Sage City[1] Middle School

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[1] Sage City is a pseudonym

Sage City Middle School

[There is] a sense here that the Common Core Standards, separate from testing strategies and teacher evaluation, that the Standards themselves are not necessarily a bad thing.

– superintendent

I kind of liked going . . . to Common Core. I actually enjoy the amp up. – teacher

I don't think anybody is working harder because of APPR. I think we're working in a more stressed environment because of it. – teacher

Anything you see here – it's taken time to build. It's really been something that's been a project over time, and it's a great place. – teacher leader

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 state assessments.

The study sample included both odds-beating and typically performing schools. Sage City Middle School met the criteria as "odds beating" because the difference between expected and actual average performance on the 2013 CCLS-aligned state assessments was close to one standard deviation higher than that of other schools around the state and statistically significantly higher on three of the six comparisons. 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 assessments by having made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in two of the prior years 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. In the next section, we describe key features of this school and its district that might provide guidance or generate ideas as to how particular processes and practices can be developed and supported to achieve targeted student performance outcomes. 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.

School Context

Presently a composite of two municipalities with similar histories and demographics, the area that comprises the Sage City school district was largely agricultural until the late nineteenth century when it became a manufacturing center and a site that attracted upper class families as well. Socioeconomic diversity continues today, with both poor and affluent neighborhoods contributing to the district's diversity. "We really are a mix, and that's a good thing," said the superintendent, as he noted that children "that live in the manor have a different set of

experiences than kids that live maybe in a public housing apartment." Educators explained that they occasionally see some "tension between the two camps," as one stated it, although several educators pointed out that they also see unity in residents' pride in the diversity of their community, which offers a combination of city convenience and small-town charm coupled with what the superintendent called "an interesting mix of environmentalists, artists' groups, as well as caring parents." The superintendent and other key participants also emphasized the challenges of the departure of notable major industries from the area and a concurrent increase in poverty rates. Almost 60% of students now qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Meanwhile, per-pupil expenditures are over $20,000 annually and in keeping with those of similar school districts in this relatively affluent county.

In addition to socioeconomic diversity, the Sage City district also serves an increasingly linguistically diverse population (now over 50%): a quarter of its students are classified as English language learners (ELLs), most of whom are Spanish speaking. Hence, information sent to parents is presented in both Spanish and English. According to the middle school principal, these students come from a number of different countries in Central and South America. School leaders described attempts to meet their needs by providing bilingual instruction in core content areas as well as in art, music, drama, and physical education. The middle school website, which highlights academics, parent and student resources, and upcoming events such as musical productions, is presented in English but offers some materials in Spanish.

Sage City Middle School is a well-maintained, imposing building serving all of the district's sixth through eighth grade students, with close to 200 in each grade. Since the district uses the Princeton Plan, which groups all K-5 students by grade level rather than geography in its elementary schools, most students entering the middle school have already been together for many years. "It's not like all of a sudden all the neighborhood schools come together and in sixth grade [the students] have to figure out how to get along. They build friendships from their earliest days in school that last their entire career in education," said a district administrator. In the middle school, each building wing is dedicated to an individual grade, which serves to maintain grade-level unity and the feeling of identity as a specific learning community.

Highlights

Among the features that stand out at Sage City Middle School are the following.

A Welcoming Culture That Embraces Diversity and Attends to Developmental Needs

This district has a really amazing culture of everyone feeling like they belong.
– district administrator

Educators generally expressed that they do everything they can to make others feel welcomed and valued. Observations and discussions suggested that teachers and staff consciously model and promote what one described as a "nurturing" environment, encouraging students to help each other, to realize that they are not alone, and to embrace differences. "Every kid is so different and developing at different points," said one teacher, adding that the school gives them "a safe place" where they know that adults and other children will help and encourage them, whether they are

struggling with language barriers or with adolescence-related issues. Staff members responding to the online climate survey unanimously agreed with the idea that "it is part of my responsibility to help students treat each other respectfully."

Team-Based Professional Collaboration to Strengthen Instruction

We share everything – what works, what isn't working, lessons, periodic benchmark assessments, . . . [asking], "Where are the gaps, how do we close those gaps, what should we be focusing on?" There's a lot of dialogue that goes on. – teacher

Participants in focus groups and interviews described being a part of a variety of district- and school-based teams in which they collaborate regularly to improve instruction. The most in-depth dialogues were said to take place at the school level. Educators shared a sense of professional agency as they participate in instructional planning in their teams. As one explained, "I love the team model." The team approach "is a strong piece of how we do business here" and "a major reason for our success" according to other teachers, who emphasized "a lot of sharing going on." "We plan collaboratively, and we teach the same content at the same time, and that's true across the board – social studies teachers, science teachers, English teachers, math teachers are all covering the same content at the same time," said the middle school principal. "Staff members routinely cooperate and work together at this school" as 100% of survey respondents reported. "We work really closely together. The cohesion, the collaboration is so key" to success, a teacher emphasized.

Focus on Student-Centered, Personalized Learning

To me the middle school is really focusing on what the students need individually. – teacher

"Nobody here slips through the cracks," said one teacher in describing the emphasis on meeting the needs of every student. "It's really personalizing—[determining that] this kid needs this and this child needs [that], and this group needs this," added a colleague. Survey respondents gave unanimous agreement to the statement, "I feel it is part of my responsibility to help all students learn and achieve at this school." The middle school principal explained an instructional philosophy of student-centered rather than content-centered focus, and a teacher leader emphasized that the collective vision is "to ensure that whatever path a student ends up deciding upon, that we help them navigate that path from beginning to end."

Emphasis on College and Career Readiness

When you're twelve years old, it's hard to imagine life beyond age twelve. – teacher

Almost every educator mentioned that everyone is working to prepare students for college and career "so they're ready for the real world out there," as one teacher said. "I'm always telling the children about the importance of their education" and how they will build on these experiences as they move through high school and prepare to enter college or career, a faculty member emphasized. In keeping with an "understood" mission that seems deeply embedded in the school culture, educators stressed the importance of helping students to think long-term. "That would be

the gist I think of the mission statement," a teacher noted as she described supporting students with transitions in their academic careers by helping them to focus on long-term goals and keeping college and career "readiness at the forefront."

Using Data to Guide Instruction and Goal Setting

> *It's all data driven. Everything. It's all data driven.* - teacher

Analyzing data is "a very big part" of "what we do here," said a teacher leader. State assessment scores are a driving factor in student placement in courses and intervention programs, educators noted, but they also emphasized that teachers use a wide variety of data—formative assessments, benchmarks, reading level measures, homework, quizzes, for example—to determine instructional changes or interventions, both by groups of students and for individuals. Monitoring academic progress is not only a primary responsibility of faculty members, we were told, but also a skill that faculty can help students to develop. Teachers described using reflective activities and conferencing to help middle-school children determine how they are doing and how they can re-set their course in particular academic units so that they "own" their progress.

A Closer Look

Following a vignette and overview, the remainder of this report summarizes the findings from the site visit to the school as well as the results of the school climate survey that was distributed to all staff members. 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/emotional developmental health; and family engagement strategies and community partnerships.

A Lesson Vignette

During a 6th-grade ELA class, the teacher leads a discussion on *The Lightning Thief*, a fantasy-adventure novel based on Greek mythology. The teacher highlights for the class three "I Can" statements about choosing evidence to explain the themes, describing a life lesson learned from the mythology, and identifying strong analytical writing. When he asks the class, "What was the theme?" a student raises his hand to respond, "Don't go against the gods, or you will be punished." After asking the students to think about how the theme is communicated in the novel and what life lesson can be described through it, the teacher models the upcoming group work using a previous mythology story that the class has read. The class then breaks into six smaller groups in which students are tasked with reaching consensus as to what they believe the theme of their myth is. After a few minutes, the groups share their results with the whole class, presenting themes such as "Even with victory, there is a tragedy," "There is more to life than beauty alone," and "Be careful what you say – there could be a consequence." After each, the teacher asks the whole class "How do you know this is a theme?" and students share evidence from the text to support their conclusions.

Overview

The lesson spotlighted above illustrates teachers' efforts to tie instruction to the CCLS in focusing students' attention to identifying themes and articulating evidence from the text. According to those interviewed, these efforts add to a long-established, forward-thinking and positive culture in which educators are committed to doing their very best for their students; in addition, they said, attention to the Common Core has energized them.

