College and Career Readiness

} Promising practices from odds-beating secondary schools

SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
UNIVERSITY AT ALBANY State University of New York

About Know Your Schools~ for NYKids (NYKids)

Since its inception in 2004, one goal of NYKids has been to help educators learn from other educators whose students consistently perform well. To date the project has identified promising practices at all levels, elementary, middle, and high school, with special attention to schools with above-predicted performance among socioeconomically, culturally, and linguistically diverse youth. Results of all studies are available in reports, case studies, articles, books, and presentations.

   To download a copy of this report, other NYKids resources, or to learn more about the project and earlier studies, go to www.albany.edu/nykids or see our searchable databases at: www.ny-kids.org/

   NYKids is a project of the University at Albany School of Education in collaboration with private and public partners. Guidance is provided by a statewide advisory board; funding is provided, in part, by the State of New York and the University at Albany.

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} Promising practices from odds-beating secondary schools

NYKids

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Crown Point Central School, Crown Point Central School District

Freeport HS Freeport Union Free School District

Malverne Senior HS Malverne Union Free School District

For anyone driving down County Route 21 in New York's southern tier, it would be hard to miss the expansive Tudor brick structure that is home to the Alfred-Almond Central School District. The district is situated between the towns of Alfred and Almond, with the former home to Alfred University and Alfred State College. The close proximity of two nearby colleges lends Alfred-Almond a reputation that it serves all the "smart kids." However, the community has changed over the years, with rising numbers of students growing up in poverty and more transience. With a mission to keep expectations high, educators nurture students' independence and both build on and evoke community pride based on a long tradition of producing good student outcomes. Alfred-Almond's students benefit from a staff who express being well-supported by exceptional student-centered leaders, with ample mentoring and professional development opportunities that build their competencies in leading and teaching.

Crown Point Central School is located in rural upstate New York. The district is home to a PK-12 building in the center of town that functions as the hub for community events and activities. Crown Point Central School is a stately, older two-level building with high ceilings, wide hallways, and administrative and town offices at the front of the building. In the late 1990s, Crown Point Central School was designated by the state as a school in need of improvement due to low performance on state assessments. In response, leaders worked to stop administrator turnover and implemented a more rigorous curriculum and other support programs to improve school culture and expand student opportunities. Evident in the widespread belief expressed among staff that school is "family," Crown Point centers its approach to schooling—from how leaders allocate resources to how teachers deliver their lessons—around its kids.

Freeport High School is described by school leaders and educators as a family where everyone cares about each other and works cooperatively to support students. Referred to as a "gem" by some, Freeport HS is situated among many affluent communities in western Long Island's Nassau County. Median household income is $60,043 in Freeport Union Free School District compared to $102,044 across Nassau County. Over 65% of Freeport HS students are identified as economically disadvantaged. While multiple generations of families have attended Freeport HS, the school and community increasingly welcome youth and families arriving in the United States from countries predominately in the Caribbean and Central America. Despite the additional needs of some of these diverse youth, Freeport HS maintains an academically competitive and rigorous program to ensure students are prepared for college or career.

Malverne Senior High School is situated about thirty miles from New York City in a working-class community dotted with small businesses, private homes, and housing complexes. Although graduation rates in 2005 were only 77%, by the late 2010s, Malverne was graduating over 90% of its students with closure of graduation rate gaps by student subgroups. Staff members credited the turnaround at Malverne to a change in school culture and vision based in the shared mantras of "failure is not an option" and "all hands are on deck." Through a mindset of "dreaming big," Malverne promotes success among its student population with an emphasis on high academic and behavioral expectations. At Malverne HS, positive and productive relationships among students and between students and adults are highly valued and supported by visionary leaders and staff who collaborate to help students find success both within and beyond high school.

This cross-case analysis builds on the case reports for each of the schools in our sample. These case reports are available at www.albany.edu/nykids as well as ny-kids.org, and highlights from them appear throughout this report. Introductory details about our sample selection and study methods can be found on page 32. A separate methods and procedures report provides more detail, and it is available on our websites.

Maple Grove Junior-Senior HS, Bemus Point Central School District

Port Chester Senior HS, Port Chester-Rye Unified School District

Sherburne-Earlville Senior HS, Sherburne-Earlville Central School District

Maple Grove Junior-Senior High School is part of the Bemus Point Central School District. Like other rural districts in the region, Bemus Point is experiencing significant demographic changes. Since 2004, district enrollment declined from about 900 to under 700 students. During this same period, the percentage of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch increased from around 10% in 2010 to over 30% in the late 2010's. To stave off the pressuresof enrollment declines, the school board adopted the strategy of striving to be a "destination" district. Maple Grove excels at serving students who are economically disadvantaged by embracing the following strategies: listening to staff, students and families with mutual respect; encouraging students to persistent in achieving high aspirations; and collaborating with the community to support student success.

Port Chester Senior High School serves a student population that is 80% nonwhite and is double the state average in English language learners (ELLs). Port Chester educators share a mission—to offer a welcoming school climate with multiple pathways for each student to reach their highest potential. Even though the Port Chester-Rye Unified School District serves a relatively economically disadvantaged community in Westchester County, the school emphasizes flexibility and enrichment opportunities. For example, honors, advanced placement (AP), and an International Baccalaureate (IB) are offered, and the barriers faced by all students taking advantage of these offerings eliminated. At the core of what makes the school tick is educators' purposeful efforts to live the mantra, "Trust and understanding are the fruits of learning." It represents the import educators place on building positive relationships with each other and the youth they serve.

Sherburne-Earlville School District's expansive buildings house the Senior High, the Middle, and the Elementary School on one multi-school campus that sits prominently on a hill from which one can take in miles of the rollng hills of New York State's Southern Tier. Educators characterize Sherburne-Earlville Senior High as the center of the community; in addition, they express a deep and sincere caring for students and their families and note how students and their families take care of each other. They also point to a school culture that prizes collaboration and matching practical solutions to families' and students' needs and priorities—whether for college preparation, career and technical training, and/or students' health and fitness. Connections, community, commitments, relevance, and independence are some of the highlights that weave through the processes and practices that explain Sherburne-Earlville Senior High's odds-beating performance.
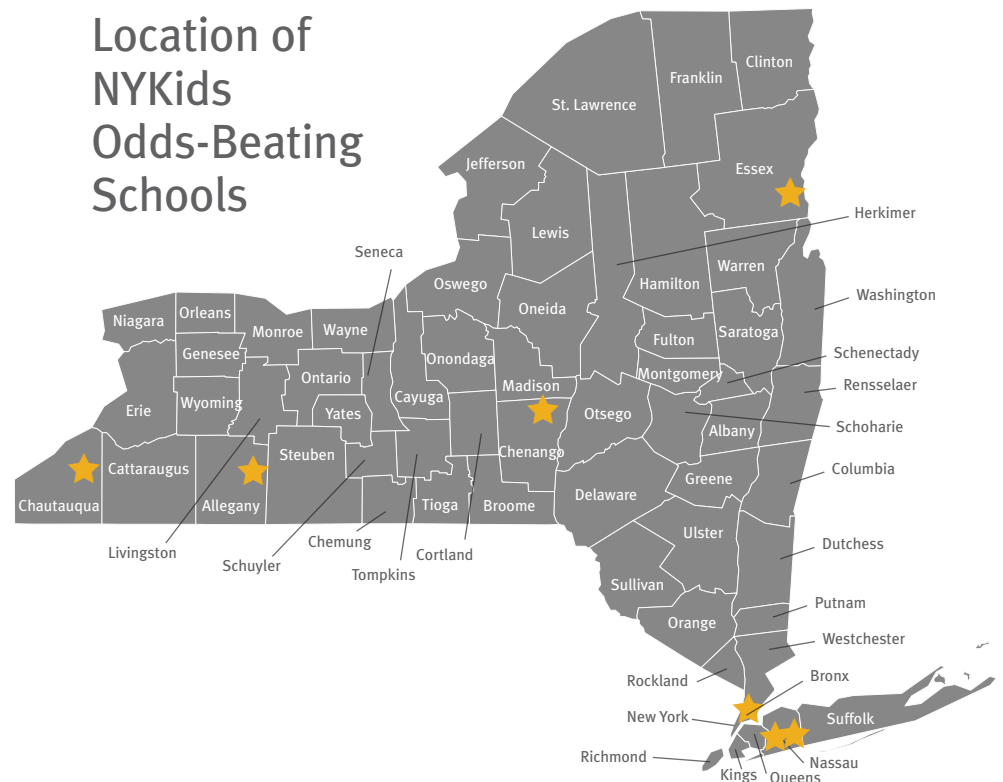
Demographics of the Odds-Beating Schools

High School	Enrollment[1]	Grade Span	Urbanicity	% Economically Disadvantaged[2]	% ELL	% Hispanic Latino	% Black/ African-American	PPE[3]
Alfred-Almond	198	7-12	Rural	42	0	1	0	$18,497
Crown Point	77	K-12	Rural	62	0	0	0	$21,644
Freeport	2,229	9-12	Suburban/Urban	66	16	64	29	$22,314
Malverne	548	9-12	Suburban/Urban	51	3	22	57	$30,539
Maple Grove	239	6-12	Rural	30	0	1	1	$17,922
Port Chester	1,436	9-12	Suburban/Urban	69	18	77	6	$19,941
Sherburne-Earlville	374	9-12	Rural	51	0	1	1	$22,507
NYS	N/A	N/A	N/A	55	9	26	17	$23,361

[1] 2016-2017 report card data. Enrollments grades 9-12 only.

