

# University at Albany researchers identify ways schools succeed in graduating at-risk students

By Janet Angelis, Kristen Wilcox  
and Linda Baker

Despite national and state efforts to improve graduation rates, nationally the average has hovered around 70 percent for decades. In New York State, the high school completion rate was 77 percent in 2012. However, the rate is closer to 50 percent for groups of students most at risk of failing to graduate: culturally and linguistically diverse students, special education students, and, especially, those living in poverty and attending schools where the overall socioeconomic composition is low.

Educators have little control over some of the factors that influence graduation rates (e.g., the socioeconomic status of their student population, economic and racial segregation in housing), but there are striking differences among schools that serve equally disadvantaged populations. Some of these high schools consistently graduate most or all of their students in four years, while schools serving similar students have rates closer to the state average.

In a new study, a team from the University at Albany's School of Education examined this phenomenon by studying eight high schools with consistently higher than predicted graduation rates among at least two groups of students generally considered as at risk of failing to complete high school.

These were compared with five demographically similar schools that consistently achieved average graduation rates among the same groups.

The higher performing schools were:

- Amityville Memorial HS, Amityville UFSD
- Brookfield Central HS, Brookfield CSD
- Downsville Central HS, Downsville CSD
- Eastridge HS, East Irondequoit CSD
- Elmont Memorial JSHS, Sewanhaka Central HSD
- Otselic Valley JSHS, Georgetown-South Otselic CSD
- Prattsburgh Central HS, Prattsburgh CSD
- Whitesville HS, Whitesville CSD

A report published on the university's website cites a number of factors in these schools' success, including "alignment of goals and curriculum." For instance, in Otselic Valley, a rural community in Chenango County, "All stakeholders, from teachers to the board of education, are said to be highly involved in developing goals," a profile of that district states. The profile quotes a teacher: "Our strength is having to pull together as a community."

Another difference involved using data to drive not just academic decision-making but "whole child" interventions.

Researchers found that in higher performing schools, teachers and administrators are

focused on students who are at risk of dropping out or failing to graduate. They know students as individuals,

intervene early on, and take steps to prevent situations likely to contribute to dropping out.

That's true, for example, in Elmont, a Nassau County school that is 78 percent African-American and 13 percent Hispanic, with 27 percent of students on free or reduced-price lunch.

"The key [to keep kids from dropping out of school is] relationships," an administrator told the researchers. "You can do anything you want as far as putting in programs – it's in the relationships. If you don't make relationships with these kids, it's not going to matter – relationships with them and their families."

Teachers in high-performing schools also credited professional development with helping them craft engaging forms of instruction (see sidebar, below).

The schools profiled were selected based on the four-year graduation rates for the cohorts of 2004, 2005, and 2006 (expected to graduate in 2008, 2009, and 2010, respectively).

Most of these schools had significant rates of poverty as measured by the percentage of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch. In 2011, the mean free and reduced-price lunch rate for the higher performers was 44 percent; for the average performers, 36.8 percent. The state average was 49 percent for that year.

*Janet Angelis, Kristen Wilcox, and Linda Baker are, respectively, the director, principal investigator, and lead field researcher of the NYKids project at the University at Albany School of Education. Find full results of the study and profiles of individual schools can be found at [www.albany.edu/nykids/results\\_high\\_school.php](http://www.albany.edu/nykids/results_high_school.php).*



## Four ways to improve graduation rates



### Align goals and curriculum

In schools that are more successful in graduating their most at-risk populations on time, educators demonstrate a constant, collaborative focus on setting high academic goals and then strengthening and aligning curriculum to support students to meet those goals. They focus on students' futures and have put processes in place to help students achieve success not only in high school but throughout their college and career experiences. To that end, teachers are supported to take initiative, to innovate, and to collaborate with professional colleagues both within and outside the school and district to improve curriculum and instruction.



### Craft engaging instruction

Central to the study's findings on graduation success is the nature of classroom instruction, particularly the role of student engagement. Educators in higher-performing schools create instructional experiences that are relevant to students' lives. They focus less on "old-style" imparting of information and more on active student involvement in the learning process. Sometimes this means offering learning experiences outside the school, and it involves carefully monitoring and tracking student progress not only through data from assessments but also from paying careful attention to each student.



### Bridge divides within the school and between the school and community

Among the practices setting higher-performing schools apart from more typically performing ones is the effort undertaken to bridge divides – between home and school, between social and academic concerns, between school and community, and even between and among educators within the school or district. Leadership is shared, and staff at all levels collaborate on the shared goal of supporting students to graduate, especially those most at risk. Educators work to build trust in each other – and with the broader community – through collaboration.



### Drive a whole-child intervention loop

Higher-performing schools monitor, share, and use student social/emotional data in conjunction with achievement data to inform the use of timely, targeted interventions. Extra instructional supports (e.g., tutoring, special education) are closely linked to classroom learning objectives. While all schools use some kind of student management software that provides information about behavioral referrals, attendance, and academics, higher-performing schools use these data to inform classroom instruction or interventions outside the classroom in a timely and consistent manner.

*Source: NYKids project at University at Albany School of Education*

## Research brief

### NYS students continue to excel on AP exams

One-quarter of New York's high school graduating class of 2013 passed at least from one Advanced Placement exam during high school, according to the latest annual report the College Board, the organizations that administers the exams.

Passing an AP exam is an indicator of a student's readiness for college-level work. New York's percentage of 25.4 percent was the seventh highest in the nation and above the national average of 20.1 percent. The percentage of high school seniors in the class of 2013 who passed an AP exam outpaced the class of 2003 by nearly five

percentage points (25.4 vs. 20.5).

The popularity of AP exams in New York grew over that 10-year period as well. The number of graduates who took an AP exam during high school increased by 52 percent from 2003 to 2013. At the same time, the percentage of graduates who took an AP exam during high school rose from 30.7 percent of the class of 2003 to 37.9 percent of the class of 2013. The report may be downloaded at [www.collegeboard.org](http://www.collegeboard.org).

– Paul Heiser, Senior Research Analyst