Careful, proactive implementation of the CCLS has maintained and strengthened teachers' professional agency, both individually and collectively, we were told, as Sage City has focused on teaching to the Standards and encouraging faculty teams to choose and/or develop instructional units rather than mandating particular curricula or instructional modules. Although the district began work on understanding and using the Standards as soon as possible, the process of aligning instruction has been neither smooth nor easy, with staff members piloting and adapting lesson ideas from a variety of sources, including EngageNY, over time.

The district has used the Danielson model for establishing criteria of effective classroom instruction for many years. In light of already having a process and tool to gauge instructional quality, local implementation of the new Annual Professional Performance Review was viewed as the best that can be done under the circumstances. Yet, educators reported that they view the APPR system as inherently flawed and see little benefit from its imposition in their context.

In general, educators reported that they feel strong professional efficacy nonetheless and are proud of their collective efforts and accomplishment. This sense of efficacy was evident in the survey in which 100% of those who responded agreed that, "I am certain I am making a difference in the lives of students attending this school."

Summary of Site-Visit Findings

District Office and School Relations, Alignment, and Coherence

The old notion of one-person-on-a-white-horse leadership is absolutely no longer relevant. . . .I see the leader in this modern era as a conductor of an orchestra . . . of skilled musicians.
- superintendent

Collaborative Leadership Structures and Philosophies. The district and the middle school are similar in leadership dynamics in that they have interwoven collaborative structures coordinated by experienced but relatively new administrators, with the superintendent among the newest members of the leadership group. Both district and school administrators gained experience in school districts in other cities, several in New York City.

A small administrative cabinet and a larger leadership team guide the district's work. Describing his administrative cabinet, which includes two assistant superintendents, one for finance and facilities and the other for curriculum and human resources, the superintendent noted that "there's a lot of talking to each other and putting our heads together and looking at problems that need to be solved together. That, to me, is an aspect of collaborative leadership." The district leadership team, composed of the building principals and assistant principals as well as the

superintendent, assistant superintendent for curriculum, and the director of pupil personnel services, meets monthly as an entire group, with elementary and secondary sub-groups also meeting monthly.

The middle school leadership team includes the principal and assistant principal, department chairs, and grade-level team leaders. We also learned that grade 6-12 academic departments meet regularly to coordinate vertical curriculum content under the leadership of a department chair from the high school. Two teacher teams per grade level have responsibility for about 100 students each. "The team leader doesn't oversee any of the other teachers but is more like a conduit of information to the other teachers. It's not a supervisory role," the principal explained.

In describing his collaborative leadership philosophy, the superintendent explained that he trusts teachers and school leaders to know the best methods of setting and meeting goals for students and themselves. Other leaders at the district office also expressed collaborative styles of leadership and described working with middle school leaders and core content department heads to help students succeed. "I don't really direct anybody. It's all about collaborative relationships and being able to say, 'Here's my vision . . . for the program. You know your building much better than I do. So how do we make it happen? What can I do to help support that? What do you need from me?'" said one district administrator.

Aligned Long-Term Goals for Students. "We have a district mission and a school vision and really the vision is, in a nutshell, to use all of our available resources to make sure that kids reach their full potential," said the middle school principal. In keeping with the quest to help students reach their potential, educators mentioned a variety of long-term impacts that they expected local education to have on students' lives, ranging from helping them to become critical thinkers as adults to "learning how to make choices for the future," as one teacher commented. "To promote healthy habits in mind – that's a major initiative now that came from our superintendent . . . to kind of trickle into all the classes," noted a teacher leader. College and career readiness was the long-term aim reported most by teachers as well as district and school administrators. "One of the goals that we're all doing [is] to have the kids become college and career ready, and I think that in every single class the teachers and students are aiming for that goal," a teacher stated.

"We definitely have goals, but it's not something that's created within us. It's something that's created by our administrators or even in our district and then they're passed down to us," said one teacher. In contrast, another teacher remarked that establishing goals is both "top down and bottom up," noting that teachers contribute to goal setting but that recently most goals are set by others, including not only district decision makers but also state policy makers. "Part of our goal setting . . . is making certain that we're aligned with the Common Core," explained a faculty member. For example, "We're starting to build the whole nonfiction genre for students. I think that's a goal of the school. I think that's a goal of every school across New York State or the country," she continued.

Resource Availability and Decision Making. Several school and district leaders spoke of developing budgets collaboratively and expressed mixed feelings about the availability of resources. "As budgets get tighter and tighter, expanding personnel becomes more and more challenging, although I will tell you that since I've been here, we've been able to increase staffing," said one district administrator. "In an ideal world we'd have more teaching assistants

in every classroom," a teacher commented, though conceding that "that's probably not realistic." "My one call for resources would be to have more specialized teachers, more explicit reading teachers [particularly] in the middle school. . . . I think there's a need for that," suggested a district leader, adding, "Sometimes I'm happy that we don't just have everything handed to us on a silver platter because it really makes you pick what's the most important thing, what's most important to focus on, what's most relevant, and it makes you be creative about how you do things."

Faculty members emphasized that both school and district are extremely careful in financial decision making, giving priority to investing in instructional improvement. "We have creative administrators who take what we have and utilize it in a way that makes it work. I don't think kids are suffering. I think anything we could add would serve to only enhance our programs," said a district administrator. "We're in good shape," commented a teacher leader, "but that's not to say we have a lot of money for gravy items or things like that. We have to use our resources carefully, and I always try to think about the long term of what we're spending money on, how is it going to [impact] down the road. . . . Does it fit in with our overall mission and vision, and is it something that is sustainable?" Investing "a lot of time and resources into letting our own teachers work together and staff develop with each other" was praised by a teacher in a focus group, while others echoed agreement. Colleagues also nodded in concurrence when a teacher stated, "Lack of state funding has severely impacted our abilities to access resources and . . . we have to make do with less." Educators referred to "statewide" budget cuts as presenting significant challenges. "We're no different than many others," said a teacher, explaining the difficulties of "being able to order new textbooks that are more aligned with the Common Core, getting materials, getting access to technology."

Sage City, however, benefits from supplemental assistance for instruction coming from a local education foundation. Composed of parents, community members, and volunteer faculty members, with two part-time employees, the foundation's work includes raising money and allocating money to selected applicants, teachers explained. Both district and school level staff members reported applying for foundation grants for needed resources. "I think our foundation does a really good job and has particularly been supportive of the math department. . . . We write grants every November. You can write as an individual or collaboratively [asking] $1000 to $5000 for whatever you might want to try. They do a great job of meeting everyone's needs. . . . If they're struggling to find the money to meet your needs, they'll talk to you about why you need this and what can they do to help," said one faculty member.

School Building Leadership

> *I have to say our new leadership, while they still value data, . . . have brought us, I think, to a new level. It's just that they've humanized the place very nicely in a short period of time, you know, which is really nice.* - teacher leader

Steady Guidance from a Principal Focusing on Instruction. Noting that the school is "finally at a place where we have more stable leadership" after years of principal turnover, a teacher remarked on how the newfound "culture of stability" has enabled faculty teams to be more productive. "I think it all trickles down from [the principal]," said a school administrator, adding that his colleague leads by example, is "very knowledgeable," and is able to guide teachers not only with lesson content but also with strategies for working with students. Every educator

participating in the site visit reported working closely with the school principal, with most mentioning her helpfulness in team discussions and two individuals indicating that the principal was a main reason they wanted to work at Sage Middle School. Teachers frequently pointed out the principal's knowledge and instructional experience, particularly in English language arts. She invests "a lot of time side by side with teachers trying to help them develop aims and objectives within their lessons that definitely promote literacy," explained a teacher leader.

Shared Leadership and Professional Adaptability. School leadership is distributed, with a principal, assistant principal, and a building leadership team consisting of grade-level team leaders and core content area department heads (who coordinate grades 6-12 curriculum delivery). The principal and assistant principal share responsibilities for overall curriculum alignment, instructional guidance, and traditional building-level function. Teamwork and collaboration among leaders within the school were in evidence. School leaders spoke of trusting team members to work together, meet goals, and provide students with resources, instruction, goal setting, and teamwork examples to help prepare them for career or college. The school leadership team develops the goals and initiatives on which everyone will focus, explained the principal.

Teachers described grade-level team leaders as resources and facilitators, working with the principal and with one of two teams functioning at each grade level. The team leader does not supervise any of the other teachers but promotes significant instructional support, explained one teacher. A team leader described meeting monthly with the principal, who "sort of disseminates information through us. It's also our responsibility as team leader to update parent contacts, make parent conference meetings, contact parents, speak to the students on our team about any sort of behaviors that are challenges and that are successes," she added. "We do a lot of logistics, planning, schedules for testing sometimes, things like that," said another team leader. Each team has one or two English teachers, a social studies teacher, a math teacher, a science teacher, and a special educator if it's a coteaching section.