[2] See definition at https://data.nysed.gov/glossary.php?report=reportcards.

[3] Total per pupil expenditures as reported in the 2016-17 fiscal supplement.

Location of NYKids Odds-Beating Schools

Background and Overview of Findings

O ne can argue that America's success as a global leader in the 21st Century is in part reliant upon a well-educated populace that has the requisite knowledge and skills to engage in civil society and contribute to the growth of the economy. A high-quality education system for all students, including those who grow up in poverty or are culturally or linguistically diverse, is necessary to meet this goal.

Unfortunately, this important goal remains elusive in too many communities and for too many youth. Federal legislation such as the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) and Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), as well as state education department policy changes, have provided incentives for educators to focus on improving outcomes for every student. However, many students still experience barriers to attendance, engagement with school, success in rigorous high school coursework, and ultimately gaining entry to college or acquiring employment. Culturally and linguistically diverse young people and those whose families are challenged by poverty are especially likely to confront barriers. What is being done to remove obstacles for high school success and prepare more youth for life after they graduate?

Previous research, including several studies conducted and published by NYKids, offer important insights. This earlier research identified features of odds-beating schools and their district central offices, and it provided important contrasts between odds beaters and comparison schools that achieve less notable student outcomes.

The research reported here was designed to build on these prior findings and explore in greater detail odds-beating school educators' practical lessons learned particularly with an eye toward college and career readiness. More than a replication study, the current investigation was designed to yield specialized knowledge about what those working in odds-beating schools are doing to meet diverse students' needs and prepare them for the future in a world where the goal line is no longer simply a high school diploma, but readiness to thrive in college, career, and life.

A comprehensive review of the research on high schools and their respective district central offices informed the current study.

Previous research provided guidance regarding what to look and listen for as we investigated sample schools, including where to look for promising innovations that yield odds-beating outcomes. Lines of inquiry that were particularly influential in this study were:

- Instructional leadership especially inclusive-facilitative leadership
- Parent/family and community engagement
- Organizational capacity for academic, social, and emotional needs of diverse youth
- School culture and climate—particularly aspects that are culturally-responsive
- Culturally-responsive curriculum and instruction
- Assessment and interventions for struggling students
- Cradle-to-career systems for diverse youth

A summary of key findings of this research follows.

Building on Prior Research

A considerable amount of educational research focuses on one or a few schools deemed "successful" or "effective." Oftentimes these studies are conducted without comparison schools that have less favorable outcomes. Two main assumptions underpin such research: Effective schools can be replicated at scale, and their surrounding contexts—their school district and community social ecologies—are inconsequential.

An alternative approach, and one we have used with this as with prior NYKids studies, is to purposefully account for variability in contexts based on the idea that district central offices, school resources and configurations, and surrounding community contexts

influence a school's processes, practices, and, ultimately, student outcomes (Durand, Lawson, Wilcox, & Schiller, 2015; Wilcox, Lawson, & Angelis, 2017). For example, rural school-family-community relations, including the external resources that can be brought to bear on student learning and achievement and school success, are unique in comparison to large urban or suburban schools (Zuckerman, Wilcox, Schiller, & Durand, 2018). Urban and suburban schools achieving success with culturally and linguistically diverse students also have distinctive features in comparison to rural schools where economic disadvantage is the primary distinguishing characteristic in the student body (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2009; Wilcox, Gregory, Yu, & Leo, 2017).

District central office leadership structures and operations, administrative arrangements, and interactional dynamics within individual schools are especially important. Previous research has emphasized the twin concepts of alignment and coherence (e.g., Daly & Finnigan, 2016). Alignment refers to structural consistency among all constituent schools, and coherence refers to widespread clarity among educators, especially around their vision for success. It is possible to have one (e.g., alignment) without the other; both have been found to relate to better performance outcomes for educators and students alike.

Previous NYKids research has amplified the importance of these two priorities while adding important details. For example, district office leaders who rely on buffering, bridging, and brokering strategies to achieve and maintain alignment and coherence, have been found to be essential for successful innovation implementation (Durand, et al., 2015). These strategies hinge on a combination of trust and communication between district central office leaders and school leaders and school leaders and staff (Lawson, et al., 2017). Odds-beating district offices and their constituent schools tend to show strong evidence of these features, whereas schools with less exemplary student performance trends frequently do not.

Prior research has also signaled distinctive features of secondary schools in comparison to elementary schools in regards to school culture and climate. Culture is evidenced in what is valued, believed, and practiced, and climate refers to the qualities of interactions among students, educators, and external constituencies (particularly parents and families) that evoke such feelings as safety and comfort. At the secondary level, school climate has been found to be especially important as it relates to youth engagement in school (e.g., Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013). NYKids researchers have employed a garden metaphor, using it to differentiate between the growth-enhancing features of odds-beating schools versus sub-optimal features of typical schools in earlier studies (Wilcox, Lawson, & Angelis, 2015). Significantly, educators in odds-beating schools tend to refer to and treat young people in their care holistically, not merely as academic students. These young people enjoy what Ferguson (2015) calls "student agency" as they are encouraged to assert their voices and make choices as they engage with others and in activities in and out of school.

Prior studies of odds-beating schools also indicate the importance of educator collaboration, sometimes via formal teams and communities of practice, and these collaborative efforts to engage and connect with every student are non-stop. Drawing on what they know about positive child and youth development (Mitra, Serriere, & Kirshner, 2014) and culturally responsive practices (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2014), educators develop and use a variety of student engagement strategies. These include getting students involved in a wide range of extra-curricular activities that oftentimes are organized and generated by students themselves. In their classrooms, teachers enjoy accessible and useful data they use to differentiate instruction and then act swiftly with sufficient resources to ensure that no youth falls through the cracks (Wilcox, Gregory, & Yu, 2017).

As U.S. educators face unprecedented pressure to prepare America's youth for an increasingly competitive global marketplace, while at the same time providing safe haven for the growing numbers who face mental health, poverty and other poverty-related challenges, questions as to what educators should be expected to do abound. The traditionally subject-centered institution of a secondary school (Doyle, 1985) where students could be expected to step up to the challenges has shown to rarely work out for all students, and student engagement and academic learning have time and again been casualties.

Findings

This study offers practical lessons learned regarding how and why educators in odds-beating schools achieve better outcomes than their peers in comparison schools. As detailed in the Methods section, the research team's methodology was comprehensive, investigating processes and practices in district central offices, schools, and classrooms. Special interest resided in structural alignments across these three levels—district office, school, and classroom—and coherence, i.e., educators' clarity and agreement regarding what priorities matter most and how best to achieve them, individually and together and with close attention to how educators adapt for cultural, linguistic, and economic diversity.

Predictably, the research team discovered once again that every school is unique and special in important ways. Differences in school context as well as student body size and composition and workforce characteristics helped to account for schools' special features. Nonetheless, alongside features that announced each school's uniqueness, the research team discovered four important commonalities among the odds-beating schools that distinguish them from comparison schools.

This set of findings is critically important because it provides a partial blueprint for what educators in other secondary schools can prioritize and do to facilitate the success of the greatest number of their students, particularly poverty-challenged and culturally and linguistically diverse ones. The four common elements odds-beating schools share and that distinguish them from comparison schools with lesser student outcomes are listed below.

1. **Co-Constructing**
a Humanizing School Community

2. **Collaborating**
to Define and Achieve Success

3. **Cultivating**
Culturally Responsive, Inclusive, and Facilitative Leadership

4. **Customizing**
Innovative Policies, Programs and Practices

} Odds-Beating Secondary Schools

1.

Co-Constructing a Humanizing School Community

> We tend to work with a culture of "We're going to give you [students] respect and we're going to expect it back, and we are going to have conversations with you [students] when we see that that's not happening." But we are looking for that level of independence and being able to govern ourselves and work together, and that goes hand in hand with high expectations. – Alfred-Almond principal

An important distinguishing characteristic of odds-beating schools is in how educators characterize their school community and the youth they serve. In this study we found that odds-beating district and school leaders, faculty, and staff members tend to describe their school community as a "family." This was not the case only in small rural schools, but in larger schools and those serving culturally and linguistically diverse communities. This emphasis on school as a family in odds beaters diverges from comparison schools, where relationship building was not a consistently articulated priority.

In addition, in odds-beating schools, leaders, teachers, and support staff (e.g., social workers, school psychologists) clearly and consistently articulated expectations for how to treat others with respect and this extended to how they describe young people. In contrast, in typically performing high schools, educators were more likely to narrowly identify young people only as "students" rather than as individuals on their own developmental journey. Educators in odds-beating high schools took a more holistic view of youth development as illustrated by the Malverne High School principal: "You can't sit there and say, 'I'm going to beat the odds with these kids.' You have to say, 'They are kids.'"

