

Promising Practices from Persistent and Emergent Positive Outliers

NYKids 20th Anniversary Study



CASE STUDY: ALFRED-ALMOND JR. SR. HIGH SCHOOL

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We're different here. – teacher

We're a tight-knit small community and . . . we don't have a lot of issues because we watch after each other's kids. – superintendent

Study Background

For two decades NYKids has been studying typically performing and positive outlier schools to identify some of the differences that account for better student performance in the outliers. With increased interest in what supports adaptation and innovation in the context of external shocks and community demographic changes, our current study sought to discover new insights into what sustains schools' significantly better student outcomes over time. This case study describes Alfred-Almond Junior Senior High School (JR/SR HS) — a persistent positive outlier school.

School Selection Criteria

NYKids studied Alfred-Almond JR/SR HS in the 2017-18 College and Career Readiness study because their graduation rate data at that time revealed significantly better outcomes for Black, African-American, Latino, Hispanic, and/or economically disadvantaged students.

In this study we used graduation rate data from 2021 and 2022 (the most recent at the time of study sampling), which included cohorts of students who started 9th grade in 2017, 2018, and 2019. This analysis yielded several persistent positive outliers, including Alfred-Almond JR/SR HS.

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School Context

Alfred-Almond JR/SR HS's stately Tudor-style building sits between the towns of Alfred and Almond, nestled in the Allegany Mountain range. This area of the southern tier of New York state, while geographically remote from large cities, hosts two higher education institutions – the private Alfred University and Alfred State College, part of the State University of New York (SUNY) system; both institutions lie within the Alfred town lines and about five miles from the town of Almond.

According to educators who participated in this study, the Alfred-Almond community has not changed much over time. Census data show that the town of Alfred has increased in population by c.750 residents since the turn of the century, while Alfred's has decreased slightly (by c.105) in the same time period. Despite the net increase in population across these communities, the JR/SR HS has seen a decrease in student enrollment since the 2017-18 study, dropping from 310 to 272 students. This decrease in student enrollment has had implications for staffing and the local economy since the school has been, and continues to be, a “main employer” in the area, according to the superintendent.

Although some educators mentioned increased transience and reported that more transient students than long-time residents were being identified for special support services, little else has changed in this rural community since the prior study. Echoing the reports of other JR/SR HS educators who participated in this study, a long-time resident, parent and Alfred-Almond JR/SR HS teacher claimed that the school has kept its intimate feel while adapting to compensate for its limitations; adaptations include offering an array of electives, extracurriculars, and new pathways to career or college. She explained,

It [the school] is small, so there's probably not as many classes as a bigger place might offer. And some of our classes have changed over time. . . . I might have taken a theater, arts, or film class, but that's not what we offer right now. But we offer different things. . . . Our kids have been able to do stage crew and tennis and track and the math club.

For a relatively small rural school, Alfred-Almond packs a lot in for students with different interests and is known regionally as “a strong academic school” with “a strong arts program,” said one teacher. This is within an ideologically diverse community that, in the words of another teacher, is more “free thinking and open minded . . . because of the universities.” Navigating different community member and educator points of view

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about what the school should prioritize has been one challenge for Alfred-Almond, coupled with challenges of increased absenteeism and mental health concerns among some youth in the wake of the pandemic. These challenges have shaped some of Alfred-Almond leader and educator adaptations and innovations, as will be explored in the remainder of this report.

Student Demographics 2022-23: Alfred-Almond JR/SR HS, Alfred-Almond Central School District

	Alfred-Almond Jr-Sr High School	Alfred-Almond CSD	New York State
Grades Served	7-12	K-12	K-12
Total Enrollment	272	533	2,422,494
Economically Disadvantaged	45%	47%	58%
Students with Disabilities	15%	16%	19%
English Language Learners	0%	0%	10%
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution			
American Indian/Alaska Native	0%	0%	1%
African-American	0%	0%	16%
Hispanic/Latino	5%	5%	29%
Asian/Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	4%	3%	10%
White	88%	89%	40%
Multiracial	3%	3%	3%
Other	0%	0%	0%

HIGHLIGHTS

Academic Culture Steeped in Tradition

I think one thing that stood out to me that's different about this school from other schools is it's very . . . steeped in tradition. And I've worked in other schools. And I think when you have these things [traditions], it helps the school. . . . It helps . . . because the kids know, "Hey, I'm gonna be able to do this." – teacher

The Alfred-Almond school district has a long-standing history of being academically rigorous and proving that graduates are capable of academically challenging work. Despite recent challenges, described above, one teacher explained,

We still stand for rigor. The kids pride themselves on doing well. And not only in academics, but with the musicals and the chorus concert.

