



CASE STUDY: BROOKFIELD CENTRAL SCHOOL

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We are trying to take small steps and show [the community] that we are still here, we're still kicking, we're still going strong. – teacher

One student in this small school makes a huge difference. – principal

I think that that's a priority – just learning about each of those kids, what makes them tick, and what's going to make them to be successful in the classroom – teacher

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 policies, processes, and practices in Brookfield Central School—an emergent positive outlier school.

School Selection Criteria

NYKids studied Brookfield Central School as part of its high school study of 2012-13. At that time, Brookfield was identified as a typically performing school based on its graduation rates. In this study we used New York State graduation rate data from 2021 and 2022 (the most recent at the time of study sampling), which included cohorts who started 9th grade in 2017, 2018, and 2019. This analysis yielded several emergent positive outlier schools (those that had shown improvements in student performance outcomes), including Brookfield.

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School Context

Brookfield Central School is located in Madison County, New York, approximately two hours west of Albany and one hour east of Syracuse. Just below 200 students from grades pre-Kindergarten through 12th grade attend Brookfield in a large school building located in the center of the rural town. As in many rural schools, educators at Brookfield spoke of increasing levels of poverty (which the principal estimated had nearly doubled since NYKids first visited Brookfield in 2013), as well as limited resources in the wider community, which sometimes pose challenges to supporting students' mental health needs. Brookfield has also gone through difficult shifts in staffing recently as one-third of the teaching staff and several administrators left the school from 2020-2022.

Amid these changes, Brookfield educators spoke optimistically about the future of the school and the quality of education that students received there. In particular, educators felt that the small school size of Brookfield – as one teacher put it, the “definition of a small town school” – allowed educators to foster deep relationships with students as well as with the wider community. In regards to coursework, at the time of our visit students at Brookfield were offered an impressive array of curricular options ranging from college-credit bearing classes to career and technical education. Underlying these choices in educational pathways was the shared goal among educators at Brookfield to develop young adults eager and able to become active participants in their communities and the wider society. To this end, educators at Brookfield engaged students in learning, in part, by creating curricular offerings that were hands on and relevant to students' interests.

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Student Demographics 2022-23: Brookfield Central School, Brookfield Central School District

	Brookfield Central School	Brookfield CSD	New York State
Grades Served	K-12	K-12	K-12
Total Enrollment	195	195	2,422,494
Economically Disadvantaged	78%	78%	58%
Students with Disabilities	24%	24%	19%
English Language Learners	0%	0%	10%
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution			
American Indian/Alaska Native	0%	0%	1%
African-American	1%	1%	16%
Hispanic/Latino	0%	0%	29%
Asian/Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	0%	0%	10%
White	99%	99%	40%
Multiracial	1%	1%	3%
Other	0%	0%	0%

HIGHLIGHTS

Building and Rebuilding Relationships

I think that's the difference between this school and a lot of other schools. We care about them as a human being and as a person before we . . . educate them. – teacher

Many educators at Brookfield felt that strong relationships were at the center of Brookfield's success. The close-knit school environment and small class sizes provided educators with the opportunity to develop deep connections with students over the course of their school careers. In addition to relationships between educators and students, Brookfield educators placed high value on promoting positive relationships among peers. For instance, several programs and extracurricular activities were designed to promote connections between younger and older students – relationships that continued to develop as students progressed to higher grades. Educators, Teachers, leaders, and support staff all spoke of the close relationship between the community and school, as evidenced by the large turnout for extracurricular activities and sporting

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events. Many at Brookfield also described recent efforts to rebuild trust with the community after the recent turnover in staffing.

Working Together to Meet Students' Needs

If there is one defining thing, it is the people in this building that . . . love the people inside the building. - principal

Another characteristic that was evident at Brookfield was a collaborative culture between staff members. In a rural context where resources are sometimes limited, educators described the need to work together in order to meet the academic and social-emotional needs of their students. Often wearing “many hats” – as several interviewees put it – Brookfield educators explained how they took on additional duties and responsibilities to ensure that no student would be deprived of an opportunity. Although they acknowledged that the large staffing changes had not been easy, they viewed a commitment to students’ well-being as a priority shared across the entire school. Moreover, many also felt that the collegial atmosphere of Brookfield would be crucial in supporting new hires as they adapted to their new positions. For instance, several participants mentioned mentoring programs as a helpful means of support.