Educators explained that teachers also have four afterschool meetings each month. Each Wednesday teachers participate in a faculty meeting, a department meeting, or one of two other teacher-to-teacher collaborations, perhaps involving ESL or special education teachers as well as mainstream classroom teachers. ESL faculty said that they meet once a week to talk about "students' needs and ventures" as well as "activities coming up for ELLs, needs that parents may have, any concern that has to do with any of our students."

Staff members indicated that everyone works together productively, adapting to changes as needed. "When you think about a weak link, there really isn't one. Everyone really does work very, very hard, and that's just the expectation, I guess," a teacher emphasized. "It's really impressive how the staff rolls with the punches. They get thrown a lot of different things, and changes are constantly being made," said a colleague, adding, "With the type of population we have and all the things coming down from the state," the resiliency of the staff "really has made a difference in what they're able to handle and the work that they do together and on their own to help the students." "That's why this school works, because the teachers are just so flexible and adaptable, and they've had to be to thrive and survive because of all the changes that have come to us. That's not just our district. That's statewide," said another teacher.

Shared Vision and Personalized Goals. Both the middle school principal and assistant principal highlighted a vision of college and career preparedness for all students and stressed the district's emphasis on student individual growth, caring for students as whole children, and developing learners who feel safe and able to take chances in exploring and discovering. In alignment with district philosophy, the school leaders expressed the importance of setting goals for each student that relate to student growth in multiple ways. "The overall vision is to ensure success for all students regardless of their background and to also know that we have multiple pathways to that success. There's a clear climate of personalization," said a teacher leader.

Educators emphasized that their vision and goals are tied to the middle school concept, which recognizes the dramatic changes that occur during this time in a student's life and focuses on nurturing students academically and socially. "I do think that the middle school model is very, very important, and I think we work hard to really make it a true middle school and not just a glorified junior high school. You know there's really a focus on the kids and not just the subject or the content area," said a teacher leader. Several teachers mentioned a shared vision of helping each student "to be as successful as possible," defining academic success most often as "making progress" or "showing growth" on content mastery and explaining social success as "feeling comfortable with others" or "feeling a sense of belonging." "I think everyone's in it for the whole – the kid! You know to make the kids better in all ways, and I think if you ask a bunch of the people in the school, everyone would come up with that kind of answer," a teacher commented.

Ownership of goals is important for everyone, several educators emphasized. Teachers set academic goals for themselves as well as for their students, we were told, but also encourage students to identify areas where they need help and to meet with a teacher to plan goals and strategies. "Putting my student hat on," said a school administrator, "if I was able to sit down . . . and say, 'I need help with [solving a problem]' [to the point where] I can say, 'OK. This is my plan,' . . . then the student owns that plan . . . and the teacher's job is just to guide them in the right direction." A teacher echoed the importance of students directing their own goals and planning, of "them really taking the reins and the helm and moving forward and making the right choices." Teachers described working toward class or school goals as well as personalized goals for individual students. For example, a teacher said that one main goal schoolwide is to "augment" the academic vocabulary of ELL students and others by creating an environment where they see the same new words in every class each day: "So last year we implemented a program of using a 'word of the day' [showing students] how we use it in math, how does it apply in English, in science."

Building Capacity through Just-Right Staffing. Much of the success at Sage Middle School was attributed to what the superintendent referred to as "a strong staff" and a "strong teacher core." Staff members are carefully chosen, administrators reported. "First we're looking for someone who loves kids," said the principal, and "Second is somebody who can really work with kids this age." She noted that she also looks for "someone who has an understanding of Common Core and lesson planning, someone who can hit the ground running and come in ready to work, someone who is a team leader because our teachers are very collaborative and they work together a lot." In fact, 100% of survey respondents reported that they feel "accepted and respected" by other staff members.

Several teachers commented that it's important for faculty members to have a middle school (student-centered) rather than a junior high school (content-focused) mindset. As the

principal emphasized in comparing the two models for grades 6-8, "If you're looking to teach content, then this is not the right place for you. We teach children here." **"**I'm here because I love this age level. . . . We're here because we understand the age level and we understand the problems, and there's not a single teacher, as far as I know, that wants to be anywhere else," a teacher proclaimed.

Resource Allocation. The principal and assistant principal described resource allocation within the middle school as a collaborative process in which building leaders work hard to support student needs through multiple pathways. The principal spoke of shifting resources to make sure students had access to education beyond the core and encouraging all students to participate in art, music, band, drama and other activities. Additionally, the school has technology in all classrooms, including smart boards and access to tablets and computers. "I think in terms of materials, they are very supportive of what we need and listening to what we need and knowing that we really know that this is what we need and what we don't need. We were the ones who went and said it would be silly to keep paying for this [math] program. This is not working for us. They talked with us and saw what our struggles were and trusted us to move on and find something different," a teacher explained.

If the district budget is unable to meet all needs, teachers reported applying for grants, particularly from the local education foundation. Faculty members noted that smart boards, new calculators, and blended learning initiatives are among projects that have been funded by the foundation. "We're very lucky here to have that kind of support financially," a teacher reflected.

Common Core Learning Standards and Implementation

The thing that I really like about Common Core is the rigor, the fluency, the process, and how it's the same topics for the most part, and it's just deepening the understanding of students. I think that that's powerful. — school administrator

The changes that came with Common Core were not shocking to us. — teacher leader

[APPR] is a tough pill to swallow for teachers. . . . It's not fair. — school administrator

Building on a Strong Foundation of Welcoming Rigor. All educators at Sage City Middle School expressed commitment to the idea of the Common Core Learning Standards and reported feeling comfortable using the Standards in their lesson development and classroom instruction. Faculty spoke of welcoming the increased rigor that the CCLS provided. "We've never been accused of not having enough rigor. At times we've been accused of having too much," one teacher reflected. "It has always been our goal that [students] meet rigorous standards, that they really have that automaticity, that they master things and can apply their skills to other things," another faculty member corroborated, noting that the school has always strived for students to have "a deep understanding, being able to explain their answers, being able to model things and use them in real world settings."

"Some of the foundation of the Common Core are things we've always done and we've always valued here," said one teacher, explaining that the school has always emphasized the

"thinking behind [problem solving], explaining your answers, and having a deep understanding of things. It wasn't a huge shift in thinking for us," she continued. Another teacher expressed a similar perspective: "Some of those 'changes' were things we had already been doing. Certainly, the topics got realigned and some of the things are presented differently. . . . I think the foundation of the Common Core and some of the goals were goals that we already had and I don't feel that it was [a] shift for us."

An Evolving Process of Planning and Professional Development. "We were fortunate in that when the Common Core Standards were adopted in New York State, we had some advance opportunity . . . to really unpack those Standards and to start making those shifts . . . over time," explained a teacher leader. The district began having Common Core conversations in 2009, beginning with a study of what Common Core "was going to look like," the principal commented, adding, "The first year was just a study. We began with English first because the math standards came out much later and [were] just beginning to come up with a plan for how are we going to implement Common Core here. So it was something that we did across grades with our department chairs." "It happened in a very methodical way," said a teacher leader, describing how she and a colleague participated in workshops at the regional BOCES "and spent a lot of time there really looking at the Standards, looking at some of the resources that were available at the time. This is right when EngageNY was just becoming up and running, and we just really started to move in that direction."

"There were lots of things that had to happen in conversation before Common Core could be implemented fully," the principal remarked. "We had to do something without pulling the plug on everything that we were doing. We had to slowly evolve. So I think it was nice that we had those three years over time to say, 'All right. Here are the Standards. It's backwards design. How are we going to do this?'" a teacher said, noting that everyone felt invested in the process. The principal described grade level team and departmental discussions focusing initially on the vertical planning process, which involved consulting across grade levels from elementary through high school. "Lots of things were moving, especially in math," she said.