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Maintaining what might be characterized as an “academic culture” through leadership changes (i.e., several superintendents and a new principal in the span of a few years, yet all with prior positions in the district), a global pandemic, and societal polarization around what should be taught and prioritized in schools has not occurred without purposeful attention to keeping true to Alfred-Almond’s roots; these roots, as noted in the quote above, are “steeped in tradition.” A hard-won and -earned reputation for academic rigor has produced multiplier effects – perhaps most importantly on the recruitment of talented and/or seasoned staff who can then contribute to the maintenance and even elevation of the academic culture. Teachers, like those quoted above, speak to how this culture acts as a strong pull for educators to come and stay in the school to carry forward its tradition of academic rigor.

Administrative Support and Teacher Autonomy

I think the most valuable and best part about this district is the autonomy you’re given. – teacher

A deep-seated academic culture animated by teachers has, in the words of one teacher, lent whole departments the latitude to “get left alone. And that’s a good thing for us.” This teacher autonomy could lead to discord, misalignment, lowered standards, and a multitude of other ill effects in a different context, but in Alfred-Almond, teacher after teacher spoke to how much their autonomy is treasured. Teachers associated this autonomy with inspiring them to innovate around the curriculum and their teaching, as well as positively impacting their own stress levels and commitments to going the extra mile in their work. As one teacher quipped, “They [administrators] haven’t annoyed us.” A teacher echoed the sentiments of several others on this point:

We [teachers] have high standards for ourselves; we want to do well. And we love what we teach. And we kind of baby it . . . and we want it to be ours. And I think the administration has left us alone in a lot of ways, but I also think schoolwide that there . . . was always an expectation that we do well.

While teachers spoke to varying degrees about “pressure” from school and district leaders over the years, most reported being supported by administrators to make their own professional judgments; they also spoke of being relatively unaffected by administrative turnover, which they attributed, in part, to their autonomy.

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Intimacy and Connection as the Norm

You stand outside your door before every class and you say hi to every kid that walks by. You say their name, you notice them you acknowledge them. – parent and teacher

A key feature of Alfred-Almond is the high value educators place on close relationships between children, school staff and children, and between school staff and parents and community members. While routines like greeting students at the door every day are not that uncommon in public schools, what is important about Alfred-Almond’s approach is that, first, it hasn’t changed over time despite leadership turnover and, second, such

routines are coupled with districtwide policies, processes, and procedures that reinforce a norm of intimacy and connection. Alfred-Almond, as a district, benefits from a strong home-grown Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS) program (called SOAR) that sets a clear foundation for relationship-building early in children’s school experience. One leader described it and what it offers to young people as they advance from elementary into secondary school:

AACS EAGLES S.O.A.R.		BUS	HALLWAYS & STAIRWELLS	CLASSROOM & SPECIALS	BATHROOM	CAFETERIA	PLAYGROUNDS	SPECIAL LOCATIONS	TECHNOLOGY
I am an Eagle. Watch me SOAR! We are Eagles. We stand for...									
SAFETY We are aware of ourselves and our surroundings.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Follow adult instructions stay in assigned seat keep hands and feet to yourself Follow bus safety rules Walk to and from bus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Follow adult instructions walk stay to the right eyes forward 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Follow adult instructions Use furniture as intended Use materials as intended 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Follow adult instructions keep waste and soap in sink 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Follow adult instructions stay in seat ask permission to leave walk 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Follow adult instructions Use equipment as intended 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Follow adult instructions Use furniture as intended 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Keep high noise level Keep personal items in locker Follow your teacher Use equipment as intended Use materials as intended 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Take care of your devices Be where you are supposed to be Manage your digital footprint
OWNERSHIP We take responsibility for our words and actions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> KAHFOOTY be tidy take care of your materials 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> KAHFOOTY go directly to destination be where you are supposed to be 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> KAHFOOTY do your personal best take care of your materials complete work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> KAHFOOTY go, flush, wash, leave 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> KAHFOOTY eat your food keep area clean return tray and go directly to seat 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> KAHFOOTY be gracious win-win and losses play fair 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> KAHFOOTY give attention to presentation sign for website performance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Take care of your devices Be where you are supposed to be Manage your digital footprint 	
ACCEPTANCE We understand and celebrate differences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> give personal space include others be an upstander 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> smile and greet others ask good examples positive comments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> give personal space include others be respectful of others' perspectives be an upstander 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> allow privacy of others give personal space be an upstander 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> be friendly to all kind words about others' food choices include others be an upstander 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> include others acknowledge personal ability levels be an upstander 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> set a good example be respectful of others' perspectives be an upstander 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> set a good example be respectful of others' perspectives be an upstander 	
RESPECT We value ourselves, others, and the world around us.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> THINK voice level 1, 2 postage in the restroom 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> THINK voice level 1 huddles share the hat 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> THINK voice level 1, 2, 3 listen with an open mind 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> THINK voice level 2 put to rest peace poster keep it clean 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> THINK voice level 2 say "please" and "thank you" use appropriate materials use math 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> THINK voice level 4 take turns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> THINK voice level 2 huddle in the zone celebrate successes celebrate short and long 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> THINK 	