Furthermore, educators in the odds-beating schools described placing an emphasis on actively co-constructing school as a community of learners. In this prototype for a school community, contributions and expectations of each member contributing to that community are highly valued. Being human, including taking risks that do not always work out and relying upon others for support during those times, is embraced as an opportunity for learning. Instead of bureaucratic policies and associated inflexible procedures and practices that silo adults into narrowly defined roles—practices that disadvantage some youth more than others—pragmatism and compassion lead the way.

As will be discussed more in Element 3, leaders like one at Sherburne-Earlville critically evaluate inherited policies and procedures. They ask questions such as, "What if we stop doing stupid things?" Such questions set up the expectation that educators are part of a learning community and that learning is targeted squarely on impacts on youth and the community. Importantly, this learning community is inclusive of staff, young people, and families, with the latter two treated more as equal participants than what was evidenced in comparison high schools, where an "expert knows best" mindset predominates.

It is in the odds-beating school communities that young people enjoy opportunities to learn how to become contributing members of society upon graduation, inclusive of preparation for pursuing additional training or education and entering the workforce. Educators in the odds-beaters employ four approaches to develop and sustain these humanizing school communities:

 (1) Building relationships across all levels of the school
 (2) Recognizing all members of the school community as valued

Everyone is close and supportive. I have never felt like I was alone at any time on any issue, whether it is an educational issue or a personal issue. The support here is phenomenal.
– Crown Point teacher

(3) Facilitating youth-driven identity development and goal setting

(4) Emphasizing well-rounded youth as a primary goal

Building Relationships across All Levels of the School

In contrast to their colleagues in typically performing schools, educators in all the odds-beating schools bring focus and intentionality to building relationships with students, as well as with each other. Notably, educators described creating multiple opportunities for young people to develop social connections with a caring adult. The principal at Crown Point reported, for example,

You have to let kids know that you know them, because they know if you know them or not. And if they know that you know them and know that you care about them, they are going to work hard for you.

Creating opportunities to really know students is viewed as the responsibility of all, including leaders, teachers, student support professionals and other adults in the building (e.g., cafeteria workers and bus personnel). For example, several schools offer a formal mentoring program that pairs faculty/staff and students. At Crown Point, every adult in the building (office staff, faculty, student support professionals, and others) is part of the schoolwide mentorship program.

School leadership for a holistic, youth-centered discourse also was evident in the odds beaters. The principal of Alfred-Almond explained,

When the bell rings all teachers are expected to be at their doors, just greeting kids, talking to them. It's going to let you know which kiddos maybe look sad, maybe who's cursing in the hallways that needs to be attended to and is somebody missing that we are looking for? So, it's a small piece, but it's the pieces like that that kind of promote the overall culture and bring out good kids. And if we're doing it, the kids answer back, you know, with a "Good morning." We expect your head up and you're answering back.

Educators in the odds-beating schools reported that celebrating student accomplishments, both academic and non-academic, was a routine practice and part of sending the meta-message, "I care about you and you matter to me and this school." Significantly, they also spoke of prizing and promoting students' co-curricular and extracurricular engagement. For example, one principal actively encourages faculty to attend sports games, musicals, and other events with two goals in mind: (1) reasserting the importance of seeing young people in settings outside the classroom; and (2) emphasizing how educators' presence communicates their commitments to young people.

Educators in other odds-beating schools described adult-student relationships as a key component of their approach to discipline. They said they strive to foster relationships with young people "before problems start," taking what one educator referred to as a "therapeutic" approach to discipline. For example, the principal of Freeport identified three key components of their school's discipline approach: (1) the need of each student to be connected to one adult in the building; (2) the need to be honest and direct with students; and (3) the importance of serving as a resource to students when they face problems at school and home. This philosophy forms the basis for caring and nurturing relationships, a key to navigating misbehaviors when they emerge, and allows for school staff to pursue collective efforts to resolving behavioral concerns. Such an approach is intended to communicate to students that adults in the building have their best interest in mind and that when an adult delivers difficult advice, it comes from a place of care and trust and is backed up by others.

Beyond explicit plans for positive adult-youth relationships, educators in odds-beating high schools also make efforts to build relationships among adults across the district and

If you treat students like human beings and you try to relate what you're teaching to what they're experiencing, you gain a lot of headway.
– Maple Grove teacher

in the school, between district and school leaders, between leaders and faculty and staff members, and between adults and kids. Educators in these schools view the relationships between adults as opportunities to model for young people how to interact with others in ways that are caring, respectful, and considerate. This manifests in simple practices such as colleagues praising and complementing each other for their work and not reacting to others out of emotions like frustration or anger.

Recognizing Contributions from All in the School Community as Valued

Related to relationship building, educators in odds-beating schools view recognition of both adults and young people in the school community as vital. Leaders and teachers actively create opportunities to celebrate the individuality and diverse accomplishments of each other and students. In contrast, in typically performing schools, these opportunities may come about on an individual basis due to the efforts of individual educators, but they are not incorporated into the articulated priorities for the school or expectations of educators. Leaders and educators in odds-beating high schools are quick to point out the accomplishments and successes of their students and of their colleagues; this was not consistently the case in the typically performing schools.

To prioritize recognition of accomplishments, educators in many of the odds beaters organize formal celebrations of diverse groups among the youth in the school such as those for Hispanic heritage, as well as for other organized clubs and groups. Additionally, as previously discussed, youth achievements outside the classroom, including but not limited to sports, are often prominently displayed throughout the school building. For example, the Maple Grove principal made space to display the accomplishments of the drama club in the front lobby alongside the sports trophies.

Maple Grove High School student-designed posters for the school's musicals displayed in the lobby.

This schoolwide recognition extends to adults. For instance, in Freeport, educators highlight the accomplishments of their peers for efforts such as working to develop unique programs to meet student needs or their work in classrooms to reach all students.

Facilitating Youth-Driven Identity Development and Goal Setting

While educators in typically performing schools tend to focus on targets defined by the state (discussed in more detail in Element 2), educators in odds-beating high schools focus on helping adolescents set their own goals for life after high school, helping them to identify their destinations as adults. Many educators in the odds-beating schools described using a strengths-based approach; for example, one student support professional said, "We work on individual students' strengths, and we really try and ride with that, as far as we can. . . . That builds up confidence, skills, and their willingness to be here."

This youth development priority, emphasized in the odds-beating schools, also was a districtwide priority, where conversations about pathways into a fulfilling adulthood begin as early as elementary school. Educators' emphasized the importance of allowing high school youth to be actively involved in designing their course of study. The Maple Grove superintendent said that they ask,

"When I first started . . . it was hard to convince them [lower-performing students] that they were worth just as much as the kid who's on the honor roll. With these other programs, we can put them into something they're interested in and they're good at. It gives them a lot of self-worth. They can go to English class and maybe they're not strong writers, but it gives them a little bit more confidence to try and work harder." – Sherburne-Earlville teacher

When [students] leave this building, the high school, are they ready to be successful in whatever they have chosen to do? We understand, in this day and age . . . you should know what you're interested in, what you're good at, some things you might have skills in, and some preparation here to help you then go further, whether it be college or trades or whatever you have in mind.

At some odds beaters, career planning involves discussions about the sort of life a young person would want to lead. These identity-related discussions include concrete concepts such as cost of living and budgeting, as well as developing skills like responsibility and leadership.

Overall, educators in the odds-beating schools described a commitment to exposing every student to college (e.g., through taking advanced coursework and participating in college visits) but without "a college for all" emphasis. In one odds beater young people are tasked with explaining in writing how a trade or technical program they want to enroll in will help serve their post-graduation goals. The principal implemented this activity because she feels it important for youth to be certain of their own path so that they use their time in high school productively.

Emphasizing Well-Rounded Youth as a Primary Goal

Educators in the odds beaters described the importance of providing opportunities for young people to engage in social and emotional learning opportunities as part of their school experience. They described looking for ways to develop self-regulation skills, leadership, respect and consciousness—so-called "soft skills"—in a number of ways. For instance, formal mentoring opportunities are employed in some odds beaters (some involving every adult and young person in the school building), while others offer classes beginning in middle school for facilitating discussions around topics such as death and dying. In Freeport High School, district and school leaders encourage and support an active and engaged student government. At the time of the site visit, district leaders were meeting with students to offer support and guidance in the students' efforts to plan their own demonstration against gun violence. The Freeport superintendent said,

We held that meeting [with student government]. They're great kids. They don't hesitate to speak up. We wanted this to be their thing, so my advice to the principal was to let the students lead the 17 minutes. . . . So tomorrow I'm suggesting the 17 minutes, literally wanting them to take over, and even on the PA system: "Would you like to read poetry? Would you like to say something, or for every minute honoring one of them [victims of gun violence]?"

Much of this self-directedness is accomplished through the relationship building previously described. Educators in odds-beating schools are aware that they are not only teaching skills and academic content to young people, but that they also serve as models for thinking critically and acting responsibly in adulthood. It is through their relationships with young people themselves, and also with other adults in the building, that they strive to help young people prepare to be healthy, well-informed, and capable citizens.