Providing Choice after Graduation and Emphasizing “Soft Skills”

We want to produce positive, productive citizens so when they get out of here, whatever they do, they are adding to society in a positive way. – superintendent

A common refrain among educators at Brookfield was that student success could not be measured by a test but was instead defined by their readiness to participate as active members of society. This belief was evident in the curricular offerings at Brookfield, which emphasized hands-on learning and coursework that was relevant to students’ lives outside of school. For example, Brookfield recently brought back the Future Farmers of America program for students and, at the time of our visit, was participating in a state-sponsored pilot program to implement Performance-Based Learning practices.

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A CLOSER LOOK

The themes 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 each of these themes within the context of the study's framework.

Culture, Climate, and Community

Preparing Students for Life after High School

As discussed below, students at Brookfield were provided a range of learning opportunities designed to provide them with knowledge that would be applicable to their lives after graduation. Underlying these efforts, educators stressed, was the overarching goal for students to become active members of their community and well-rounded, conscientious individuals. A support staff member explained their view of success for Brookfield students: "Student-wise, we just like to create well-rounded students. You know, expose them to as many things as we can, academically, athletically, culturally." Likewise, a teacher commented on the way Brookfield students were prepared for what came after graduating, saying, "I feel like we have such a good way of getting them through high school that they graduate from here knowing that they can and will take on anything that comes their way, and they can do whatever they want to do."

These efforts were reflected in the curricula at Brookfield (described in further detail below), which offered students career and technical education through the local BOCES as well as credit-bearing college courses. A teacher explained how students were supported in their post-graduation pursuits, with the guiding principle being to prepare "people" and not just students:

Whatever the student wants to be. . . we've given them the tools to do that when they leave. And whether it's workforce, whether it's college, whether it's a gap year, whatever it is, we've given them the tools to do what they want to do -- in the building when they're here and when they leave. And I think, at the end of the day, we're not preparing students to be students, we need to prepare students to be people.

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A Collaborative and Collegial School Culture

A culture of collaboration and camaraderie was evident at Brookfield. Due, in part, to the small size of the school and limited resources available, educators explained that they often wore “many hats” and willingly assisted in work that may have fallen outside their regular responsibilities. Although educators acknowledged that recent turnover in staffing has created challenges, “family” was a common word used to describe the relationships among staff members. As one support staff member put it, “I would say amongst us staff members, it's like a small family. . . . We're very close knit. And it's like a home away from home.” Another support staff member commented similarly on the collegiality and rapport between educators at Brookfield, “Staff support one another here in a way that I've not seen in other districts. . . . When you're in the hallways or you're in classrooms, teachers are friendly with one another.” This collaboration was described as centered around the idea of improving the experiences of students. “It's all for the betterment of the school district. We all work together. It's not just her job; it's not just my job. We're all a team,” said the principal.

Fostering Positive Peer Relationships

Promoting positive relationships between peers was also mentioned as an important priority. As several educators explained, the small, close-knit school environment and single PK-12 building shared by all students inherently provided opportunities for long-term peer relationships. One teacher described peer relationships as “family-like, . . . because they've been with each other since Kindergarten, and because the school is so small, they're with each other all the time.” Another teacher characterized peer relationships as “almost like brothers and sisters.”