Professional development has become especially important during the transition to Common Core, faculty members agreed. "We were fortunate this district is extremely good about giving teachers the time, whether its during professional development days or during the summer," said a teacher leader as she told of conversations with district administrators in which she advocated putting focus on "building capacity" and "putting the roots down" in staff development that resulted in "very detailed proposals" composed by teachers and approved by administrators. "For the most part, we got pretty much everything we asked for," she concluded. In general, focus on the CCLS has dominated staff participation in regional workshops and collaborative teacher curriculum work the past several summers as well as at on-site and off-site conferences during the school year. Educators mentioned 7th and 8th grade teachers working together and 5th and 6th grade teachers working together to align curriculum during the summer, for example. During professional development days on-site, "we always have some great training that goes on and that's delivered by a host of different people," a teacher remarked, with a colleague adding that presenters may be local teachers and administrators as well as "outside" experts. "The district is also very good at informing us about what's available out there" through BOCES or other sources, one of the teachers noted. Teachers indicated that the workshops have been helpful in "figuring out how to implement it in your classroom" so that teachers actually "put it into practice." "We're able to at the end of each year, to have part of some professional

development days where we can work together as the new grade team . . . to start mapping out the next year, what do we need, what sort of resources. We have between 2 to 4 days during that summer of paid curriculum work that we can come and get at least the big things [like] the curriculum map done, a lot of major resources that will be utilized throughout the year done, the first unit started and kind of going," reported a teacher.

Teachers gave particular credit to professional development offering "lots of technology options." "We have some wonderful tech staff who are constantly doing classes," usually one day a week for six weeks, a staff member explained. Several teachers mentioned the "flip classroom" concept, in which students are first exposed to online learning outside of class and then follow through with application and discussion of the concepts during class, as an example of an initiative undertaken by a colleague after participating in a tech workshop over the summer. "There's a bombardment of technology," said a teacher leader. Colleagues described the additional mentoring and informal technology instruction provided by a local technology staff member who comes into classrooms and has helped students set up a variety of classroom applications and programs. One teacher said, "She popped in and she's like . . . 'I have to show you this one.' My entire class signed on and we created a Google classroom. Now I've taken what she's shown me and I've done it in my other class. . . . She'll introduce me to new technologies, and I'll be able to implement them in class. Just having the availability of it is amazing. Having someone to be able to pop in and just show you, 'Hey, let's do it this way,' it's phenomenal."

Teacher Agency in Using and Adapting Resources. Early in the transition process, educators looked carefully at the EngageNY curriculum modules and other resources to decide which ones made sense to consider using. The first year each grade level chose one ELA module and one math module to use. Since then, they've piloted other concepts as well as chosen more modules. **"**We have a lot of autonomy to decide what we're going to do, which is great because then you feel you have license and agency over your own work," a teacher said. A teacher leader described the process as starting with "Let's look at some of these model unit plans and some of the model templates that we saw on EngageNY and start to develop our own." "We looked at exemplars" and developed one unit that year and two units the next year, said a teacher.

By the time of our visit to the school, school leaders told us that all grades were adapting available materials aligned to the Common Core and "putting their own stamp on it," as one educator said. A teacher leader explained the expectations in her department: "My style as a leader is I don't expect you to just mimic something lock, stock, and barrel. I expect you to look at it, to really use your own critical thinking skills and know our population and how are you going to alter things, how are you going to tailor things so it works here?" One teacher remarked that, while there are models they are expected to use, no one tells teachers exactly "how we should do it." Teachers maintain responsibility for making it "our content," she added, while noting that they often discuss plans and strategies with colleagues, "like we talk about how we want to solve an equation as a math department." "The first year that it came out, we tried to take the lesson exactly the way they were and apply them in our classes, and the lessons would take more than just the period, and we only have kids for a period of the day, 45 minutes. There was no way we'd be able to get through the entire curriculum, and it was just that there was so much information that they were throwing out there at the kids that we just didn't have the time to do

everything. So we had to pick and choose what we thought would work based on the Common Core [Standards]," said a teacher.

Teachers expressed concern about whether they will be able to maintain high levels of success once the Common Core is fully implemented. "We focus a lot in this district on personalization, and I think that really makes our district successful. I think the Common Core doesn't take into account all the different students. . . . I had hoped that the Common Core would have all these different pathways and [prepare students for] college and career. I had hoped that we would see more of that, and we're not," commented a faculty member.

ELA Curriculum Shifts and Adaptations. Sage City has been undergoing a districtwide literacy improvement effort in addition to the implementation of the CCLS in the schools. Teachers described heavy involvement with a balanced literacy initiative, using both whole language and phonics, starting just before the Common Core was introduced. "So we're taking the best of balanced literacy and embedding it in Common Core because a lot of the Common Core material that we've been given from EngageNY is very good, but there are big gaps, [including] writing," a teacher explained.

Teachers found it "validating" to move from the previous "four extremely broad general standards" to "some 30-odd very specific standards," said a teacher leader. "In general I think people embraced it. They viewed it as an opportunity . . . and really energizing," she continued, referring specifically to Appendix B as "one document that was very important to us in the early stages" because it contained a list of Common Core exemplars. Middle School teachers have adopted the Common Core Learning Standards and then worked to adapt EngageNY ELA modules as a framework for curricula with the addition of other content as needed.

ELA teachers reported that although they welcome the rigor of the standards and see merit in much of the new content and pedagogy, they also feel that students are "missing out" because some of the traditional ELA focus has been dropped. Teachers expressed a particular sense of loss over students' lack of opportunity to study literature, commenting that "the pendulum has shifted too far" toward nonfiction and that "it's sad" to think of "the wonderful literature that our kids aren't getting exposure to in the classroom and doing that deep dive into." "The ultimate thing" is to make sure that the children leave with "a love" of reading and "an appreciation for the thought, the process, and everything that goes into" the writing process, one teacher said, adding, "Sometimes with the shift it can be difficult for them to find that or have time to find that because they're not as exposed to some of the creative elements" in reading and writing.

Math Curriculum Shifts and Adaptations. Educators explained that middle school classes have always emphasized understanding of math concepts and not just finding answers. However, the transition to Common Core has required different approaches to problem solving. "[When] we collaborated after Common Core, we saw the examples that they had, and now we teach a different way. Instead of vertically, we make them solve horizontally, so that's one way, or even giving them a problem where the work is done for them, and they have to determine if there's a mistake or what their mistake is. . . . It's really hard for them to do that, but if they can do that, then they can look at their own work and say, 'Oh, yeah, I made a mistake.'"

Significant grade-to-grade realignment of math units has been required to meet the new Standards, educators reported. For example, geometry topics moved from 10th grade into 8th grade, fractions moved from 6th grade into 5th grade, and sections of algebra moved into 6th

grade, the principal noted. The shifts in grade level units have meant that students at some grade levels have experienced significant gaps, educators said. A teacher whose class was observed mentioned, "I put a fraction on there on purpose, and they flipped out because they missed the whole year of fractions, literally," while a colleague said, "We're working really hard to close those gaps and find ways to fit [fractions] in." "In 7th and 8th I think we're doing well now. There were some gaps, but we've closed those up," another teacher reported. Overall, there have been "huge gaps" to fill, several teachers noted. "When you think about the fraction piece that got lost in the 5-6 translation, that's huge, and the 6th grade and 7th grade teachers had to adapt to that. We're going to see the effects of if all the way through, so the teachers are really working hard to adapt," a faculty member summarized.

Finding the right resources for math curricula supporting the Common Core Learning Standards has been difficult, we were told. Initially, teachers attempted to use the EngageNY Math modules and found them to be only marginally useful. "The overarching information that came down was use EngageNY. . . . So everyone went in thinking this is what we're going to use," a teacher remarked. "It became a year of trying to make this work," she continued, but "there were so many errors and alignment issues" that teachers were encouraged to "experiment with everything else you can find online." When the district decided to try another approach, they purchased a commercial program advertised as being fully aligned with Common Core Mathematics Standards. That, too, was disappointing, teachers said. "It was not meeting our needs [either]. It doesn't differentiate. It doesn't scaffold. It was very hard to do with the digital component that didn't seem to be quite right for us. There were a lot of mistakes with that as well. The program wasn't quite ready or up to date," a teacher explained.

Numerous faculty members said that they are now "picking and choosing" from various programs including EngageNY modules, the alternative program they had purchased, and other materials found online. The EngageNY modules are "not teacher friendly, but more importantly, [they are] not student friendly," said a teacher. The local BOCES will print the modules into booklets that could be given to students, but "there is no student that would ever read that or look at it or use it as a reference, it's so poorly done. It was clearly not done with the intent of enticing students because it's the opposite of engaging" and has really small print although it has "some good problems and good lessons," the teacher continued. "We use EngageNY, but then we also like to mix it up a little bit," said another teacher. Overall, teachers are committed to CCLS math instruction but have not settled on any one curricular resource.