Consistent with the research on the relationship between engagement in school-sponsored activities, academic engagement in classrooms, and student retention and success (Ferguson, 2015; Houser, 2016; Abruzzo, Lenis, Romero, Maser, & Morote, 2016), educators in odds-beating schools encourage youth to participate in activities outside the classroom such as playing team sports, engaging in physical activity (e.g., running, weight lifting), playing an instrument, participating in the school musical, or getting involved in creative arts. In some odds-beating high schools, educators participate in these activities

What I try to do is I try to validate people. A lot of times a lot of the good things people do go unrecognized, and sometimes that can lead to people feeling disheartened—not being appreciated. So, I try to make sure to validate people as much as possible, when it is in my interactions with them or when it is the observations we do of them. – Port Chester assistant principal

as well. For example, one high school opened the newly renovated weight room to both students and faculty before and after school. This not only offers additional opportunities for relationship building but also models the importance of caring for your whole self.

On the Continuum

Typically Performing High Schools	Odds-Beating High Schools
Relationship building between educators and students not a priority consistently articulated by leaders and educators, though individual educators take actions to build student relationships on an individual basis.	Relationship building between educators and students is a priority consistently articulated by leaders and educators. Formal expectations, policies and structures facilitate relationship building widely across the school.
Hierarchical relationships among leaders, faculty, and staff members, as well as between educators, kids, and families apparent with little consistency in expectations for how to treat others shared across schools.	Egalitarian relationships across leaders, faculty, staff members, kids, and family members. High expectations that apply to all in the school consistently articulated by leaders and teachers. Everyone (leaders, educators and students) expected to be honest and to give and show respect and appreciation.
Graduation the main goal. Discussion about post-graduation goals and planning occurs mostly in high school rather than prior and/or these discussions are not student driven.	A student's post-graduation goal(s), a plan to achieve the goal(s), and being a productive and contributing citizen are the school's focus. Discussions about post-graduation goal-setting and planning, which is student driven, begins early in elementary or middle school.
Leaders and educators believe in the importance of students being well rounded and developing soft skills, but these beliefs are not supported by shared expectations, policies, structures and opportunities for this development.	Belief in the importance of students being well rounded and developing soft skills consistently identified as essential by leaders and educators. This belief is manifested in expectations, policies, structures and opportunities for this development.

Freeport High School

Building an Inclusive "School Family" and Supportive Environment

You know [our first priority is] student success. Also, creating an environment where faculty, staff, and students feel comfortable and safe to express their ideas and where they can be in an environment where they are supported. – principal

A consistent theme expressed in interviews was that Freeport High School is a large extended family in which each member is valued and supported. In this family, educators said, adults model for students how to treat each other with respect and listen to differing perspectives. All members of the family have opportunities to voice their desires, whether faculty and staff members choosing professional development opportunities or students seeking to publicly express their concerns about school violence. In response to a growing Spanish-speaking population, the district has prioritized hiring bilingual faculty and staff members while also supporting current faculty to obtain bilingual certification. Other examples of supports include "safe zones" for LGBTQ youth and evening programs for students who must work to support their families.

Using a Shared Decision Making Approach to Discipline
At Freeport High School, thinking about discipline begins before problems arise and is about more than administering consequences. According to the principal, an approach to discipline should start with examining the culture that leaders, faculty, and other staff members set for the school. It involves building relationships with students as soon as they walk in the door to be sure that each student is connected to a caring adult.

The principal described a disciplinary process that involves shared decision making with staff members and students. This reportedly involves providing a space for staff members and students to share their perspectives and understanding of an incident, as well as what the consequence should be. Leaders reported working with both teachers and students to process their thoughts and behavior and stressed the importance of not responding to the situation with emotion, which the administrators model. Since implementing this approach, the principal said, suspensions and write-ups in the school have dropped dramatically.

To deal with discipline, you have to look at the environment and the culture of the building. That's how it starts. When teachers don't feel comfortable . . . or they're not being supported, your infractions and your write-ups are going to increase. Also, the same thing with the students: if they don't feel supported, their level of acting out is going to increase. I started certain practices where I empowered either the student or the teacher in the decision-making process, within reason, of the consequence [of an infraction]. – school principal

Freeport High School students in the Gay-Straight Alliance Club started an initiative to identify "safe haven" spaces where students can feel included and accepted, no matter their race or ethnicity, gender identity or sexual orientation. These signs indicate that when students walk into that classroom they are allowed to be themselves without being pressured or harassed by anyone.

2.

Collaborating to Define and Achieve Success

> **It's that team approach. If you work in isolation, you're only serving yourself. It's all in that connection.** — Sherburne-Earlville principal

Leaders, teachers, and student-support professionals at odds-beating high schools expressed the belief that they cannot "go it alone" if they are to reach their high aspirations for the young people they serve. To support youth in achieving success in high school and beyond, these educators explained that they must engage parents and families, other community members, and young people themselves. In addition, and importantly, while graduating from high school is a goal for all students, how success is defined beyond this measure is seen as a collaborative process driven by youth and supported by parents and families. The diverse measures of success in odds-beating schools are informed by context and unique characteristics of youth. This approach contrasts with typically performing high schools where success is defined largely by measures external to those served by the school—mainly (New York State) Regents test scores and graduation rates. Educators in the odds-beaters employ three approaches to collaboratively define and achieve student success:

    (1) Defining success as more than meeting external targets established by others
    (2) Distributing and collectively developing and implementing solutions
    (3) Actively and persistently engaging parents and families

Defining Success as More than Meeting External Targets Established by Others
In odds-beating schools, success was defined as supporting students in aiming high to reach individualized student-defined goals, as well as assisting students to develop into well-rounded, contributing citizens (directly related to Element 1). Parents and families are also part of the process of defining success, setting goals, and planning to meet those goals, and this process begins as early as elementary school. In contrast, goals in typically performing schools were more often defined as meeting targets defined by the state, and the curriculum is aligned to reach those narrower aims.

The curriculum in odds-beating high schools (as will be discussed in more detail in Element 4) has been designed to go beyond subject matter and to develop higher-order thinking skills. Rather than focusing on getting students to graduation, educators in odds-beating schools focus on supporting young adults with developing their post-graduation plans for after graduation, whether college, additional technical and trade training, or entering the workforce. These student-defined goals dictate customized education plans based on the resources (e.g., college credit bearing courses, technical training, internships) available in the school and community.

In addition to pursuing academic goals that are student defined rather than exclusively state driven, educators in odds-beating high schools emphasize that preparing their students for success in life involves purposeful nurturing of well-rounded, physically and mentally healthy individuals. These individuals, educators hold, need to be positioned to take informed risks academically as well as in extracurricular activities (discussed in Element 1), but with options and supports in place to catch them when they stumble.

> We'll tell them [students] what they need for graduation but absolutely we'll emphasize the fact that we want them to do more than the minimum, [asking them] how can they stand out and be college and career ready. – Malverne student support professional

To do this, they create safe environments for young adults to "fail forward," as one put it, where they encourage the development of skills in leading, problem solving, and persevering, which they believe will serve students throughout their lives. Echoing the sentiments of his peers in other odds-beating schools, a district leader from Malverne summed it up this way: "We want kids to be resilient when they leave. We want kids to be able to meet challenges and succeed without the supports but know they can do it."

Distributing and Collectively Developing and Implementing Solutions
In odds-beating high schools, finding solutions to sometimes highly complex issues is a collective and evidence-informed process that includes school-based staff members, youth, parents/families, and at times, others in the community. Leaders in odds-beating high schools provide time and structures to facilitate this collaborative work. They actively seek to identify where the school could be missing the mark with any student or where their systems might not be as effective as they could be in providing more rigor or intervention when needed. The idea that we learn together from our weaknesses is actively promoted by leaders in odds-beating high schools; this contrasts with typically performing high schools, where use of such local data to inform instruction and adapt to external demands is uneven and/or inconsistent.

Leadership is another area in which odds-beating and typically performing schools differ. Leadership can be viewed as an activity vested in a few persons or as a function carried out by many. The latter kind of leadership is described as distributed and collaborative, and odds-beating schools are exemplars for such shared leadership. Staff are selected who can and do fulfill different roles and take on different responsibilities as needs arise. In practice, this means that teachers, social workers, guidance counselors, principals, and assistant principals all see their roles as directly connected to fulfilling the vision of providing each and every child a sound academic preparation with the social and emotional supports they need to reach their potentials in high school and beyond. In some cases, students, families, and other community members take on leadership roles in problem solving and innovating to identify and test solutions. For example, to address the psychological, social and emotional needs of young people, staff in some odds-beating high schools coordinate a network of available community resources to meet needs.

In other odds-beating high schools, educators engage the community as a site for post-graduation preparation. Particularly in rural communities, these educators work with community partners to identify employment needs and prepare students to meet them. Other high schools embed young people into the community for internships and other experiential learning to prepare them for careers and instill soft skills. As one teaching assistant said,

They [students] go out into the community a lot. We have Career and Vocational Technology [CV Tech] that also prepares kids for trade and work. That's been very successful. . . . I'm from the town next door, and we probably have six shops for cosmetology, and we [the school] are a small community next door, and . . . there's probably 20 kids employed [there], and all of them have been through CV Tech. We also have a program where they can go into the community and shadow. They have a shadow program.