Acknowledging that conflicts sometimes do occur, educators at Brookfield utilized several programs to encourage positive peer relationships. A “Book Buddies” program in which 6th graders read to Pre-K students was mentioned by staff members as a way for students to connect across grade levels. Another program mentioned in interviews was the “Elementary Safety Patrol” in which middle schoolers assist younger students on and off the bus. This program not only facilitates positive connections among students but also gives students an opportunity to be “in a leadership role” and act as a “role model” for younger kids, as one parent explained. Educators felt that these programs help establish positive connections that continue as students progress into higher grades. As one teacher put it, “[Book Buddies] become friends,” explaining that when older

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students see a former Book Buddy on the playground, they “remember that they're seniors and the other kid is a sixth grader . . . [and] [that] they're Book buddies. It's pretty astonishing.” In addition, educators explained that the small size of the school allows all students interested in sports or other extracurricular activities to participate without needing to try out or compete with one another.

Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

Using Responsive Curricula to Engage Students

At Brookfield, educators across content areas described their efforts to make their curriculum relevant and engaging to their student through hands-on learning opportunities. The principal elaborated on what she hoped to see in Brookfield classrooms: “We don't want the teacher in the front lecturing and the students in their seats passively engaging with maybe note taking or whatever it is they're passively doing. That's not engagement. That's not real learning.” Many educators echoed this view in interviews, explaining how they integrated students' interests and needs into their pedagogical approaches. One teacher, for instance, said, “For me, high quality teaching always starts with the kids.”

To develop responsive and relevant curricula, educators at Brookfield often asked students about their interests directly in their classrooms or through a survey, as mentioned by a parent, which had been sent out in recent years. One teacher explained his efforts to be “more responsive” by “asking what [students] need, or what [they] think could have been done better.” Another teacher explained the process of integrating students' choices topics into curricular content:

We'd gotten through the content, and toward the end of the year, we asked them, “What would you like to learn for the remainder of the year?” We gave them a list of topics, you know, pick your top two, and just give us a brief explanation why you might want to learn it.

This approach, educators explained, was ultimately more engaging to students. One teacher described the value of “knowing your students, so you can figure out what interests them.” He continued, “And if you know what interests them, it's easier to teach them. You can tie in their interests to the content and focus on that and refer back to it.”

One prominent example of the responsive approach taken at Brookfield is the reinstatement of the Future Farmers of America (FFA) agricultural program. The program

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involves a range of hands-on activities, including caring for plants and animals in classrooms and attending a conference in Buffalo. The principal explained the value of the FFA program to the school and wider community, “[W]e are one of the only schools left in the area that has a really big agricultural base. So we wanted to really capitalize on that. It's what kids are interested in; they love it.” A parent explained how important agriculture is to students and their families, saying that FFA “really intrigues [them], sparks their learning.”

Teaching through Hands-on Learning

Another important feature described by educators at Brookfield – one that complements the responsive and engaging curricula – is an emphasis on hands-on approaches to learning that can be applied in real-world situations. Many educators described their desire to move beyond state exams as measures of students’ success or teaching effectiveness. The superintendent asserted that students’ success “shouldn't be about a test score. We want to see what you're able to do in so many different ways; and we want to be able [to see] how you're working with people and [the] projects you're working on.” A teacher described their goals for students as defined by how the knowledge learned in school could be utilized outside of the classroom:

I feel like we all do a really good job of not focusing on the test; the tests are always superfluous here. It's always about the content, about the skills, and about the kids themselves, making sure that they are prepared for everything that they can come across.

Another teacher reiterated a similar view, noting, “Even my students who tend to struggle on that kind of stuff [exams], they can tell you plenty about my subject and why it's important and all that.”

Brookfield was also participating in a Performance-Based Learning pilot program involving 20 school districts across New York State. While the program has provided additional incentives to create hands-on activities, educators noted that this approach was already embedded in the school curriculum. As one teacher put it,

But as far as, in general, project-based learning, it's kind of what we've always been doing. You know . . . you need the hands-on experience in science. I think that's also why it makes it enjoyable for a lot of the students, too.

