

Keys to stronger results in high school

By Janet Angelis

What do you think would happen if your district's high school opened its Advanced Placement (AP) and honors courses to any student wanting to take them? Would more students sign on? Would those who do so succeed?

More importantly, how could we encourage more students to take these more rigorous courses – and support them to ensure their success?

In a recent study, University at Albany researchers identified 10 high schools with above-average student performance on five Regents exams, after adjustments to account for demographic factors such as the percentage of low-income students and students learning English as a second language (see list, inset). Researchers interviewed two to five administrators and five to 10 teachers at each school, and the results were compared with answers to the same questions asked at five average-performing high schools.

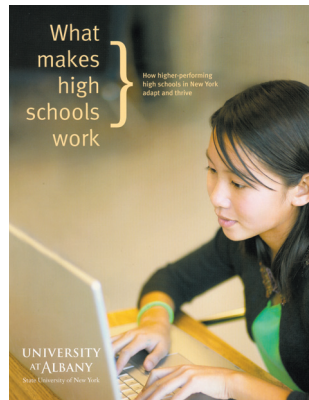
The study found that teachers and administrators in higher-performing high schools:

- Have high expectations and provide opportunities for typically lower-performing students to take honors and AP courses.
- Engage in disciplined innovation.
- Communicate openly about challenges as well as successes.
- Embrace and use evidence from a

wide variety of sources to make decisions.

- Deploy and redeploy resources where they are most likely to impact student performance.

The schools challenge students to reach as high as they can while providing the preparation and support they need.



At Yonker's Saunders Trades & Technical High School – one of the 10 higher-performing schools identified – teachers have a saying: “Failure is not an option.” Educators in the higher performers are not willing to accept excuses for why more students can't graduate or perform at higher levels.

Determined to change the typical trends of achievement among English language learners and students of poverty, these teachers work together to marshal resources in terms of time and personnel to provide opportunities for students to exceed expectations; help students see and seize opportunities to complete their courses and high school requirements, and plan future education and/or work. They also celebrate success.

In these schools, you will find such practices as:

- **Differentiated instruction.** From Batavia to Warrensburg to Huntington, in schools large and small, teachers report that they are expected to differentiate instruction to meet the particular learning needs of each student while ensuring that all students meet the standards for their subject. This is especially important now that the schools have eliminated or are eliminating tracking, including special education students in mainstream classes, and opening up honors and AP classes to more students.

- **Extra support.** Many schools have added a ninth or 10th period for the express purpose of providing additional help to those who need the support in order to succeed in the more challenging courses. Others have attached “clinics” or “labs” to core courses to provide

that support. Thus students have opportunities both during and after school to get the extra help they need – and those clinics and labs are staffed by teachers who also teach the core course so that the assistance is directly tied to the need. Extra help is well-integrated with coursework.

- **Frequent assessment and reporting.**

Like many of the others, MacArthur adds five-week reports between report cards, as well as teacher phone calls home, to keep students and families regularly and frequently informed of progress. Some schools (Warrensburg and South Kortright, for instance) have an “inel” list. That is, students with more than one failing grade (lower than a 70) are ineligible to participate in sports or social events until they improve their performance by taking advantage of the special help provided.

- **Flexible scheduling.** Several of the schools report innovative variations to the traditional high school schedule – all designed to support student learning needs. For example, South Kortright English and social studies teachers have double blocks of time while their colleagues do not. To help more students earn enough science credits, Cambridge offers an earth science course that covers 70 percent of the material in grade 8, with the remaining 30 percent in the first semester of grade 9. Students take the Regents Earth Science Exam in January, with a second chance in June for those who are not successful. Most students then go on to take biology.

- **Finding gaps and needs.** Teachers and administrators in the higher performers collect a variety of data that go well beyond state assessment data to try to spot, anticipate, and address needs or gaps. For example, like White Plains, educators target services to students displaying the characteristics that predict dropping out well before they reach high school, and they identify eighth-grade students with “untapped potential” who are unlikely to take advanced classes in high school without encouragement. These students are offered a summer enrichment program and additional support during their ninth-grade year as they enroll in at least one honors-level class.

The study of higher-performing high schools in the state is the third in a series of studies conducted by the Just for the Kids-New York project in the University at Albany's School of Education. For more information, see www.albany.edu/aire/kids.

Janet Angelis is director of Just for the Kids-New York.

Research briefs

Abstinence pledges ineffective, study says

Teenagers who made pledges to remain virgins before marriage were just as likely to have premarital sex as those who did not pledge abstinence, and were less likely to use some form of birth control, according to a study by a researcher at the Johns Hopkins University School of Public Health.

In fact, five years after pledging, 82 percent of the pledgers denied having ever pledged.

Using data from the federal National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, the analysis compared 289 middle- and high-school students who reported taking a virginity pledge in 1996 with 645 who did not take a pledge but were similar on 112 other variables, including their attitudes toward sex and birth control.

Pledgers and those who did not pledge did not differ in age of first sex, incidence of sexually transmitted diseases or participation in oral and anal sex. Pledgers had 0.1 fewer past-year partners but did not differ in the number of sexual partners in their lifetimes.

To see the full report, go to <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/cgi/content/full/123/1/e110>.

Weak on web savvy

Only about one in four teachers feels comfortable and prepared enough to inform their students about cybersafety issues such as cyberbullying, according to a recent survey of educators.

The 2008 National Cyberethics, Cybersafety, Cybersecurity Baseline Study, conducted for the National Cyber Security Alliance, gathered and analyzed data from 1,569 public and private U.S. K-12 educators and 94 technology coordinators. It found:

- 75 percent of teachers were uncomfortable informing their students about cyberbullying.
- 22 percent of respondents felt comfortable providing guidance to students on how to protect themselves from online predators and identify theft.
- 36 percent understood copyright and fair use when used in the education setting.

“These numbers reflect an across-the-board disconnect between the information that research and industry believes needs to be delivered to our students, and the knowledge and ability our educators have to deliver it,” said the report.

To download the study, go to www.staysafeonline.org.

– Paul Heiser
Research Analyst

10 higher-performing high schools

- **Batavia High School**, Genesee County
- **Cambridge Junior-Senior High School**, Washington County
- **Greene High School**, Chenango County
- **Huntington High School**, Suffolk County
- **Honeoye Falls–Lima High School**, Monroe County
- **MacArthur High School** (Levittown school district), Nassau County
- **Saunders Trades & Technical High School** (Yonkers school district), Westchester County
- **South Kortright Central School**, Delaware County
- **Warrensburg Junior-Senior High School**, Warren County
- **White Plains High School**, Westchester County

Source: University at Albany