"We need more time to implement the Common Core Standards. We need more time with students in the classroom," one teacher reflected. "I think that they actually made a mistake in implementing them all at once across every grade level because those gaps will never be closed up. We can't make up a year of fractions for our students even if they continue to study math all the way through high school. It just won't happen. I would have recommended starting it with kindergarten and as they move up," the teacher continued. "The other problem I see coming down the pike," said a colleague, [is] "I have no idea how they're teaching how to add, subtract, multiply and divide in elementary school, so when we get to problems in the middle school where they have to do that basic computation, I would teach them the way that I learned, and most of the students have learned over the last 20 years of teaching where they borrow, they cancel, they carry. They don't know any of that terminology nor how to do it. I won't know how to teach them how to subtract."

Data Analysis and Monitoring. "Since I've been here, using data has been a large part of my job. . . . We really spend a lot of time looking at data at all levels," said a teacher leader. In addition to state assessments, teachers mentioned a wide variety of evaluation instruments, including benchmarks, formative assessments, class tests and quizzes, rubric-informed analyses, conferencing between teacher and student, student reflective writing, exit slips, and reading level measures. In many cases, the department or grade-level data team establishes expectations for assessments. For ELA and math, the benchmarks are often practice assignments for the state assessments and might be given three or four times a year. "We build them so that the first one covers obviously what they've done so far, and it's cumulative throughout the year," commented a teacher leader. "The large benchmarks we do with a huge data analysis, and we meet in grade-level pairings with the principal, assistant principal, and [department chair] and look at things that stand out—strengths and weaknesses. Then we'll compare them to the next benchmark as we go on through the year," a teacher explained.

State assessment scores were described by a teacher leader as "a starting point for everything," including whether a student needs AIS or a math lab and, to some extent, whether a student should be accelerated. The district's regional information center issues detailed reports that enable educators to look at patterns and outliers. "We can see that in this grade we may have been ten points above the state, but see that these students were high 2's and they would have been a 3 except for, I don't know, [the] ratio and proportion section and that gives us an indicator," the teacher leader continued. Data analysis often leads to setting goals and action plans, educators noted. "We might see 20 students who were a high 2 and we say our goal is to get these kids to a 3 and we'll focus on these twenty students." Teachers keep records throughout the year, noting the action steps and progress toward the goals. Some of the data compiled is numeric, such as changes in test scores, and some is observational, such as patterns of concepts with which a student is struggling, teachers said. Department chairs described supporting the effort by coordinating data and leading analytical discussions with faculty members: "The students are taking [a test] this week, and when it comes back, I will scan them. Then the teachers will help me organize them by topic, and I will be able to present results within the Algebra I strand. These are the five questions; this is how our students by teacher did on these questions. Then we'll go back and we'll meet in grade-level pairs with [the principal and assistant principal] and we'll go through it and [determine which topics need what additional work]."

"Fortunately or unfortunately," the state assessments play a large role in decision making, a teacher emphasized. "We look for progress. We look for areas where we need to make changes. We make comparisons from year to year, but in the past several years there's been so many changes that it's hard to compare from one year to the last," the teacher continued. Educators in general identified "growth" as the main component they seek, noting that they want to see that every student is making some kind of progress. Keep in mind that one-day's test should not have an out-of-proportion educational effect, administrators and teachers emphasized. "We look at a lot of other types of data to help us make decisions. This way we can move students all around whenever they need to be moved as opposed to, 'You know, you didn't make it here, and you're done for the next 6 years.'"

Data analysis is ongoing throughout the year and between grade levels, educators said. For example, a teacher leader explained, "We might have a level one student at the end of grade 5 who we put in math lab in grade 6. The teachers are constantly looking. They might come to me in October, and say, 'You know what, I know he was a level one, but he's doing great in

class and he can do everything I'm providing him, so he doesn't need math lab anymore,' or, 'We need to watch him.' The teachers do a really good job of making sure the students are constantly where they need to be." Moving into honors placement from grade 5 to grade 6 is a "hot button" topic for parents, teachers said. Some parents are upset if someone is not placed in honors with high achievers that parents consider their children's peers. "The best information that I can tell them," said a teacher leader, "is that in seven years the teachers have never, have never done me wrong. They are so good about constantly watching kids and keeping track of things and knowing when a student is ready because data [include] test scores . . . but it's also how you're doing, and maturity plays a factor, when you blossom." Teacher leaders mentioned close collaboration between educators at the transitional grade levels, i.e., fifth to sixth and eighth to ninth, to be sure that student placements are appropriate.

"It's always informative to look at the data," said a teacher, "whether it's related to progress within your grade or related to vertical placement." Data-driven decision making is the norm, explained a teacher leader, "and is very well used across the district, especially with such a diverse population."

Impact of APPR. The superintendent described the local APPR plan as "right in the mainstream" using the Danielson model "even though, as you know, it wasn't designed to be an evaluation rubric." The APPR process is "a work in progress," he continued, noting that he wished it was not a numerical scoring method: "I don't think that makes sense ultimately. I think the conversation about improvement and constantly reaching more students is where we ought to be." There is merit to the Danielson rubric in establishing criteria for classroom success, several educators stated, explaining that the district had used the Danielson model before APPR was instituted. A district administrator pointed out that achieving the highest level of engagement on the rubric shows that students are taking responsibility for their own learning and are being appropriately challenged. "I think all that falls into that larger umbrella of students each achieving at their individual capacity," he said. There is value to "good conversations around instruction," the administrator continued, "and the Danielson model, even though it's long and tedious, [has] a lot of really solid information and helpful resources in there as far was what makes a good classroom environment. We use it to the best of our ability to boost instruction and allow principals to have conversations pre and post lesson about teaching and learning, and then we don't dwell on it."

"I don't know anyone from our view that will say that the test that's part of the APPR is the perfect system in showing the teacher's value," said a district administrator. The principal described the APPR evaluation system as "difficult for teachers" and noted that there is a "sense of inequity" among teachers who are "tied to the state tests" ("English and math teachers and some special education teachers who have 51 or more percent of their kids in English and math") in contrast to teachers of other content. Teachers evaluated through the state assessment "never know what material is going to be on it from year to year," she continued, "whereas teachers in science or social studies are writing an SLO and creating an assessment and a pre and a post assessment." ESL and special education teachers mentioned the difficulties of being judged on ELA tests that do not seem appropriate for their students. "Our kids are supposed to work magic, and by the end of the year they're supposed to do very well in these tests that many Americans that were born here still struggle [with]," said one faculty member. "We'd love it if we could tailor it to people's jobs more specifically," said a district administrator.

"APPR from my point of view hasn't changed my instruction," said one classroom teacher, while a colleague echoed agreement. "Frankly, I don't think about it. You don't have control over it. You just have to go and do what's right for the students," the first teacher remarked. Several others mentioned, however, that they feel considerable stress from APPR. Teachers agreed that, while the evaluation process has not affected their instruction, it has caused them to worry more about situations out of their control, such as student absences, new students, and students' leaving for extended periods to visit family in other countries.

Teachers' Instruction and Practice

[Common Core] wasn't a change as much as just an increase in expectation. - teacher

We were never asked to implement specific modules. It was more identifying the key components and the key skills and then . . . we take our lesson and hold it up to the module and [determine how it might] fit within the framework, identifying things like using the primary sources and developing rigor and academic vocabulary. . . . We use [modules] as an example to develop basically our own units. - teacher

We plan each lesson collaboratively in our team meeting. But I still have discretion in the details of how I teach it. - teacher

Cross-Curricular Explicit Instruction and Increased Rigor. Depth of understanding is now emphasized rather than breadth of information, several teacher leaders stated. Explicit instruction begins with clearly outlining student-learning objectives and then using systematic, direct teaching strategies including such elements as modeling work to be produced, using mentor texts and exemplars, focusing on academic vocabulary, close reading, basing analysis on evidence, and looking for thought processes rather than answers, educators explained. These practices were demonstrated in the classes researchers observed. "It really was just we're increasing the rigor," a teacher reflected. "We're going more deeply into everything," said a colleague.

For this age level, teachers have always helped students to realize that "what they're learning is never in isolation," observed a faculty member. "Right now everything is so departmentalized in their minds. . . . To get them to see that everything is interwoven makes them more successful and something they have to start learning in middle school," she continued, noting that Common Core strategies remind teachers to make the connections more explicitly. "Getting them to think beyond what they're looking at, to think on a more global scale is something that you try to interject into lessons," said another faculty member.