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Developing Content across Subject Areas

A third feature of teaching mentioned by educators at Brookfield was the effort to utilize curricular content that spans multiple content areas. These practices coincided with educators' broader goals to develop well-rounded students capable of using school lessons in practical scenarios. One teacher described using "things from other classes" in order to engage students. An example mentioned was using literature such as *Animal Farm* in English Language Arts to supplement lessons about Cold War era politics from history class. Another teacher described integrating a discussion of history in science classes to explore the development of scientific ideas. The small department sizes, several felt, allowed teachers to create interdisciplinary lessons more easily. "Interdisciplinary stuff is really important – and easy at a size like this," said one teacher. Teachers also mentioned future plans to develop a Humanities program that would combine several content areas.

District and School Leadership

Leading through Collaboration

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Brookfield has experienced significant transformations in its teaching and administrative personnel.

Among the many staffing changes Brookfield has undergone since the onset of the pandemic were changes in the positions of superintendent and principal. Although the superintendent and principal are new to their current roles, both are veteran educators with extensive experience at Brookfield and a shared history. "I feel like we are rebuilding. . . . We have a wonderful new superintendent. [We] started the same year . . . [and] have been colleagues for 28 years," said the principal. Both described their dedication to leading the school district guided by the core values of collaboration and communication. The superintendent elaborated on this approach saying,

Communication [is] one thing that with me, it clears up so many messes. If people are uncertain about something, that's where rumors start. . . . I don't want that. You want an answer, come ask us; we'll give you the answer.

When asked about the future of Brookfield, the principal explained how working together with other staff not only keeps the school afloat, but moves them toward flourishing:

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We lost a third of our staff . . . a superintendent, a principal and a guidance counselor in one fell swoop. . . . We're still standing and we're not only standing, we are amazing. Being able to trust each other and have each other's back I think is paramount.

Providing Autonomy and Support When Needed

The current administration's commitment to prioritizing teachers' needs and remaining open helps foster a positive outlook about the future at Brookfield. One teacher, for instance, spoke of the "healing" that was occurring between teachers and leaders and added, "I would say that we are heading in a direction that everybody is comfortable with."

Because both principal and superintendent had previous teaching experience, they felt they had firsthand insights into how to support teachers without micromanaging them. The superintendent explained his motivation for taking on the role as a leader in Brookfield, "I was a teacher in the classroom. I really love this district. I love the parents, I love the staff, I love the kids. . . . I knew our superintendent was considering retiring. . . . I felt, 'I can step up and do more positive things in the district.'"

Part of the superintendent's philosophy towards working with teachers is to take a hands-off approach and allow teachers to run classrooms in the best way they see fit. "Hire good teachers and get out of their way," he said. Several educators responded to this approach and appreciated the autonomy they were afforded in their teaching. When asked about the expectations of teachers, one teacher said, "I feel like this district has always . . . [been] lenient on letting teachers drive their classrooms. A lot of people like that. . . . We have control of what we can do in our own classrooms."

In general, educators, felt that when a problem or challenge arose, leaders were available and ready to support them. "They are very approachable and [issues] always get handled," said one teacher. A support staff member similarly stated, "Whenever there's an issue, . . . we're always able to go to administration and . . . talk to them, devise a plan."

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and Youth Mental Health

Marshalling Resources to Meet Students' Needs

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Educators acknowledged the increasing social-emotional and mental health needs of their students since the return of in-person schooling. They attributed these needs to a combination of factors. As one teacher explained, “I think the needs are increasing, definitely with everything . . . social media, COVID happened. You know, there's so many things that have affected the kids, and I think that the needs, their social-emotional needs, definitely increased.”

While the geographic isolation of Brookfield posed challenges, several efforts to harness resources to address students’ growing needs were described. For one, the school participated in a community-based program called Safe Schools, which provided students with a full-time counselor in addition to the K-12 counselor on staff. The principal explained that, since the counselor was not from the district, “Kids really can engage with him and know that it's kept confidential.” She continued, “And I think that's really been very, very helpful and advantageous.” In addition, for 13 years, the local BOCES has provided a part-time counselor for elementary school students who, according to the principal, “has established a wonderful rapport with our kids and does a phenomenal job.” Educators also described efforts to incorporate more social-emotional learning (SEL) programming into their curricula. One example is a Mental Health First Aid program offered through Madison County. The program is currently offered to 10th graders; however, the principal explained that there are plans to expand it for elementary school students.