Actively and Persistently Engaging Parents and Families
Much like educators in typically performing high schools, those in odds-beating schools described the challenges they face in engaging parents and families in the ways they hope to, and this was true across schools regardless of locale. However, in the odds-beating schools, educators expressed two beliefs that distinguished them from their peers in typically performing schools, and these beliefs guide their approaches to parent and family relationship building.

First, school leaders, teachers, and support professionals in the odds-beating schools all consistently described relationship building with parents and families as the responsibility

We see the hard work they [teachers and staff] are doing, and we thank them not only for their professionalism but what they are doing for our students as well. It's not my students—it is our students. Giving them some ownership in this no matter what [their] role is here in the school. This is our building; it is not my building. It's not [the principal's] building; it is our building. And as a result of that everyone must work to their best potential whatever role with students they have. So if anyone has any ideas in which we can go ahead and improve the environment . . . make any type of improvements in the school, feel comfortable going ahead and feel empowered to bring those suggestions and ideas about because they are important here.
– Port Chester school leader

of everyone in the school. This contrasts with typically performing high schools, where some articulated the belief that relationship building is the responsibility of all, while others, that relationship building is the responsibility of others in the building, usually student support professionals. And the student support professionals in those typically performing schools generally expressed feeling under resourced in meeting the challenges they face.

Second, leaders, teachers, and student support professionals in the odds beaters expressed the belief that, even when challenging, relationships with parents and families can always be improved and strengthened. A Freeport student support professional put it this way: "Their [parents' and families'] success means our success. If we give up on them, we are kind of are giving up on ourselves. I know personally, just talking to everyone here, we all kind of feel that way." This belief, expressed in the odds-beating schools, differed from typically performing schools, where staff described parent and family relationships as static and unlikely to change.

Differences between how educators understand parent relationships in the odds-beating high schools compared to the typically performing high schools also emerged in a school culture survey that was administered at each site. In the odds beaters, 91% of survey respondents believe parents or legal guardians have high educational expectations for their children, compared to 57% of respondents in the typical performers. Additionally, 69% of respondents in odds-beating schools vs. 51% in typically performing schools said that they receive a great deal of support from students' families for the work they do. Nearly a third of survey respondents in typically performing schools, compared to just under a quarter in odds-beating schools, indicated that they have difficulties with students' families.

Unlike typically performing high schools, odds-beating high schools offer opportunities for parents and families to have a greater responsibility and influence on the practices and systems within the school. For example, serving on committees with other school staff members, offering feedback on new school policies related to discipline and attendance, and contributing to change efforts through continuous feedback surveys actively engage parents in schoolwide decision making.

Additionally, educators in the odds-beating high schools also take the approach of "meeting parents where they are at," (e.g., as described by the Freeport educator above) and communicating to parents that "we are here to work with you," as suggested by the Sherburne-Earlville educator in the quotation below. Leaders, teachers, and student support professionals in the odds-beating high schools described continual efforts to understand and respect the perspectives of parents and families. For example, parents were recognized as balancing the demands of providing for and caring for their families as well as possibly having had negative personal experiences with school in the past that influence their involvement in school or viewing education as threatening or unnecessary. As a student support staff member from Sherburne-Earlville High School said about parents,

Education isn' t always their top priority. We fight that. Some of them are threatened when their kids become too high achieving because that' s just not something that' s supposed to happen, "Wow if you' re doing this well in school, does that mean you' re going to grow up and go away and never come back? Who' s going to take care of me and who' s going to take care of grandma?" That' s a real battle with some families around here.

Recognizing the challenges some parents encounter, educators in the odds-beating high schools have adopted a variety of approaches, including scheduling beginning-of-the-school-year parent conferences to accommodate parent schedules and attracting parents to the school for nonacademic focused activities for the whole family designed to build trust and relationships, as well as conducting home visits. Overall, efforts are made to make engagement easier for parents rather than expecting that all parents will be able to participate in traditional ways convenient to the school, such as through parent-teacher nights.

I hear some others from other districts talking, and I just shake my head thinking, "Why would you take that hard line with that kid or with this parent?" . . . I think our teachers are really accommodating. I just think that we all have the same goal in mind, and this place seems really committed, whatever that is going to look like, for each kid – but really committed to trying to get kids to where they need to be and get families what they need. – Sherburne Earlville student support professional

On the Continuum

Typically Performing High Schools	Odds-Beating High Schools
Success defined by fulfilling state requirements.	Student success defined as more than academics and this is reflected in course and program offerings and extracurriculars.
Leaders generally provide an "open door" for communications with teachers and support staff, but teachers and support staff do not report engaging in collaborative problem solving and solution generation unprompted and/or may resist initiatives assigned by administrators.	Leaders provide a tone, routines, and explicit expectations for collaborative problem solving and solution generation.
School is the main site for college and career preparation, and educators do not, or do so only for some students, align their curriculum and program offerings to needs of the local economy.	School, as well as the community, are used as sites for college and career preparation of students, and educators align curriculum and program offerings to what is needed in the local economy.
Staff make referrals to established community resources for follow-up by parents and families. No or little connection or coordination by school staff with community resources. The status of young people is not tracked or the tracking is suboptimal in timeliness or extent of supports.	Educators coordinate available school and community resources to address the emotional and mental health needs of young people and continually seek out new opportunities for services that might be available. The status of young people in these services is tracked so that supports are applied in a timely manner and are consistently effective.
Parent and family relationships recognized as an essential component to success, though the relationships between school staff and parents described as distant and strained (at best) and lacking trust (at worst). Lack ideas about how to improve relationships. Relationships assumed to be static and unchanging; also assumed that parents or families may not care about education. Perception that the responsibility for relationship building lies with certain members in the school, not everyone.	Parent and family relationships recognized as an essential component to success. Although challenging, the relationships described as trusting. Many ideas about how to engage with parents and families are generated; educators assume that these relationships can grow and be improved and that parents or families care about education. Shared perception that the responsibility for relationship building lies with everyone in the school.

Sherburne-Earlville High School

Offering a Responsive and Relevant Curriculum

School leaders and teachers in Sherburne-Earlville spoke of making strides in an effort to develop a curricular program based on the needs and interests of the community. The centerpiece of their version of cultural responsiveness is evident in such curricular adaptations as the rebuilding of the Agricultural Science program, which had been eliminated in the 1990s. Reinstating this program had long been a priority for many parents, students, and teachers because Sherburne-Earlville has historically been an agricultural community. As the superintendent recounted, "We have [community] members saying, 'Here we are, an Ag-related school. Where's the Ag?'" Responding to such questions, school and district leaders have been adding Agricultural courses and are planning to hire a full-time instructor to teach them. To augment these courses with hands-on experiences, students and staff members have been constructing a greenhouse on school property using funds from a grant provided by the nearby yogurt maker. The importance of agriculture to the community and its relevance to students' lives was made explicit by the superintendent:

I think some of our students have been missing out because you do have a lot of students who are going into the [agricultural] business. I had a conversation just the other day with one of my former biology students who has a small organic farm. . . . He could have really benefitted from some of those Ag Science courses, and [we're] looking to bring those pieces back.

In addition to the Agricultural Science program, other course offerings have been added to the curriculum to ensure its relevance to students' interests and needs. "We're constantly adjusting our course offerings to meet those needs to what they're interested in," said the principal. A Hunting and Wilderness course, for example, was added to respond to student interest in the outdoors.

New courses based on graphic novels and mythological heroes also are being proposed in the English Department. Based on current student interest and recent graduates' feedback, a college-level Physics course was recently added to the curriculum as well as other STEM (Science-Math-Engineering-Technology)-related offerings such as Computer Science, Engineering, and Robotics.

One teacher thoughtfully summed up the need to provide courses students need and/or feel are relevant to their lives in the following way:

I think it has to be relevant to their life because when you throw material at a student . . . what does it really mean to them? How do you relate it to their life here?

In response to needs identified by the community, Sherburne-Earlville High School constructed a greenhouse on school property with the help of a local yogurt manufacturer in order to give students more hands-on agricultural experience.

3.

Cultivating Culturally Responsive, Inclusive, and Facilitative Leadership

> We don't hold anything back. We have our differences with one another, we say what we need to say, we get it out, and I think those are healthy relationships that actually allow us to be successful. Because I can say anything I want to anybody in this room, and I think that's important. — Freeport High School principal

Related to Element 1 and an emphasis on humanizing the school, leadership at odds-beating schools is characterized by mutual trust and collaboration among staff members and a shared sense of responsibility for nurturing the general well-being of all young people. With close attention to hiring practices that support leaders' aims, district leaders described selecting highly qualified candidates compatible with the student population as well as the district's academic goals and vision of success.

