agreed or agreed with this statement. When asked whether they agreed or disagreed that the principal enforces student conduct rules, the majority of respondents reported that they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. Additionally, 94% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that school staff consistently enforce student behavior rules.

Respondents' Attitudes and Beliefs about Engagement with Learning (Part C). Respondents were also very positive in their responses about student learning. When asked whether they agreed or disagreed that students are actively engaged in learning at school, 100% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed. Additionally, all respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "I believe all students can learn." All responders also agreed or strongly agreed that it was part of their responsibility to help all students learn and achieve, with 76% strongly agreeing. Lastly, all respondents also reported they are certain that they are making a difference in the lives of the students attending this school.

Respondents' Attitudes and Beliefs about School Climate and Respect (Part D). Many respondents were positive in their beliefs about cooperative work and mutually respectful relationships within the school. All respondents (100%) reported agreement (Strongly Agree or Agree) with statements about feeling accepted and respected by other staff members. Furthermore, 97% of staff members agreed or strongly agreed that staff members routinely cooperate and work together. All respondents also agreed that school staff members respect each other and interact in positive ways and that students respect each other and interact in positive ways. All respondents reported feeling that it is part of their responsibility to help students treat each other respectfully. Furthermore, 70% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with a statement about receiving a great deal of support from parents.

Table 1: Staff Beliefs

Staff members were asked to what extent they agree with the following statements:	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
A. Responses concerning the principal				
Overall, the principal consistently supports and encourages staff members.	70%	30%	---	---
The majority of staff members respects and supports the principal.	55%	45%	---	---
The principal sets priorities, makes plans, and sees that plans are carried out.	55%	45%	---	---
The principal communicates to the staff what kind of school he or she wants.	70%	30%	---	---
B. Responses concerning student conduct				
My principal enforces school rules for student conduct.	56%	44%	---	---
My principal backs me up when I address student behavior.	55%	45%	---	---
Rules for student behavior are consistently enforced by staff in this school.	39%	55%	6%	---
Overall, the students at my school respect and respond to adults.	45%	55%	---	---
C. Responses concerning student engagement & learning				
Overall, our students are actively engaged in learning while at school.	48%	52%	---	---
I believe all students can learn.	79%	21%	---	---
I am certain I am making a difference in the lives of the students attending this school.	33%	67%	---	---
I feel it is part of my responsibility to help all students learn and achieve at this school.	76%	24%	---	---
D. Responses concerning school climate & respect				
I receive a great deal of support from parents for the work	9%	61%	30%	---

that I do.				
Staff members routinely cooperate and work together at this school.	48%	48%	3%	---
I feel accepted and respected by most staff members.	42%	58%	---	---
I feel it is part of my responsibility to help students treat each other respectfully.	73%	27%	---	---
Overall, students respect each other and interact in positive ways.	36%	64%	---	---
Overall, school staff members respect each other and interact in positive ways.	42%	58%	---	---

Totals may not equal 100% because of rounding.