Figure 1. Alfred-Almond CS PBIS (SOAR)

Safety, ownership, acceptance and respect: it’s S-O-A-R for the Eagles. We use golden tickets for students who demonstrate those expected behaviors. If you walk to the elementary [school], there are matrices that you see that have -- what does it look like in every area. We do assemblies, which are just like huge celebrations for positive behaviors. We do a lot.

A CLOSER LOOK

The highlights above are evident throughout the eight lines of inquiry that frame the study of which this case is one part. The sections below expand on findings across these lines of inquiry.

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Culture, Climate and Community

Supportive and Trusting Teaching Environments

While Alfred-Almond is a small school that has experienced its share of turnover – which some staff noted has led to challenges with communication – several teachers associated the supportive and trusting interactions among staff with fostering innovations to curriculum and maintaining a generally high quality of teaching. Trust and support at Alfred-Almond carry into the ways educators work with one another in their own classrooms, in coteaching arrangements, in departments, and across different departments. As one teacher attested,

I appreciate [that] there's not a lot of micromanaging. Like, you work with people that you trust, and if there are things that they're good at, they do them. If our superintendent asked me to do something, then he trusts that I'm going to do it, and I do, you know. And vice versa.

Teacher autonomy was identified as a highlight of Alfred-Almond JR/SR HS. As illustrated above, school leaders take a step back to allow staff to learn from one another in the process of making changes to curriculum and improving their instruction. Teachers described taking charge of what and how they teach and not being afraid to lean on one another for ideas and assistance when needed. One said, for example,

If I felt like I was overwhelmed, I think I would be able to say to any of them [colleagues], “My list is too long,” “I can't get this done,” or “I'm going to need help,” or whatever; and I don't think I would feel like there would be a consequence or a disappointment in me because of that.

Coteaching as well as opportunities for staff to observe one another are encouraged and taken advantage of as opportunities for teachers to learn from each other. One teacher explained, “They [leaders] encourage us as a staff to sit in on other teachers’ classes. To observe them [colleagues] and to pick up . . . some things that they do well, or some creative ideas they have.”

Human Connections as the Foundation to Teaching and Learning

Fostering connections throughout Alfred-Almond – between staff and students and among students – is a key feature of the school culture. Educators explained that strong connections come before, and often lead to, rich learning opportunities. Staff spoke to developing caring and compassionate relationships with students by taking time to

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connect about their lives at home and make themselves available to help students work through their struggles.

I think those connections—for me, some of that's bigger than the rest of it . . . for kids to know that you care about them; that you're going to advocate; that you've noticed them; you know what they need. . . . I'll get emails from kids from the cafeteria, "Can [I] just come talk to you for five minutes?" "You sure can." But you have to build that connection first, and then if they . . . are failing science, or they can't tell them [parents/caregivers/friends] that they're depressed, or whatever, we can navigate that with you. But if you don't feel safe talking to anybody here, how do you do that? - teacher

Teachers expressed a shared belief that building caring relationships with young people leads to more positive experiences in school in general and helps teachers navigate more difficult conversations within the classroom. As described above, the community is socioeconomically and ideologically diverse, an environment where conflicting beliefs could be disruptive. Yet, as one leader put it, "Kids come from such diverse backgrounds, but they accept each other" and – especially in the JR/SR HS – teachers and student alike, in the words of one teacher, seek to "keep things copacetic with each other."