To support depth of understanding, evidence-based analysis has become a stronger part of daily lessons in all subject areas, teachers said. For example, as a grade 7 ELA Honors class reviewed a multiple-choice assessment of their understanding of a short poem, students helped each other to clarify how evidence from the poem contrasted with incorrect answers they had initially chosen. Each time a student asked about an incorrect answer, three to five students raised their hands to share a quotation from the text to provide evidence for the correct answer. Students also indicated their understanding of the nuances and occasional ironies within the passage, as in the following quick student exchange:

S1: Less people means less damage to the park.
S2: Less people means less money so there would be no park.

Students seemed fully engaged in the text-based discussion. The school has "adapted evidence-based claims in all content areas," said the principal, adding, "You'll see that in science, in social studies, in math, in English language arts, in ESL, in our language classes, because really it's getting kids to think about, look at the text in different ways. You'll see close reading in all of the classes. . . . It was a more seamless process in ELA and spread into other content areas."

Academic vocabulary is important in every subject area, teachers reported, and there was evidence of focus on vocabulary in lessons observed. As a teacher of a sixth-grade math class began a review of key words and concepts, she asked for explanations of terms such as equation, solve, and order of operations. Each time, students responded quickly with correct answers. Student thought processes were key in the following exchange:

T: What is the inverse of no solutions?
S: One solution.
S2: Infinite –
T: Right – infinite is many or infinite solutions.
S: [I'm] confused.
T: When do you get many solutions?
S: When everything adds up.
T: What is that [writing x=0]?
S: Infinite.
T: This [2=1] would be?
S: None.

A few minutes later, as students looked at a packet of problems, the teacher said, "I don't want to know the answer. That's not the point. What would you do to solve the problem?" After the lesson, the teacher re-emphasized that it's always about the thought process, not just having an answer. "The shifts that I've seen inform my teaching the most are vamping up vocabulary and lots of reading, increasing the stamina of the reading. You used to just tell kids, 'Solve the equation.' Now we give them a word problem with four or five sentences, and they have to figure out [the language and situation]," another math teacher observed.

Wherever possible, lessons should include "certainly a mini lesson where you're modeling, where you're showing the students," one teacher remarked. Both a teacher-written op-ed piece (a model) and a newspaper op-ed article (a mentor text) were used to demonstrate the writing that students in an eighth-grade ELA class would be doing as they studied *Fahrenheit 451*. Think about the emotions the rebels and the mainstream group would be experiencing in the situation, the teacher told the class as she engaged them in activities and discussion:

T: The point of the article is to show you what an op-ed looks like. Now you are in groups. You will create your own op-ed piece using strong words and tone about *Fahrenheit 451*. What would be the rebel group tone?
S: Angry. Technology has taken over. Books are gone.
T: Mainstream?

S: Direct, serious. Sort of positive. Okay with technology. Who needs to think?
T: [Your op-ed] will have articles, headlines, and ads around it. Write you group's opinion that reflects your group's belief.
T: Yesterday I wrote one for you. Remember they don't say it explicitly. Imply.

Use of models and exemplars as well as rubrics is invaluable for teaching writing, teachers said. Sage City has always used rubrics, they reported, and the Common Core rubrics are a continuation of a long-established practice for faculty members. The NYSED.gov website is "incredible," said a teacher leader, explaining that she is "on it all the time, constantly looking at those exemplars and rubrics. . . . We're so fortunate to have the technology we can just put it up, put it up, put it up."

In general, lessons observed seemed to be aligned with Common Core Standards, and teachers frequently mentioned what they saw as main elements of alignment. "Overall, I think that the kids are getting a lot out of it. When I think about the kids last year at this time and the kids this year, as far as their writing goes and the vocabulary that they have and talking about just analyzing—that's like a big part of our conversation all the time—it's definitely a lot higher, the level, than I think it was last year with the kids we had," a teacher observed.

Continuing Focus on Student Engagement in a Positive Group Dynamic. Student engagement strategies were evident in both ELA and math classes observed, and 92% of survey respondents agreed that, "Overall, our students are actively engaged in learning while at school." The principal judges teachers to be successful "when I see that they have connections with the kids," she emphasized, saying, "I value that . . . first and foremost." "You get the feeling from your students that they are enjoying being in your classroom," said one teacher as she explained her idea of successful teaching. Faculty participants in the site visit frequently expressed their belief that engaging all students is the key to academic success. Whenever teachers spoke of using "total participation" techniques, which they said were "heavily recommended" in Common Core-aligned instruction, they also underscored, "We were always doing a lot of that." Observed classes reflected teachers' efforts to connect with every student and to engage every student. If an individual seemed distracted or disengaged, teachers quickly responded by verbally pulling the student into the conversation or by moving closer to the student and establishing eye contact. There were also occasional quick reprimands, and then the teacher moved on.

Teachers employed a variety of group structures, often changing within a single 45-minute period. Student seating was most often in a group layout, but students were in rows in one observed class. Instruction frequently began with a whole-group discussion or activity, usually changing to small-group or peer-to-peer partnering during the lesson. Occasionally, students worked individually, particularly for assessment, although there were examples of teams producing an assigned task that would be evaluated. There were also times when most students were working independently while the teacher instructed a small group, with a rotating plan so that all had a chance for the targeted instruction.

Student use of technology played an important role in many classrooms, particularly in an ESL math class researchers observed. The teacher gave all instructions and explanations in Spanish and moved easily between Spanish and English as she helped students to play a web-based math game using both the classroom smart board and iPads or iPhones on which each student signed in as a player. As each question was presented in English on the smart board, the teacher translated it into Spanish, and students recorded their responses on their devices. For

example:

> T: (in Spanish) The question: Which is not a method for solving a system of equations?
> T: X was the first one to get the answer.
> Ss clap.
> T: (again translating into Spanish) Q2: When the lines intersect, the system has: no solution, one solution, or infinite solutions.

After a few seconds the answer appeared on the screen, and students again clapped. Between each question and answer, students discussed the problem, saw the answer on the screen, and then clapped. The teacher provided some explanation of each answer in Spanish. In explaining the activity later, the teacher reported that today's lesson was part of learning math system characteristics, that students could choose to answer game questions individually or to confer with others, and that the activity was designed to provide immediate feedback on math concepts. Emotional support from teachers and peers was evident. Students were actively celebrating correct answers and did not seem to hesitate to answer. Mistakes were used for teaching, and the teacher responded to each student who asked a question.

The same ESL math teacher is using the "flipped" classroom model, in which students have online access to the material before the classroom experience, and then class time is spent processing the material. The teacher said that she instituted the format partly because of the range of skill level of the students in the ESL math classes and partly because she saw the format as a way "to let [students] take ownership" of their learning. "I have a student who came two days ago. She's brand new. She has no idea what we're doing. She's just looking at the board and saying, 'Oh, my goodness.' There's another student who came the last week of December right before the break," the teacher noted. In each case, she was able to tell the student, "OK, all my lessons are on video. Go home and [watch the videos.] I understand it's a lot, but if you want to do it, you can do it.'" She said that the newest student has already started using the videos, "so she's catching up pretty quickly." The teacher indicated that students who do not have Internet or a device at home can come in before or after school and use a school iPad. If necessary, she said, they can watch a lesson video during the school day whenever they can fit it in.

ESL teachers commented that they feel that they can engage their students more effectively by teaching classes mostly in Spanish while ensuring that students are learning the academic vocabulary in English. "Although they know the word in Spanish, they prefer it in English because eventually they have to do it in English. My goal is to get them ready for high school," a teacher explained. Teachers find it frustrating that there are few Common Core resources in Spanish. "That's a big deal for me because there's actually nothing in Spanish. Some of the things we are trying have some pieces in Spanish, but there's nothing [substantial] out there, not one book," one teacher explained, adding, "When we were trying EngageNY last year, I translated every single page, and it took me forever. One page is OK, but this was the whole thing. That's been a big issue." A colleague said, "It's actually very strange given the population of this area [and] the country." If you call the publisher, she continued, "you get, 'Oh, there's that translate tab where you can convert the worksheet,' and, you know if you go online, you can print something, but in terms of [ordering] books, we have yet to find a Common Core book that we could order in Spanish."

Differentiating and Using Data-Driven Instruction. They've made it more difficult and then left us to "figure out a way to support the kids that are going to be left behind otherwise," said one faculty member referring to the designers of the CCLS, adding that an important part of the teacher's job is "developing that support or that scaffold."

From formative assessments to reteaching to exit tickets, the use of data within classrooms was evident. We observed teachers using informal data such as daily classroom interactions with students, student engagement with lessons, student conferencing, and student motivational responses to monitor learning. More formally, teachers and grade-level teams reported using benchmark assessments, state assessments, and other standardized and locally developed assessments. Monitoring on a continuous basis is part of the school culture, faculty members said.