For many of the odds-beating schools, this initiative entailed hiring staff who share a cultural and linguistic identity with students and who feel a strong sense of community pride. The hiring of qualified and dedicated staff members and provision of effective professional development contributes to the inclusive and facilitative form of leadership evident in odds-beating schools, as school and district leaders expressed confidence in the abilities of staff members in a number of ways. For instance, as the Sherburne-Earlville superintendent explained, "A lot of it comes down to the fact that I don't have to micromanage because these people are sharp." In addition, staff members at odds-beating schools consistently expressed understanding and sharing the vision of school success promoted by school and district leaders. This understanding facilitates a common sense of identity and a unified approach to achieving goals, which contributes to higher investment by staff members in new initiatives.

In promoting culturally responsive, inclusive, and facilitative leadership, educators at odds-beating schools shared three approaches:

(1) Staffing for and developing cultural responsiveness
(2) Interacting to problem solve, find solutions, and improve
(3) Networking with a shared vision

Staffing for and Developing Cultural Responsiveness

Educators in odds-beating schools described paying close attention to the hiring process and seeking highly qualified staff well suited to meet the needs of their student populations. In Freeport, for example, leaders prioritized the hiring of Spanish-speaking and ENL-trained (English as a New Language) staff to support the growing Central American population. As a school leader explained, "[District leaders] want to know that you can handle this population, that you have experience with this population and have knowledge about it." When teachers do not have the requisite certificates, the district provides support for educators who are willing to acquire an ENL or bilingual extension. In addition to new teaching hires and Spanish-speaking administrative staff, Freeport added two bilingual counselors, a social worker, and psychologist to strengthen their services for linguistically diverse youth and families. Port Chester, also serving a highly diverse student population, works to find skilled candidates who share commonalities with their students. As the principal explained:

> We put a tremendous effort into the hiring process. We need to hire the right people for the job. You have got to love kids. You have got to have a genuine love for children. I can teach you how to teach if you have a passion for it, but you have to love kids. So that's probably the number one thing I look for, someone who loves children.
> – Malverne High School principal

I knew I wanted teachers who looked more like my students. I knew that I wanted to hire qualified applicants who were filling niches. . . . African-American teachers, Hispanic teachers, Spanish-speaking teachers. Those were what we certainly looked for very hard when we were filling positions, with always, though, the idea that merit is what mattered most.

District and school leaders across odds-beating schools also seek prospective candidates with a strong sense of pride and investment in the communities in which they work, a characteristic that many veteran staff members cited as a reason for staying at their schools for so many years. Illustrating this deep commitment to his school, a teacher at Alfred-Almond explained, "I do feel like there is a sort of sense of pride in this school. I've lived here my whole life, and a lot of the people that I talk to are proud to be associated with this school."

Furthermore, many odds-beating school educators recognize the increasing prevalence of mental health issues and the need to tackle them. They have sought to address these student needs by hiring additional support staff. Rural Sherburne-Earlville, for instance, recently added additional school counselors and social workers and houses a doctor and dentist on school grounds so that students can receive medical care without missing class time.

Interacting to Problem Solve, Find Solutions, and Improve

An inclusive and facilitative form of leadership was evident across all odds-beating schools, where problem-solving, solution-finding, and ultimately acting to improve outcomes were approached as a team, with diverse voices given a chance to be heard. At Alfred-Almond, for example, the superintendent stressed the need of having "open" relationships and welcoming difficult discussions. He explained:

You have to be able to have the strength to have an open relationship and to sit down and say, "No, you're wrong, on this. You know this is why we have to do these things," and understand that if we have that discussion, great. That's a professional discussion.

Staff at odds-beating schools reported meeting regularly with one another, freely collaborating, and feeling comfortable raising concerns when they feel it necessary, even with building and district leaders. As a teacher at Crown Point stated, "We tend to work together to come up with the best solution we can as a group." District and school leaders further facilitate a collaborative climate by taking staff feedback seriously and surveying staff in order to incorporate their opinions and ideas into future initiatives. As a district leader at Freeport commented, "We can never survey teachers, ask them what their needs are, and then not respond to it." A district leader at Maple Grove articulated a similar sentiment towards staff collaboration:

I'm constantly listening to what they [teachers] need, and then I'll be the person behind the scenes to get in what they need. . . . And always, we are supposed to learn. How can we keep the teachers learning, and keep them active?

Inclusive leadership exemplified by district and school administrators extend to students as well, and school organizations and extracurricular activities feature leadership roles for students. As the principal of Freeport explained, the collaborative tone set by building leaders sets a positive example for students:

We have a unique situation here: We're all friends, we all taught here. We have camaraderie with one another; every decision is made by consensus. So I think that translates with the kids because they see how we interact.

The more barriers you put between yourself in a leadership position and the students, the farther you are removed from what is truly important.
– Alfred-Almond Junior-Senior High School principal

Networking with a Shared Vision

Educators in odds-beating schools share a coherent vision of school success and teachers enjoy voice and choice in school initiatives, which helps to gain and sustain teacher buy-in to new initiatives while promoting a unified approach towards achieving student success. For example, at Malverne, staff members repeatedly referred to the shared mantra of "Dream Big" that was evident throughout not only the high school but the entire school district, which fueled teamwork across individuals within schools and across schools in the district. Starting with a "Dare to Dream" program in the middle school, leaders spread the program's framework vertically to the elementary and high schools, so that "each cohort would have that whole vision and support," as the superintendent explained.

With an emphasis on high expectations for all children, numerous staff members at Malverne reaffirmed another shared mantra: "Failure is not an option." This kind of coherence is backed up with routines for collaborative problem solving and solution finding. Staff at odds-beating schools often reported that they do not feel like they have to tackle challenges alone and have a network of colleagues and school leaders to turn to for support. As just one of many examples, a teacher at Crown Point described the network of resources that are available anytime a problem arises:

If I have an issue, I talk to the regular teachers, my special education peers, my guidance counselors, my principal, the superintendent, the CSE [Committee on Special Education] chair person. I am not afraid to go to any of those people and say, "I have an issue; I have a problem. . . . What can we do about this?"

On the Continuum

Typically Performing High Schools	Odds-Beating High Schools
Teaching staff hired to fill gaps but may not share a collaborative or relational approach toward working with diverse students or other adults.	Teaching staff selected based on their qualifications to fulfill multiple roles (dual or more certifications), their valuing of relationships with diverse kids, and abilities and willingness to share and improve services.
Leaders offer ineffective professional development opportunities not necessarily based on broad input about priorities from staff.	Leaders set expectations for improvement by including staff in developing professional development plans and by setting a tone of "everyone learning together is everyone improving together."
Teachers and support staff vary in their understanding of why they are pursuing certain initiatives and vary in their investment and effort toward meeting goals.	Teachers and support staff understand the "why?" behind initiatives and are generally heavily invested in meeting goals.
Teams or networks of staff work together; however, those teams tend to be responsive to the "flavor of the day" initiatives they receive from higher-ups and/or are focused within buildings.	Teaming and networking highly valued. Teams within schools and across schools frequently engage in problem solving, solution finding, communicating innovative ideas, and acting upon them.

The greatness of an organization is determined by its people. Anybody who comes to work in this district, I'm going to vet them personally. And I think that when you have really good people you have the potential for really good outcomes. Within those good people you need to have a very healthy functioning collaborative dynamic. And then of course you have to ensure that you have structures and best practices and programs in place that are evidence based and you're just not trying to make it up as you go along. But it starts with the good people, because the good people are going to find the good programs and they're going to collaborate with each other. – Port Chester superintendent

Malverne Senior High School

Leading Turnaround with a High Reliability Vision and a Mission

Malverne Senior High School has reaped the benefits of experienced and able district leadership that, according to leaders and other staff, facilitated their "getting better and better." "It was more of a team between the teachers, administrators, our parents, and definitely our students," said a district leader. Their turnaround story is one led by a vision that educator after educator articulated consistently: Failure is not an option—for students or the adults who interact with them every day. As a district leader asserted, "It was a culture that was built over 11 years, and in 11 years it's been a dramatic change for the better." The superintendent's vision for "no failure" has been complemented by a mission to ensure that Malverne graduates can go beyond just graduation but compete with their peers in wealthier districts.

Living up to this vision and achieving this mission requires unrelenting persistence tempered by a healthy appreciation for enjoyment and a long and holistic view of what makes for a healthy human being. As the superintendent explained, "We needed to make school enjoyable," inspiring renewed efforts to provide an array of extracurricular options and redouble efforts to build lasting relationships between school staff and students, even after graduation. As an example, a teacher leader shared a not so unusual occurrence: "We, yesterday, had a former student who came here for help with transcripts, and we helped him with the college application."

Leading a "Can-Do" Spirit by Example, with a Compelling Why and a Clear Path
The principal, when asked about anything in particular that he strongly encourages or even mandates of staff, answered with a clear message that teacher after teacher reiterated: It is about what kids can do, not what they cannot:

One thing I will not accept, and everybody knows it: I want all kids to have the opportunity to take honors courses. I don't ever want to hear what kids can't do.

To do this requires some specific and strategic actions as well as instructional guidance, which the principal freely offers at times, even coteaching lessons. One guidance counselor explained how she and a colleague follow up on the spirit of this mission by preparing students to meet high expectations as early on as they can.