Strong Traditions and High Standards

Another highlight of the JR/SR HS school culture is its strong traditions and high academic standards. Events and activities have long histories in the district and are designed to build anticipation among younger students who get excited to participate as they progress through the grades. A teacher described some of these traditions as "goofy" activities that kids look forward to even when they are "little things." These traditions also help strengthen community connections across the ages. One example of an Alfred-Almond twist on the typical holiday concert is the "senior chorus" concert where alumni come and sing. Such events occur in the school auditorium and the community fitness room, which are welcoming spaces for the community to enjoy.

Coupled with these social traditions is a general expectation of high academic and behavioral standards for both students and teachers. As described in the highlights above, Alfred-Almond students are expected to exhibit respectful behaviors in and out of the classroom. These behaviors are cultivated at the elementary level and reinforced through secondary school. Just as educators hold high standards for their students,

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they also hold, in the words of one teacher, a “quiet expectation” of high standards for themselves. She elaborated,

When I started working with the teachers, I was very impressed with the teaching level, that when I taught at different schools before this, that level was here [gesturing low]. When I got here, I was like, I have to make my game go up now. I mean, they brought me up to where I feel I'm a better teacher because of my colleagues.

Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

Scheduling for Deeper Learning and Adjusting Priorities

The schedule at the JR/SR HS was called out as an important feature that allows for deeper and interest-based learning opportunities as well as several other benefits. Teachers described the schedule as a “year-long, modified block” schedule, which offers more instructional time in core content classes and more opportunity for electives. A teacher described it this way:

I will say the way the schedule is built here allows students to have more electives. Whereas . . . we have like nine or ten periods throughout the week that are classes that kids could take, so that gives them a little more room in their schedule to take more electives.

The schedule is designed to have “on days” and “off days” for core content classes that meet 2-3 times a week. This provides opportunities for students to choose from an array of electives such as Drones, Home Repair, Intro to Keyboarding, Student Success-Computer Literacy, and Core Fitness, to name a few. Teachers and students alike benefit from the modified block schedule in relation to assessing learning, as well. A teacher of Advanced Placement classes, for example, described how students “have time to get larger chunks of assignments done. Also . . . on a Regents exam, you have approximately an hour to write an essay. Well, in class, I have approximately an hour for you to write an essay.” Not only does this modified block schedule give students more time to complete in-class and out-of-class assignments (on “off days”), it keeps teachers from “getting exhausted,” said one teacher, as the off days give teachers “a break.” It is also during these times that clubs meet and teachers “catch up with kids that need extra help, . . . or, in the case of people that are class advisors, we can have class meetings,” reported a teacher.

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This schedule facilitates timely informal and formal intervention services too, which are especially important in the wake of the pandemic, when assessment data systems were weakened, and individual student's learning gaps became wider. As a teacher explained, "being remote for that time period [pandemic] made it very difficult to assess where the students were at and to say, 'Okay, this is where we need to be.'"

Weaving Alfred-Almond's Special Touch into the Curriculum and the School

While the Alfred-Almond community was described as largely unchanged over time, educators spoke to the broader cultural divides in the country as also showing up in their community. One way culturally responsive education plays out in this community is in how teachers address more conservative or more liberal beliefs through cross-disciplinary approaches. Alfred-Almond teachers (especially in ELA and social studies) described ramping up opportunities in their lessons for students to reflect on their beliefs and build critical perspective taking, such as how to receive ideas and information and make sense of them without being reactive. Some teachers weave Alfred-Almond's special touch into their curriculum and the building itself. Examples of this include fine arts student-crafted tiles of important people and places in the community and state displayed on the walls in the cafeteria and numerous student-crafted murals in the hallways. The principal also spoke to how they have invited students to do campus cleaning projects as part of their senior participation in government class and even the Home Repair students crafted ski storage carts for the ski club. Beyond these campus improvement efforts, educators have expanded internship opportunities – including in education – to grow their own next generation of educators and tradespeople. As the superintendent explained,

One thing that we've been doing . . . is a lot of internships with our seniors. As far as kids that are going into education, my own daughter is going into speech pathology. She shadowed our speech pathologist for the entire school year. This year, a number of kids that are going into the construction trades, or are going to college for construction, shadowed and worked in our maintenance department. We had kids shadowing teachers, because they're going into education. So we're trying a homegrown [approach] . . . that leads into . . . teacher retention, too.