Building Supportive Relationships with Students

In addition to formal counseling, educators at Brookfield described the importance of creating and maintaining close, positive relationships with students. The superintendent elaborated on the importance of making “connections” with students before you can expect them to learn. He explained,

We want [students] to feel safe and secure here. And that's where the connections come in, like the Aristotle quote I have on my refrigerator: “Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all.” So that's where you have to go first. And when the kids feel comfortable, they are going to learn better.

Educators, too, explained their efforts to connect with their students and build relationships with them. One teacher described the importance of talking to students, particularly those who may be showing some signs of stress or sadness:

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I think the biggest thing is talking to them one-on-one, especially after the class, too. Like saying, “Hey, I noticed you were a little down, you were a little quiet today. Is everything all right?” or “You had this sort of outburst, what’s going on?”

While all educators at Brookfield shared the belief in creating relationships with students, several noted that each student may connect better with particular staff members than others. A participant explained how this looked from the perspective of being both a parent and teacher in the school:

I think all the adults in the building are really good about knowing which kids they connect with, and [they] are willing to help out. Even if it is just [a student saying] . . . “I’m having a really tough day today. . . . Can I go talk to so and so?” And even if that’s [name], or . . . whoever, one of the other assistants in the building, or anybody in the building, if your kid connects with that person, they’re usually pretty willing to help out in any way that they can.

Parent/Caregiver and Community Partner Engagement

Engaging Families with Multiple Tools

Teachers at Brookfield use multiple means of communication to stay connected with parents. ParentSquare is a software that allows teachers to communicate with family members using one-on-one or group messaging as well as to send forms and permission slips. “All of the teachers in the building use Parent Square, and I feel like that communication is very good. I’m always getting messages,” said one parent.

Keeping open lines of communication with parents is important to teachers at Brookfield. One teacher explained how she uses multiple forms of contact to keep parents in the loop about their child’s progress, explaining, “If a parent doesn’t answer an email, follow up [with] a phone call just so you can get that parent involvement in some way, shape, or form.” Another teacher explained how he likes using School Tool, an additional software used to communicate with parents, not only when students are struggling, but also when they are thriving: “What I like about using School Tool is . . . I can put . . . little notes and everything and say . . . ‘They’ve been a great leader in class.’”

Parents who were interviewed in this study generally reported feeling comfortable reaching out to teachers to solve problems and get more information about their children’s progress at school. “If there was an issue [I would] go to their teacher and . . .

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address it. We'll work together and get to a common . . . agreement on what the consequences will be or whatever we're going to do," said one parent.

Building and Rebuilding Trust with Families

The community at Brookfield has a reputation of supporting the school. Data from our prior visit to Brookfield (in the 2012-13 school year) reported that educators agreed that the school was "the center," "the pulse," "the hub" of the community. "The community is always looking to help the people . . . whether they need it, or don't need it, it doesn't matter. They treat everybody the same. . . . The community is huge here," one teacher had explained.

Our recent visit showed us that even though the relationship between the school and community may have been strained by COVID-related challenges, the bond is far from broken. Extracurricular events and sports were mentioned by both parents and educators as a common interest. "We have one of the biggest support systems. . . . When we've gone to sectionals, we've filled the big gyms. It was pretty remarkable how our fan base follows us," one teacher explained. Another teacher reiterated the passion that the Brookfield community held towards the school's sporting events:

Community members that didn't even have kids on the team, they would come support. [At sporting events] you see the whole Brookfield community . . . and I think that's what makes it great. . . . The kids feel connected, too, because everybody gets involved.

At the end of every school year, Brookfield hosts a Celebration of Excellence to recognize all their students' academic and athletic successes over the year. They also incorporate a community gathering with games and refreshments. The school staff send home formal letters in the mail to let parents know their child is going to be honored at the celebration. "I like that we still get stuff in the mail," said one parent. Another parent added, "It's nice to be able to hang those on your fridge."