I think that the expectations have certainly changed. They've changed the mantra into eliminating failure. The district itself is raising its expectations. The teachers have raised expectations, the administrators, and [our department] as well. So we'll go into the ninth grade classrooms and we'll talk to them. We'll tell them what they need for graduation, but absolutely we'll emphasize the fact that we want them to do more than the minimum, [asking] how can they stand out and be college and career ready? The students in eighth grade are taking Algebra 1, Living Environment, and a foreign language, and now even some of our seventh graders are taking Earth Science. So they're coming in with 2, 3, or 4 high school credits already, and we explain to them, "Okay, we don't have you doing that so that way you can be done with math and science in tenth grade; we have you doing that so that way you can get to those upper level classes in eleventh grade, twelfth grade. So we're encouraging our students to go for that AP Math or Science.

A large sign hanging in Malverne Senior High School celebrates the school's inclusion on the College Board's "AP District Honor Roll" as a school "helping more students learn at higher levels." Above the sign student artwork is proudly displayed, providing one of many visual reminders of school pride in student accomplishments both academic and extracurricular.

4.

Customizing Innovative Policies, Programs, and Practices

> I hope [a graduate is] someone able to adapt to changing times and changing technology and able to think critically and think for themselves and adapt to changes in the world and changes in careers that are out there. – Maple Grove school leader

While high performance on state assessments remains a priority across all schools in this study, staff members at odds-beating schools frequently described pedagogical goals in terms that emphasize critical thinking, civic participation, and preparation for college and career that go beyond standard measures of high school success, such as graduation rate or state exam scores. To this end, a wide range of programs and courses are offered that have been designed to develop students into well-rounded and productive members of society.

In keeping with the goal of developing well-rounded young adults, educators in odds beaters have found diverse ways to measure academic success and work to customize their instructional practices to the needs of the youth they serve. These educators make genuine efforts to recognize and appreciate the diverse backgrounds and experiences of their student populations by embedding culturally responsive principles in the curriculum and endorse a progressive, future-oriented view towards preparing students for their lives after high school. To this end, students are urged at a young age to begin preparing for college and career through career training programs, college visits, and numerous college-level courses. As a guidance counselor from Maple Grove stated, "We help them make the connections between what they're doing now and how it's going to help them in the future."

For educators at odds-beating schools, customizing innovative policies, programs, and practices was accomplished through three approaches:

    (1) Developing well-rounded students ready for life after high school
    (2) Encouraging a growth mindset and removing obstacles to success
    (3) Providing responsive and relevant services and curriculum

Developing Well-Rounded Students Ready for Life after High School

Success in odds-beating high schools is not defined narrowly by academic performance but is operationalized as well-rounded students capable of leading productive lives after high school. Toward this end, educators make efforts to provide students with diverse learning experiences.

Educators at Crown Point, for instance, provide students with abundant opportunities for cultural enrichment, including visits to museums, theaters, and college campuses in addition to the multitude of extracurricular programs promoting the development of athletic, musical, and artistic abilities. Maple Grove educators also strive to recognize the achievements of their students both inside and outside of the classroom and work to create a learning environment where students can feel safe, as the principal said, "taking risks." She elaborated on the need to push students beyond the basic goals set by state metrics:

They're much more successful because they've learned how to challenge themselves. . . . I want them to feel like this is the place, it's safe to do it here. If they fail it, let's figure it out, let's pick up the pieces, but using any failures to continue to move ahead.

We've made a commitment to make sure that our staff is ready to teach the kids that they are going to get, not just what the teacher is supposed to teach and/or follow the modules and/or whatever. So it is more individualized, and student data drive that. – Crown Point Central School District superintendent

At Alfred Almond, staff members praised their students not only for their academic performance but for their excellent civic behavior. As the superintendent explained, equally important are "the things we hear, whether it be from parents or business owners: 'You know, your kids are great! They're on time. They're respectful.'" Likewise, at Maple Grove, staff commented positively on their ability to move beyond "teaching to the test" and focus on skills of problem solving, critical thinking, and civic participation. By instilling a "love of education"—as a school leader put it—students are encouraged to welcome new and diverse experiences, which prepare them to be well-rounded members of society.

Encouraging a Growth Mindset and Removing Obstacles to Success

Nurturing a forward-thinking perspective, educators in odds-beating schools encourage students to keep an eye towards their future beginning at a young age. For example, students at Crown Point from sixth grade up are encouraged to make college visits with staff members, while at Maple Grove, sixth graders begin creating inventories of potential career interests and compiling information for college applications. A support staff member elaborated on the effectiveness of opening college pathways to all students at an early age at Crown Point:

Maple Grove plan for a school farm.

Even those who are not interested are encouraged to go on college visits and do different curriculum that they don't think they can do because it says "college credit" on it. They'll try it. These kids end up changing their minds and going [to college].

All students attending odds-beating high schools are supported in the college search and application process, and they are prepared academically for the rigor of a postsecondary education through the wide availability of college-level courses taught in-house and at nearby colleges. As a school leader from Freeport explained, "If you're teaching to a college level, you should be aligned to what's on the state exam because the expectations at a college level are going to be above that level of what's in the high school classroom."

Like other odds-beating schools, Freeport High School leverages their close ties with neighboring colleges to provide students with college-level courses. Beginning in 2008, their dual-enrollment program started with three courses and has now expanded to over a dozen. In expanding access to college courses, Freeport leaders remain sensitive to financial obstacles for students and have obtained grants to help pay the tuition for students with limited financial resources.

While fostering the belief that all students are capable of attending college, educators in odds-beating schools endeavor to provide their students with a diverse array of career track pathways. Sherburne-Earlville, for example, provides students entering the job market with career and technical education program options and training opportunities that prepare them for work. The wide-ranging paths for students to pursue after high school dovetail with the belief articulated across odds-beating schools that school success is defined on a case-by-case basis and should be customized to the needs of each particular student. A guidance counselor from Port Chester summed up this viewpoint:

So, our [guidance counselors'] goal is to make sure that every student can be a productive citizen, and they have to tell us their plan. They just can't get a diploma and walk out the door.

Providing Responsive and Relevant Services and Curriculum

Staff at odds-beating schools work to develop and constantly revisit their services and curriculum to ensure they are relevant, responsive, and thus engaging for students. This effort is reflected in the schools' commitment to programs, course offerings, and staffing that directly address the needs of their student population. Data from the school culture survey administered as part of this study further demonstrate this facet of odds-beating schools, as 97.2% of respondents agreed that "Students of different ethnic, cultural,
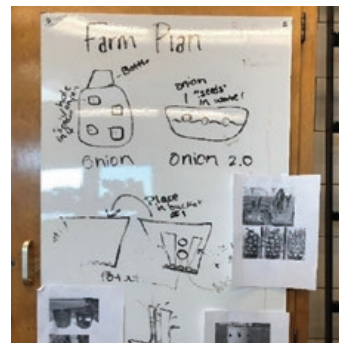
We want to be that destination school that has rigorous academics, really preparing kids. But I'd like to get rid of rank, quite honestly, so that kids are taking classes that are of interest to them, and they're thinking about their talents, and they're thinking about careers, and they're thinking about college. I want that whole package there. We also have the sports, and we have the theater, and we have technology club, . . . science Olympiads.
– Malverne High School principal

language, and/or socioeconomic backgrounds who have health or other problems get the services that they need"; 87.4% of respondents from typically performing schools agreed with the same statement.

With regard to curriculum, Freeport, for example, maintains a wide range of courses taught in Spanish by bilingual teachers as well as a "Spanish for Native Speakers" course, demonstrating to students that their ethnic and linguistic backgrounds are resources, not obstacles to overcome. Likewise, teachers at Port Chester adjust their teaching to their diverse student population without making assumptions about their previous education or knowledge. As one teacher put it:

That [adjusting to student needs and circumstances] is what we're hardwired for… I would try to teach something, realize they [students] didn't know this, back up a little bit, then realize they don't know that. You can't take anything for granted.

For Port Chester and Freeport, the imperative to make courses more culturally responsive to their Latin American student population did not entail a reduction in academic rigor, as students regardless of language or ethnic background are highly encouraged to take International Baccalaureate (IB) and Advanced Placement (AP) courses.

Schools with less ethnic diversity also have worked to provide students with curricular offerings relevant to their lives. As discussed earlier, rural Sherburne-Earlville customized its course offerings by acknowledging the interests and desires of its student population and the surrounding community. These efforts are reflected in the rebuilding of the Agricultural Science program and addition of a Hunting and Wilderness course. As the principal explained, "[T]he worst thing is being stagnant in anything we do because students are going to lose out in that."

> And unless we, as an institution, understand that we have to service the whole child and not just make sure they pass a test and graduate, we're not going to find continued success.
> – Freeport school leader

On the Continuum

Typically Performing High Schools	Odds-Beating High Schools
Close alignment of curriculum to state standards and preparation for students to take state assessments leads curriculum and instruction decisions and practices.	Relevance and responsiveness guide curriculum and instruction decisions and practices. Priority of instruction on higher-order thinking and going "beyond subject matter" and state standards.
Differentiated and student-centered instruction listed as a goal but lacking concrete examples of how these goals re enacted and encouraged.	Concrete examples of differentiated and student-centered instructional practices evident and this emphasis built into teacher evaluation and mentoring.
Culturally responsive and relevant curriculum added onto classroom practices or school events.	Culturally responsive and relevant curriculum reflects the interests and experiences of student population and is integrated into the school program offerings and curriculum.
Maintaining engagement in the classroom and with the school in general seen as major obstacle to academic success.	Student engagement seen as a challenge that teachers feel capable of meeting. Teachers believe that they are able to engage all students and facilitate their learning.