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District and School Leadership

Culture Eats Top-Down Leadership for Breakfast

As the saying goes, “Culture eats strategy for breakfast,” and a key lesson about leadership we found in Alfred-Almond is what a culture of professional autonomy and teacher collaboration does to minimize the impacts of leader turnover. At Alfred-Almond teachers and support staff spoke of few negative impacts of district and school leader turnover in recent years. They attributed this to having a strong culture of professionalism and mutual respect and collaboration among the teaching staff, who take responsibility for keeping their standards high. Importantly, teachers attested to having leaders who listen to them and this being part of what one teacher called leadership “philosophies” that are a good fit in Alfred-Almond. One teacher echoed others in reporting that “it [a culture of professional autonomy and teacher collaboration] kind of makes us a family . . . and our administration does listen to us.” While individual leaders have come with their own unique priorities and approaches, these leadership “philosophies” have carried through from one district leader to the next and have kept the Alfred-Almond ship on a steady course. A veteran teacher spoke to this important nuance on teacher professional autonomy, collaboration, and leadership:

They [leaders] push that philosophy [of high levels of professionalism], and . . . everyone is agreeable to it because . . . I wouldn't say we're all on the same page—that would be probably not true. But we're close to being on the same page.

Culture Eats Strategic Planning for Breakfast, Too

While leaders at Alfred-Almond did not identify having a detailed or complex strategic planning process, this is buffered by having a strong academic reputation and wide community support to lean on. However, in the wake of the pandemic, Alfred-Almond leaders have recognized the need to revisit their communication strategies, as they had been largely unidirectional – with outgoing messages from the schools and district to the community being the dominant approach. Recently they have looked for more community input, including conducting student surveys to gauge kids’ interests in classes and co-curriculars.

Fiscally Sound and Responsibly Led

The Alfred-Almond school district has benefitted from what the superintendent characterized as a consistently “fiscally sound” platform from which to lead. This

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attention to financial health has extended from the Board of Education to the classroom, with the recent Board request for a financial literacy class to become a requirement at the school. The superintendent noted that this move “falls in line with the Blue Ribbon Commission” as well as a shared concern in the community that the school provide a variety of pathways for graduates to attain well-paying jobs with or without a college degree.

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and Youth Mental Health

Attending to Rising Mental Health Needs

Educators at Alfred-Almond described the rising frequency and severity of their students’ mental health needs, especially after the return to in-person schooling. “I think just what's changed is that there's just more mental health needs. And we're just trying to find time and balance all of it,” explained one support staff member as she recounted the increasing roles and responsibilities that her job had taken on in recent years. One particular issue that concerned educators was the negative impact that social media use has had on their students. “There's so much more room for . . . cyberbullying,” said one counselor. She then explained the challenge of “getting them to differentiate between what's real, what's fake; what's right, and what's wrong. . . . I guess it's like anything, there's social norms and social rules, that we as teachers and educators have to start teaching them.”

In response to these challenges, leaders added a full-time social worker P-12 in '22-'23, and a speaker from a neighboring school district was invited to speak about the dangers of social media use for youth. Educators also described incorporating lessons about social media into the health class offered to middle and high school students. They also spoke about additional strategies to support students, such as giving students extra breaks or doing daily check-ins. The significance of establishing trusting relationships with each student in the school and creating safe spaces in the school was also mentioned as a priority. A teacher said, for example,

I think a lot of times it's having that safe space, like it can be another teacher or like a teacher's assistant, or just if you have a room that's like their safe spot that they can go to if they're feeling anxious . . . just building those relationships makes a huge difference.

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Shifting to Provide Services on School Grounds

As in many rural locales, educators at Alfred-Almond described a paucity of resources in the surrounding community to assist them in supporting students' mental health. There's a "lack of availability," explained one leader who reported that many children see a General Practitioner instead of a pediatrician, since it would require a drive outside of town to get an appointment – a situation that can result in less appropriate services and care. Another school leader reiterated these concerns and contrasted the current situation with that 10 years prior, when educators at Alfred-Almond focused primarily on students' "school-based needs. . . . Now, counseling is everything, it's the in-school needs, the out-of-school needs, but we are the ones providing that service. There is certainly a lack of available resources [in the county]," he explained. To address these issues school and district leaders described their efforts to provide students with as many services and supports on school grounds as possible. "I think our goal as administration is certainly what can we do in-district because it's so difficult for families to either get to appointments after school, or to find someone who has availability," said the principal. One example was using grant money to establish a partnership with Alfred University to bring additional mental health services to the school. Unfortunately, the program did not materialize, although educators were hopeful that it could be restarted in future years. The school provided vision and hearing services for students and also was in the process of adding dental services, as well. "Dental is always a big need," said one support staff member, noting how many families – even those with health insurance – did not often have dental care coverage.