Staffing, Retention, and Staff Development

Incorporating New Staff Members

Brookfield lost 10 teachers from 2020 through 2022 as a result of tensions between staff and leaders, exacerbated, in part, by the COVID-19 pandemic. The resulting "grieving"

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process – as several educators put it – posed challenges, but new hires continued to build relationships with their new colleagues and students. Participants in this study spoke hopefully about the future of the school and commented positively about the new additions to their school. The principal, for example, lauded the “amazing people on staff.” “I would put them against any other teachers in the district,” she said of the new hires. The superintendent similarly commented positively about how newly hired teachers have “fit” into the school. “I think over the past couple of years, we’ve been able to add people that fit into what we’re trying to do,” he said before adding:

[New teachers] appreciate how coworkers support them. And they also love the kids. It’s a friendly community and everybody’s supportive. And so they have taught at other districts and they just said, “This school has a family feel,” and it makes a big difference.

A teacher summarized his optimistic view about the future of the school and its new staff members, “[Teachers] are starting to make the connections. We’re having fun, too, I think, doing it. And I think we’re on the right track to just better the school and better the learning experience too for the kids.”

Gaining Support through Mentorship

A salient form of support mentioned by many educators was a mentoring program available to all new teachers. The program pairs new hires with veteran teachers with similar experience or from the same content area, and the mentors meet weekly to check in with each other. The principal – a former mentor herself – explained that these meetings provide “time for [new teachers] to get help. It’s not any judgmental criticisms.”

While they acknowledged the challenges they faced as new teachers, several teachers commented positively on the support they received from their mentors in providing them with guidance and feedback on lesson plans and teaching style. The principal and superintendent, though veterans in the school district, were also new to their positions and also drew on mentors and networks of support to aid them in their new roles. The superintendent, for instance, described a “very helpful” group of superintendents from neighboring districts from whom he often solicited advice. The principal, too, received guidance from a mentor from BOCES who works part-time for the district and with whom she has a long-standing relationship. “I think that support was really excellent, and the

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fact that we've worked together for years . . . [means that] we have that trust built already," she explained.

Making Professional Development Count

While acknowledging the challenges that the isolated geography of the school poses, educators at Brookfield commented on the availability of professional development (PD) opportunities through the local BOCES. "There's plenty of offerings, if you're looking. . . . If there's things that I want to try to bring in or I think that we need, they're more than willing to accommodate what we want," one teacher said about the PD offerings at the BOCES. The school also uses My Learning Plan, an online platform that provides remote learning opportunities for teachers seeking professional development not available locally.

Many educators viewed professional development as an important way to improve their own teaching and thereby the experience of their students. "I think that's another thing that makes us stand out, too . . . we're always willing to keep learning. We're always willing to benefit our students more by helping ourselves to help our students," said one teacher. The superintendent likewise explained how he valued PD for the teaching staff:

We also encourage teachers, if they see something they would like to do, bring it to us, and we'll let you. . . . I don't think I've turned anybody down for professional development. You know, we've had some teachers go out of state for some stuff. And as long as it goes along to help them grow, we are all for it.

With a small staff, the principal explained how staff members who attended professional development were also expected to do "turnkey training" so that educators who did not attend in person would still benefit from the opportunity. "We don't have to send 8 million people, but we can send one person that we know will do a great job reporting back to the staff and helping," she said.

Interventions, Adjustments, and Special Arrangements

Learning from Mistakes Approach to Discipline

Educators articulated a caring approach to discipline that promoted understanding and empathy rather than punitiveness. As one teacher put it, "Nobody tries to punish them. We . . . try to work through what's going on with why we got to that point." Paralleling this

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attitude, several educators mentioned that students will make mistakes and learn from them. As the superintendent noted, “If you make a mistake, don't worry about it. That's how you're going to learn, and it's a great way to learn.” The principal articulated a similar idea as she described her philosophy towards discipline, “I do not punish kids to punish kids and ‘You're bad kids, and you're good kids.’ No, we all are kids, and we all make mistakes.”