Port Chester Senior High School

An Array of Programs and Class Options

A key component of Port Chester High School's "hard wiring" for diversity is marked by their robust ENL (English as a New Language), bilingual, and special education programs that provide an accessible rigorous curriculum to students with diverse needs and circumstances. District and school leaders attribute part of the school's odds-beating performance to changing "the dial" with regard to offering students rigorous options, as explained by the deputy superintendent:

I think that a couple of things have taken place here at the high school which have really changed the dial. First, the . . . recalibration of the expectations of what our students are capable of as indicated by the implementation of programs like the IB [International Baccalaureate] program. You know, "Oh, you're a 74% percent Hispanic high school, how are you going to have a successful IB program?"

An impressive array of options provide multiple pathways to IB, Regents, and Advanced Regents diplomas. These options include slower pacing (i.e., completing courses in two years rather than one) or receiving instruction through one's native language or accompanied by a lab or second period or even a half-year course for mid-year arrivals. With the shift in state policies toward better servicing English language learners (ELLs) in mainstream classrooms (Commissioner's Regulations [CR] Part 154 revised) in 2015, the district increased inclusive offerings through coteaching arrangements.

A Literacy-Rich, Relevant and Aligned Curriculum

In Port Chester's diverse environment, language and literacy development has been a central focus, and teachers described a continuous effort to ensure that their curriculum is, as one explained it, "relatable." In the English Language Arts (ELA), making the curriculum relatable for their students involves examining closely the extent to which teachers assign "dead white man" literature, said one teacher, versus more culturally diverse options from which students can choose. A teacher explained their curriculum review process in this effort:

Every summer we do curriculum mapping. We have a two-week session where we go in and we revamp the map in terms of our anchor texts. We ask, "How can we make our anchor texts more relatable?" So one way we're doing it is a big push into Young Adult literature, because certain authors are going to connect with different types of students.

Initiatives to assist with curriculum alignment across grades and within content areas include the use of professional learning communities. One teacher explained that these professional learning communities provide opportunities to "constantly look at our curriculum and think about alignment." To address particular areas that they identify as needing attention—whether to align to new standards or adjust to changes they identify in-house—the district has partnered with local colleges and outside experts. For example, in ELA one teacher explained how partnerships and outside expertise has helped with aligning the writing curriculum across grades:

There was a huge divide between the middle school and the high school for a lot of the time that I've been here. But in the last few years, especially this year, the English department is working with the teacher's college, and we're aligning 6th grade and 9th grade teachers. Next year it's going to be 7th and 10th, and the year after that it's going to be 8th and 11th. So eventually everyone will be on the same page from 6th grade up.
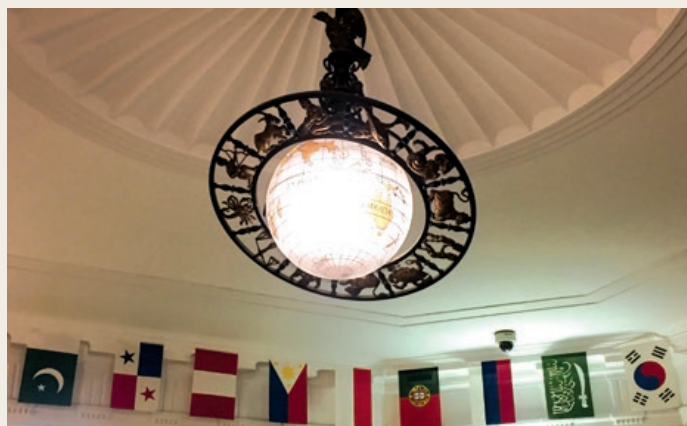
Adorning the center of the circular foyer of Port Chester Senior High School, a lighted globe illuminates flags from around the world, signaling that this is a school that embraces its diversity.

Conclusion

Although many educators across the United States struggle with preparing youth for the workforce, college, or career and technical education, odds-beating school educators in this study illustrate how they engage with diverse youth and their families in ways that value diversity and encourage academic success and emotional and social well-being. The findings from this study paint a hopeful picture and provide practical strategies for preparing young people for their futures beyond high school.

The study found that odds-beating schools are organizations in which people are encouraged to work in teams and are provided time and structures that facilitate collaboration. Educators in these schools are adaptive to youth and community needs and simultaneously reflective and future oriented. They look for information through open communications with staff, youth, family and other community members, as well as through multiple data sources that capture measures of students' academic progress and social and emotional well-being. Additionally, while odds-beating school educators are committed to their school communities, they do not lose sight of each student as an individual human being; they actively seek to identify where they have opportunities to relate to kids and their families or where they might provide more rigor or interventions when needed.

To make this culturally responsive, inclusive, and facilitative structure work, in the odds-beating schools, leadership is not confined to those holding traditional leader titles. While superintendents, other district office staff, and principals perform clearly defined roles and enjoy supportive relationships lubricated by trust and communication, other educators also are viewed as leaders and provide genuine leadership. Teachers, social workers, guidance counselors, principals, and assistant principals all see their roles as directly connected to fulfilling the mission to provide each young person with a sound academic preparation and social and emotional supports needed to reach their potentials.

A growth and future-oriented culture extends to customized innovative policies, programs, and practices. These include professional learning opportunities with the input of staff, who are encouraged to learn individually and collectively. Likewise, youth are treated holistically as on a developmental journey rather than as individuals lacking any particular set of skills, competencies, beliefs or values. They are encouraged to take measured risks to stretch themselves in new ways and this is done through innovative adaptations. Thus the odds beaters offer tailored experiences to youth whether through courses offered over different timeframes, in different languages, or with different post-secondary preparation goals, and these are complemented by various extra-curricular offerings. From disciplinary policies to family outreach, at the root of the opportunities for odds-beating school youth to succeed—is a shared value of the importance of positive and constructive relationships and high expectations for every child.

This composite of four elements that characterize odds-beating school educators' approaches (Co-Constructing a Humanizing School Community; Collaborating to Define and Achieve Success; Cultivating Culturally Responsive, Inclusive, and Facilitative Leadership; Customizing Innovative Policies, Programs, and Practices) provides a partial roadmap for others. Policymakers, district and school leaders, teachers and other school staff may find this roadmap provides guidance into the kinds of system-wide adaptations needed to remove barriers and create opportunities for diverse youth. From all of the contributors to this study, we hope that this report and related case studies will aid others in guiding youth to successfully bridge from high school to college or career and ultimately go on to lead healthy and productive adult lives.

Methods

Two sets of high schools were identified as cases for this study based on their high school graduate rates relative to other schools around New York State serving similar populations of students. One set of schools was classified as "odds beating" because their graduation rates among African-American/Black, Hispanic/Latino, English language learners, or economically disadvantaged students exceed what is expected, while the other set was classified as "typically performing" because their rates are as expected given the student population served. These schools serve as a comparison set.

Expected graduation rates were estimated using regression analysis for two types of outcomes—(1) proportions of cohorts overall and for the above categories of students earning any Regents diploma, and (2) proportions of cohorts receiving an Advanced Regents diploma. These estimates were calculated for three successive cohorts of 9th graders—2010, 2011 and 2012—with separate analyses for all students and the four subgroup categories. The demographic characteristics used to predict expected rates were the proportions of students who were economically disadvantaged, were either African-American/Black or Hispanic/Latino, and the proportion English language learners.

For each of the 30 analyses, gaps between actual and expected rates were standardized to have a mean of 0 and standard deviation of 1 (i.e., z-score) before calculating an overall actual-expected gap by averaging these z-scores. Schools with z-scores essentially zero provided the pool of potential typically performing schools. Schools with z-scores close to 1 or above were classified as beating the odds. Ultimately, the ten schools (seven odds-beating and three typically performing) were recruited from the two pools such that they reflect geographic and community variation around the state, with representation of rural and suburban/urban locales. All schools cluster near the state's mean in their per-pupil spending. For more detail on the sampling process, see the methods report on the NYKids website.

A team of up to three researchers visited each of the sample schools for two days to conduct interviews and focus groups with the principal, teachers, and district leaders to explore classroom, school and district policies and practices among the aforementioned student groups. The following data in total were collected:

131 interviews and focus groups with teachers and school and district leaders and support staff

10 school tour observation notes

77 documents as well as dozens of digital media from school websites (e.g., student handbooks)

10 school-wide surveys with 411 respondents

Researchers engaged in both inductive and deductive cross-case analysis to investigate the research questions (Maxwell, 2012; Yin, 2014). Steps in analysis included three phases. Phase one involved a priori coding based on the lines of inquiry with case studies of individual schools crafted and checked for accuracy with participants. In the second and third phases of analysis, deductive and inductive methods were used to reorganize data into matrices that capture the distinguishing elements of odds-beating schools.

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