Parent/Caregiver and Community Partner Engagement

Collective Support to Promote Youth Well-Being and Enrichment

In the small, rural community that surrounds Alfred-Almond, youth often require additional supports to meet their mental, physical, and academic needs. Although accessing critical resources can be challenging, JR/SR HS staff described a collective commitment from parents and community members to support students' well-being. Notably, the parents at Alfred-Almond were characterized as being highly involved in their children's education. One teacher described how students are future oriented and "think about what they're going to be doing beyond high school." According to this teacher, this can be attributed to strong parental and family support at home.

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The surrounding school community is also invested in the experiences of Alfred-Almond students. In particular, the school maintains communications and partnerships with local colleges and universities. JR/SR HS students can attend college courses and receive aid if they don't have the means to pay for classes:

If a kid can't afford it, we will pay for it. Just like with their AP [Advanced Placement] tests, we send a letter home to the parents; if you can't afford your child's AP tests, the district will pick up the cost. And typically, we pick it up for 99% of the kids. – superintendent

Outreach and Accountability through Community Connections

The close-knit connections throughout the Alfred-Almond community were said to contribute to an environment in which everyone knows one another, helping to hold students to higher standards and encouraging school projects that give back to the school community. One staff member, who is also a parent, reflected on the advantage of the tight connections throughout the school community and how they help to keep track of and support the students in the school:

I don't think there's any kid that can sort of get missed. You know, that small school piece. Like I could walk through the school and tell you first and last name of every single kid in the building and probably at least one of their parents' names.

Additionally, one teacher talked about collaborative initiatives that stem from class projects that give back and lean on the connections that staff members have within the community:

I work with other teachers, like the AIS [Academic Intervention Services] teacher where [he] actually is the person in charge of the local community parks. So we set up a schedule and we do food drives through the government class.

Staffing, Retention, and Staff Development

Maintaining Multiple Roles through Investment in Students and Community

The collection of extracurriculars, course offerings, and activities available to students at Alfred-Almond are diverse and extensive, often a challenge for small rural schools. The key to providing students with these unique experiences and opportunities lies with Alfred-Almond educators who also take on roles such as sports coaches, advisors, and

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school bus drivers. The willingness to wear many hats as an educator is a quality that school leaders and seasoned teachers look for when hiring new employees. One teacher explained, “I want someone that we know really loves kids and feels like they will invest in kids.”

While school support staff and teachers assume various responsibilities – which include starting new clubs based on student interests – Alfred-Almond leaders are also involved in various duties and willing to be at the forefront of pressing issues. “There are some days where I will have boots on and be mopping up the floor because there's another crisis somewhere else,” said the principal.

Willingness to Be Part of the Alfred-Almond Way

We learned several reasons why staff want to come work at Alfred-Almond. When describing the reasons why they wanted to be hired, some staff mentioned practical moves for their families while others pointed out the attraction to Alfred-Almond’s positive culture and climate and high-performing reputation. Staff also reflected on the appeal of a small rural school that feels like a family. Notably, one teacher talked about how Alfred-Almond stands out from other schools due to its particular “way”. The superintendent spoke to what this “way” is and how it factors into hiring decisions:

We can teach you to be a teacher, and we'd rather teach you our way than if you're just not a good person, then you're not a good fit for us. And that's one thing. I mean, I'll be honest; a lot of districts will keep people just because it's easier to keep them. We don't. If you're not part of our program, and you're not working the way we think you should be working. We'll let you go.

Regardless of the reasons why new staff join the Alfred-Almond family, successfully retaining these staff members is a core component of the school’s success. In particular, educators discussed how establishing a sustainable working environment at Alfred-Almond involves hiring staff who are malleable and open to adapting to the school culture.