Special education teachers reported that the CCLS provide deeper understanding for their students as they use the same instructional techniques with skill-appropriate literature. "You want to see them making progress, and that's easy to measure because they'll have specific measurable goals on their IEP," a faculty member explained. "For the kids on RTI, a lot of teachers will say, 'If they're not reading at grade level at the end of the year, we failed,' but if you've been able to take a student who's two grade levels behind and increase a grade level or a grade level and part of another one, even if they're not on grade level, that's deemed as a success through the RTI system," said a district administrator. The approach with special education is to promote the least restrictive environment, several educators noted. Two middle school students take an experiential class at the high school, and all other special needs students are instructed " "here [in] special classes or self-contained classes with a coteach model with academic support, sort of like a resource room," a teacher explained.

Teachers described working both individually and collectively, particularly within grade-level teams, to determine how to scaffold instruction for students in need of intervention or additional academic assistance.

Student Social/Emotional Developmental Health

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

Positive Youth Development Priorities and Strategies. Student social/emotional health is part of the priority of preparing students for long-term success, middle school educators emphasized. Numerous administrators, teachers, and student support specialists highlighted the importance of nurturing the whole child and paying close attention to the developmental aspects of middle school students as well as being aware of situations that seem to be causing student stress. "I love this age level. I love seeing the 6th graders start . . . [and] helping them deal with the changes that they have and talking them through that," a teacher said. "I think the biggest thing we do is just kind of let them know that we're here to help. It's almost [as if] in some way it has to be handled on an individual basis because every kid is so different and developing at different points," observed a teacher leader. Several teachers emphasized the importance of giving students a "safe place" where they know that adults will listen. The superintendent pointed out

that everyone in the building is "very cognizant" that "middle school is a difficult time developmentally for students and their parents," and everyone focuses on multiple ways "to offer kids personalized contact" with adults who care about them, including a combination of "serious things like classes on the Lego competitions" and "silly stuff" like teacher teams dressing up as pirates. "I think there's a space for that, a little time for being silly," the superintendent concluded.

Teachers praised the work that school counselors and child psychologists do to help students socially and emotionally. "They do a lot of individual counseling. They do some group work. They're in classrooms. They spend a lot of time meeting with parents," the principal commented. "We take a developmentally appropriate approach to counseling and supporting our kids," said a specialist. A support services colleague noted, "We have students coming from varied backgrounds, and they're dealing with many issues plus the developmental piece of growing up. I think the fact that the district recognizes that having us here in terms of being able to provide the support, being available to kids and parents as needed is a real treat," adding that not every district is able to offer that kind of support.

Student support specialists work closely with administrators and teacher teams to identify needs and develop the most appropriate scaffolding. Sometimes the needs involve the difficulties of being new to the environment, whether because the family has recently moved to the district or because the student has recently transitioned into the middle school, we were told, and other times the needs may relate to language barriers, student interactions, or even testing.

Collaborative Focus on Supporting Students. Reiterating that all students are individuals with their own distinctive needs and goals, teachers and other staff stressed that they consult with each other frequently to help students achieve individual growth and overall wellbeing. The middle school principal said that she and the counselors, social worker, psychologist, and special education department chair meet once a week to "talk about at-risk kids. We talk about what can we do, what kinds of interventions can we put in place, not just academic interventions but social-emotional interventions as well." Situations are often complex and interwoven, educators said, and teachers may notice that a student who is struggling academically seems to be dealing with social or emotional problems as well. Teacher team meetings will often focus on how to help a child, we were told, and the team may invite a counselor or child psychologist to consult with them. "We'll participate in creating a plan for the student, interventions. A lot of times it will include inviting the parents in to be part of that plan and [learning] how they can support their students," a specialist explained.

When researchers asked about an example of a student they had observed receiving extra encouragement from a teacher, the teacher explained, "Right. I didn't want to push him because he was somewhat on today," although, "he's had issues for some time" and is absent often. The grade-level team has had meetings concerning this student and has brought in the parents, she said, noting that she has help from the social worker, psychologist, and guidance counselor. "It is such a tough time" for middle school students, said a teacher leader, suggesting that teachers "are the adults in their lives who, for some of our kids, are the only ones who show up every day, you know? So it's important to maintain a positive attitude."

Nurturing during Difficult Times. Experienced staff members have developed detailed strategies for working with students during times of particular stress. They anticipate school

situations that may be difficult for students and work to prepare students for positive experiences, educators indicated. For situations where advance preparation is not possible, faculty members focus on listening, knowing the resources, and doing their best to support the students emotionally.

Transition programs are in place to help students prepare for and adjust to new school environments. "We're a 6th to 8th school, so we pay close attention to that transition from 5th to 6th and the transition from 8th to 9th. We do a lot of work with regards to that," a specialist said. Sixth-grade teachers said that they receive information from the elementary school on incoming students that they should "keep on our radar . . . whether it's an academic concern or it's a social-personal concern." A teacher mentioned that "the school psychologist and social worker will share that information so we know if we need to maybe meet with the team or let the team know." The transition to 6th grade is more difficult for Spanish-speaking students, staff members noted. The superintendent reported that elementary schools use a dual language program, "essentially a 50-50 model where you go from the English zone to the Spanish zone, and it's the same curriculum. . . . So one of the challenges we face moving forward is what do we do when one gets to the middle school?"

Teachers reported that several new students may enter their classes each month and that the newcomers have a wide range of reading levels, often not quickly identified. "They might be at 1st grade level coming into 6th grade, they could be at grade level, they could be a little bit advanced," as one teacher said. Many of the new students are just learning to speak English. The transitions are difficult for these students, who may feel an overwhelming combination of academic, social, and emotional stress. One counselor spoke of her work in helping newcomers adapt to all aspects of school life, and other educators praised the work that support specialists do in welcoming new students and families, noting that all staff members go out of their way to help new students feel comfortable. Given the challenge of providing for a high number of ELL students, there are some bilingual programs in place to help students learn in both languages (English and Spanish) and to provide support and translations for both students and parents.

Teachers and counselors also anticipate and prepare for the "pressure and anxiety" associated with the Common Core shifts and testing, they noted. "We've had kids right after that test or before that test in our office in tears," one student support specialist commented. Although teachers and administrators reported that they do everything they can to minimize the stress and have worked together to fine tune the CCLS-related messages they give in the classroom, staff members said that they have seen considerable student anxiety over Common Core instructional shifts, particularly in math, as well as reactions to assessment scores. "A child that was used to getting a 3 or even a 4, when they see that they can't get that, it causes a lot of stress," said a specialist, continuing, "It's not just the test but what they're learning. It's hard. I've had kids say that it's really hard."

Developing a Culture of Character and Respect. Sage City Middle School has continuing programs in place to foster qualities of character such as kindness, courtesy, and trustworthiness, educators reported. Staff members consciously model a welcoming attitude toward all and foster acceptance of difference, we learned through both discussion and observation. Children were observed treating each other kindly and with helpful attitudes. Researchers saw a particular emphasis on welcoming those of diverse backgrounds and helping everyone to feel that they belong. Students participate in community service projects "that all kids are a part of," said the

principal, adding that she thinks it is important for children at this age to feel that they are valued members of a community where people help each other.

Survey respondents unanimously agreed that "overall, the students at my school respect and respond to adults." Teachers and school staff were observed creating an environment of trust with students, saying hello to all students in the hallway and main office, treating students respectfully and professionally. Classroom observations yielded multiple examples of students expressing trust of both teachers and each other. Both school leaders and teachers reported that student discipline was rarely a serious issue at Sage City Middle School, and 92% of survey respondents agreed with the statement, "My principal backs me up when I address student behavior."

Extending the Welcome beyond the Classroom. The school has an open door policy with regard to its many sports and clubs after school. Students can join at any time and are encouraged to participate in any club regardless of talent or skill. All teachers offer office hours to students either before or after school, and the school has partnered with a local organization to provide an afterschool program.

Participation in sports and other extracurricular is high, staff members reported. Instead of having a seasonal policy of academic eligibility for participation, as many schools do, Sage City Middle School uses what educators call a "route slip" to base participation on day-to-day completion of homework and classwork. "The teacher will initial the route slip and then at the end of the day, . . . we'll email the coach and say, 'Yes, they can play today,' and then if they can't play today, tomorrow's another day to do all of their homework, to do what they need to do in class, and if they choose to do it then they can play that day. What we try to get kids to understand is that this . . . is you making a choice that you either want to do it or you don't want to do it," explained the principal.