While some educators noted a need for increased accountability for students who do break rules, many felt that students' behavior was continuing to improve since the height of the pandemic. One piece of evidence of these changes is a 50 percent (as estimated by the principal) rise in attendance over the last two years. “They feel welcome here. They feel safe here. I think that is the reason we've had an increase [in attendance],” explained a support staff member.

Shifting the Special Education Program to Meet Students' Needs

The Special Education program at Brookfield had undergone some recent changes to help meet students' needs. The school uses a resource room model for students K-12 and contracts with the local BOCES to provide services to students with more restrictive needs. At the secondary level, educators described a transition to a coteaching model where special education teachers collaborate with general education teachers in the classroom. In this model, students with special needs receive the same content as all students with additional support from special education teachers who are able to adjust instruction and differentiate to “meet kids where they're at,” as one teacher put it. To develop this model, teachers received training on coteaching from the local BOCES and another county organization called the Central Regional Partnership. In addition, special educators described becoming more knowledgeable in the content areas that they push into so they can collaborate with general education teachers more effectively.

Data Use and Progress Monitoring

Guiding Instruction with Assessment Data

Although educators at Brookfield asserted that tests were only one way of measuring students' understanding of curricular content, several teachers did use some assessment data to help guide their instruction and identify gaps in student learning. Recognizing that students would still be required to take the Regents state graduation exams, one teacher

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described using “a combination of state questions, with our own questions thrown in there as well . . . because it is important that they understand how the state talks and how they're going to assess them.” Similarly, another teacher used exam banks from previous Regents exams to identify content that may need to be retaught to students:

I basically use spreadsheet functions to tell me what numbers. . . . If there's a question and 20 students got it wrong . . . that's something I'll spend a day or two actually like reviewing and going over again. So for the most part, it's like, sort of a data-driven bullet into whatever problem I'd be having.

In addition, Brookfield used Star Assessments to monitor student progress in several content areas. A teacher explained how she blended different assessments to make sure students' learning needs were met: “I also look at data from my own assessments that I might use in the classroom itself and compare those with Star and then do that to supplement anything.” Google Classroom was also mentioned by several educators as providing an additional way to track student progress.

Using Data to Ensure Comprehension

Teachers also used informal measures to check students' progress and comprehension. In concert with their views about the limitations of testing, several teachers explained the need to simply talk to students and get feedback about their own learning. One teacher elaborated on what this looks like in her classroom:

I just have these like check-ins, essentially, and those are my data. It's like, “What did we learn this week? How comfortable do you feel with each of these topics?” So for me . . . it's just input from the kids and having them constantly reflect on how I'm providing for them. And giving me that feedback that allows me to change or shape or, you know, target them specifically with the next activity we do. So data for me is more, not just numbers. It's input from kids and changing myself and my strategies to suit their needs better.

In addition, several teachers described using “bellringer” activities in the beginning of class to ensure students understood the previous class material before moving on to the next lesson, and – as one teacher put it – “to just get their brains moving.” These activities were valuable according to one teacher, as they “let me know, if it was lecture, were they paying attention? Did they stay with me? Were they active? If it was a worksheet, did they understand it? Are the basics covered?” Another teacher explained

PROMISING PRACTICES FROM PERSISTENT AND EMERGENT POSITIVE OUTLIERS

NYKids 20th Anniversary Study

how these activities gave him a good opportunity to decide whether to reteach content from a previous class: “So, it’s obvious. I’m like, ‘Well, we got to, we have to talk about that again.’”

In a Nutshell

At Brookfield Central School, educators collaborated with one another to engage students academically and support their social-emotional well-being. A common refrain heard from educators was the dedication and commitment that each staff member had to the school and wider community. In addition, educators developed engaging curricular offerings that were based on students’ interests and lives outside of school. They readily acknowledged the challenges they faced, including a geographically isolated community in which resources were sometimes lacking, as well as the recent staff changes. Despite these hurdles, an optimistic view towards the future of their school was shared by many educators, as they endeavored to build and sustain positive relationships with students, the community, and new hires.

Brookfield Central School

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