I think we looked for what they bring in knowing their content and knowing how to manage a classroom, but there was always that sense . . . “Will they be personable people, willing to learn, willing to see how our culture works, and willing to step into that, and be a part of that?” rather than “I'm coming here to bring something to your culture.”- teacher

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Interventions, Adjustments, and Special Arrangements

Scheduling for Individualized Academic Support and Staff Communications

As described above, the modified block schedule at the JR/SR HS allows for individualized academic support during the school day with “off days” allowing for extended time (up to an hour) of support. One teacher provided a detailed description of how this works:

With our schedule, fourth, fifth, and sixth mods [modules] during the day are lunch mods, and they're shorter, so they're only half an hour and so a lot of kids have a study hall in there. And a lot of teachers are monitoring the study hall or have AIS mods in there, too. So those are a lot of times where we can be like, “All right, when do you have study halls today? Come in fourth, fifth or sixth, talk to me about what you're doing and we'll sit for half an hour. We'll, work with you on that activity.” On Tuesdays, where you can just say, “All right, here's an hour, like you're not going to a club today, like come sit with me; you have an English project to finish, like we'll work on that together.” So it can be very individualized, of like sitting one-on-one with a student.

Communications lines were said to be open, as teachers and support staff work to provide support needed. One teacher spoke to communicating “a lot . . . in regard to the AIS. Because students who are in AIS don't necessarily have the same instructor that they have for the course.” Teachers providing AIS spoke to communicating regularly with their colleagues across 7th-12th grades and across sections of courses (e.g., algebra) where they attempt to “kind of stay in the same place and communicate what we're doing.” Teachers sometimes combine their classes for particular activities, and all staff are provided time to review data on student performance on conference days.

Communicating Student Needs and Services to Parents

Alfred-Almond support staff showed evidence of awareness of the divide between “educator speak” and what parents and caregivers need to know and understand about supports being offered to their children. A more veteran teacher described the approach they take in bridging this divide, for example, helping new teachers understand the importance of this, especially for students identified for special education services:

Making sure that the way that [newer teachers] are writing [quarterly progress notes] makes sense for families, and showing the data, reminding them that if a parent comes back and says like, “Well, how'd you figure that out?” Do we have

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the resource just to show them? They're really good teachers. So, I feel like once they know what to do, and they have the capacity to do it, they really do.

Data Use and Progress Monitoring

Guiding College and Career Planning with Tech and Data

Educators at Alfred-Almond used data generated by the program Xello to ensure that students could start creating detailed plans for college and career. Described by one teacher as “wonderful,” Xello assists students in creating postsecondary plans and tracks their progress. The program was currently being used for students in grades 6 through 12 and was in a class that all sophomores take. A teacher elaborated on the utility of the program for students at different grade levels and stages of planning:

[Students create] portfolios; kids have questionnaire stuff to match them with careers. . . . It's user friendly, it's the part I like. When in class, [I can say], “Here you are here, and this is what your results look like. This is how you learn, this is the personality traits that come up.” As seniors, it's tied to the common application]. So they can write their essays or . . . apply to 25 schools, just like that, because it is hooked to that. . . . And their schedules are put into that as well. So I can see where they're progressing.

Using Assessment Data to Identify Instructional Gaps

Various forms of assessment data were used by educators at Alfred-Almond to guide instruction and identify learning gaps. For instance, a teacher spoke about using Regents assessment data to target their instruction.

The district's good about giving us data. “Hey, why don't you look through this data and target some things that you need to work on.”

Several educators explained that data inform instruction across content areas. One teacher explained the need to focus on “vocabulary,” since “even the math Regents [require] a certain level of reading.” The principal similarly added that Regents exams often assess a number of skills that may require additional support, “It could be writing, it could be understanding statistics. Because that crosses mathematics, it also crosses . . . social studies.”

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In a Nutshell

Alfred-Almond JR/SR HS is a place steeped in a tradition of academic excellence that has in recent years expanded on its elective and extracurricular offerings through innovative scheduling and tapping educators' individual talents and interests in creating or revamping courses. High expectations for academic performance and behavior are instilled early in the elementary grades and woven through the secondary level. These expectations for youth are coupled with high expectations for educator professionalism and collaboration, motivating staff to apply their talents in contributing to the school's reputation as a desirable, and even exceptional, place to go to school and to work.

Alfred-Almond Jr. Sr. High School

Brett A. Dusinberre – Superintendent of Schools

Alfred-Almond Central School

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