Students with particular needs have access to social groups for development of interactional skills and emotional support, often facilitated by school counselors. For example, an academic achievement group for 8th graders helps them set goals and plan for the transition to high school, a staff member said, since "students might need a little extra support as they move towards high school." A teacher mentioned the effectiveness of a counselor-organized social group called "7 habits of highly effective teams," which helps students learn to work well together. The principal explained that that group was part of a six-week program in which each counselor chose a different topic. The other counselor, the psychologist, presented a workshop on impulsivity to help four boys learn to manage their impulsive behavior, the principal explained. In each case, students were chosen because of particular identified needs, she added. A 10-week college/career readiness group starting soon will provide "skills and supports they'll need to be successful in high school and college and will culminate in a college visit," said the principal.

Family Engagement Strategies and Community Partnerships

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

This is just a really wonderful community. It's diverse, and everybody is very helpful. None of the students see race, and I think that's a really amazing thing.   - school administrator

Building Community Connections. Family engagement and community partnerships were said to be important to the district and the middle school, in particular. At the district level, we learned that the superintendent holds monthly informal meetings with parents and community members in both English and Spanish. District leaders said they make it a point to be at all school events and mentioned that they find parent opinions critical to making districtwide decisions. We were told that school administrators, core curriculum department heads, teachers, and student support specialists engage with families through workshops, PTA meetings, parent meetings, and conferences as well as at events like music concerts, drama presentations, art shows, and other activities where parents are welcomed.

Many educators noted that the district's embracing of diversity first attracted them to the district, and it continues to be an important part of what they "love" about working here. And they defined the school as one that puts positive emphasis on welcoming everyone, and where personnel reach out to the diverse families and organizations that make up the community to help everyone to feel that they belong and can be of help in supporting middle school students.

Fostering Healthy Levels of Parent Involvement. Educators reported that parents are partners in developing students both academically and socially. "I feel parents are on our side for the most part. They want the best for their child," a teacher stated. Three quarters (75%) of survey respondents agreed with the statement, "I receive a great deal of support from parents for the work that I do."

Several staff members, however, noted a dichotomy between parents who seem overly involved and parents who seem insufficiently involved. "I find that a majority of my time is spent talking to parents of students that don't really need any help. . . . [Parents of students] in the honors classes," for example, a teacher leader reported. On the other hand, she said, there is a large group of parents that teachers seldom see and with whom they have difficulty communicating. A colleague added that in some cases the parents may not speak English, are working three different jobs, or may not know how to help their children academically.

Communication with parents is continuous, staff members said. "We have parent-teacher conferences. They are invited numerous times throughout the year to come in, [such as for] quarterly assessments, . . . and after each quarter there's an awards assembly for parents to come and watch their children get awards. There's also American Education Week where the parents have the opportunity to come in for two days at the end of January to sit in on classes. Team leaders do regular e-mail blasts," a faculty member summarized. Teachers reviewed a "bombardment" of communication, including through various social media and school technology giving parents access to grade books and other academic information. "One of the unintended consequences of increasing our communication, using phone call-out systems, having a parent portal where parents can go in and check on student's grades . . . is that it increases the appetite for even more communication. We're communicating more than we ever have in the past . . . yet you'll still find people that say, 'It's not enough,'" the superintendent noted.

Faculty members described various strategies of outreach to parents, particularly to those who have had less involvement with the school. For example, they said, the principal holds community meetings for parents in both English and Spanish. Parents "care about their child's education and participate in events or whatever we have going on here" as much as they are able

and feel comfortable, a staff member reported. A student support service specialist said that parents contact support personnel frequently and "rely on us quite a bit to communicate their needs or their concerns about their children." Parents may observe difficulties and ask a counselor to meet with teachers. "Parents will often say they're at wit's end dealing with a preteen. Where do they begin? So we help them . . . in terms of the parenting skill set of establishing rules and routines and schedules at home that will help the parent to engage the child and get them to get the homework done and to deal with that piece," said a specialist. School counselors and social workers "guide nonjudgmentally," one said, "letting [parents] feel like they're in control of the process" and "educating them on how this could help their child." Establishing relationships with these parents may require proficiency in Spanish, which many staff members have, and the superintendent said that he is "challenging people to try to stretch themselves to become bilingual."

Trust builds partly because support personnel are familiar to many of the extended families, and family relatives who have lived in the neighborhoods for years already know and have faith in them, staff members said. A specialist emphasized that trust also builds from parents realizing that "I genuinely care about each and every child here, and I feel like that comes across. As a parent myself, I feel like I can pick up when someone is genuine and is there to support my child and looks out for their best interest and wants to help." Parents welcome staff members who can meet with them at times and places beyond school, specialists said, and value being able to schedule appointments that do not require taking time off from work. Sometimes parents who have a day off "will just show up, so we're flexible like that," a support specialist commented, telling of parents who came in and waited until a counselor was free, particularly "if they think their child is just acting out and they don't understand, so we're doing a lot of education, too." Building the relationships includes not only counselor meetings with parents but also referrals to outside agencies and sometimes even accompanying parents on medical or agency visits, the principal said.

Engaging a Caring Community. Community partnerships were described as widespread in this district. School leaders were said to have established relationships with youth and family service organizations, environmental and entertainment centers, colleges and universities, and nonprofit philanthropic/service organizations and foundations. Mentioned most often were family services provided through a community agency located nearby. "We have a great rapport with them," the principal commented as she described an afterschool program provided from 3 to 6 pm every weekday and mentioned the agency's services in providing social/emotional counseling for students. Counselors reported working closely with this agency, whose services are provided based on a grant the district wrote specifically asking for assistance with middle school students, according to the superintendent. "The counselors and the social workers and psychologist are really good at reaching out to family services," the principal affirmed. Student support specialists noted that they work closely with therapists and clinicians in the community, also mentioning several other nearby agencies, including one providing medical and mental health support to needy families.

Several community centers help to extend students' learning beyond the classroom. The superintendent and principal both praised an afterschool cinema program where a dozen students go once a week to view documentary films and write about films and where each 7th grade team goes once a quarter to see a film at no expense to students or the school. "It's fabulous," said the

principal, while the superintendent described the film center as "a real gem." Local environmental preserves were lauded for providing outdoor learning. One preserve allows ELL students in the program to visit a 40-acre outdoor classroom and prepare a digital field guide in two languages, said the superintendent. "This is a way to make learning interesting," he continued, "rather than sit in a room and have someone say, 'Here's how you say oak tree, and here's how you say it in Spanish,' . . . You're out in the woods with a camera, and you're looking, and you're designing. Now this is a little different and exciting." Science programs have been established in partnership with local colleges. "Essentially a STEAM or STEM academy," the superintendent said. "It's a way of making the support that ELL students need not just remedial in nature." On Saturdays, many students attend an Upward Bound program (supporting students from low-income families in being prepared for college) hosted by a local college. "We're working with Latino U, an organization that focuses on getting Latino kids to think about college. We're having them come in more and more to different activities including our summer camp activities," the superintendent said. While one area college works closely with teachers on issues related to inquiry design for instruction, others partner by providing college credit for courses taken before college entry, we were told.

Administrators noted that many of the programs mentioned are supported by donations or grants aimed at providing assistance to at-risk students such as English language learners or those experiencing poverty. Among the financial contributors is the local Rotary Club, which the superintendent described as "very generous" in providing scholarships and other gifts. Foundations supporting local students include one established by a philanthropist who was particularly concerned with preserving the . . . environment. Other grants are provided through educational institutions and community agencies, including the local education foundation that has been successful in raising funds to give out in the form of grants for teachers' creativity, the superintendent said. Applying for grants was said to be highly encouraged by the district and was mentioned repeatedly by educators when asked how they were able to attain resources. In general, this diverse community has been very supportive of local students, educators said.

In a Nutshell

Sage City Middle School has been particularly purposeful in implementing the Common Core Learning Standards by focusing first on developing understanding of the Standards themselves and then encouraging local adaptation of curriculum and teaching strategies aligned to the Standards. A welcoming culture that embraces diversity and age-related developmental stages, team-based professional collaboration to strengthen instruction, focus on student-centered and personalized learning, emphasis on college and career readiness, and using data to guide instruction and goal setting have enabled Sage City Middle School to implement Common Core initiatives in ways that foster student success. A teacher leader summarized: "We're a good community. We're in it for the right reasons. And we work really hard here."