

Greene High School *Greene Central School District*

School Context

Resting in the rolling foreground of the Appalachian Mountain Chain in the Chenango Valley is the town of Greene, New York. This rural community once prospered, as its waterways and early turnpike system and rich farmlands made it the hub of commercial activity. While that era has passed, the town website still boasts that this is a community rich in “pride and spirit, natural resources and history” with “a strong tradition of family and community.” These attributes noticeably carry over into the Greene High School which, as the town website goes on to say, offers “programs to accommodate all academic abilities” to its nearly 450 students and “enjoys one of the highest rates of student graduations within our four county area.” At the intersection of Routes 12 and 206 is the town’s business district, with the Raymond Corporation, a prominent forklift manufacturer, at its heart. Neighboring this plant are the Greene Middle and High Schools, the latter partnering with Raymond in projects beneficial to both.

Student Demographics 2005-2006: *Green High School, Green Central School Districtⁱ*

| | Green High School | Green CSD | New York State |
|--|-------------------|-----------|----------------|
| % Eligible for Free Lunch | 30% | 30% | 37% |
| % Eligible for Reduced Lunch | 13% | 12% | 8% |
| % Limited English Proficient | 0% | 0% | N/A |
| Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution | | | |
| % African-American | 0% | 0% | 20% |
| % Hispanic/Latino | 1% | 1% | 20% |
| % White | 98% | 98% | 53% |
| % Other | 0% | 1% | 7% |
| % Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards on Secondary Level English Assessments | 91% | 87% | 69% |
| % Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards on Secondary Level Mathematics Assessments | 90% | 85% | 71% |
| % Students Graduating | 88% | 83% | 67% |
| Total Enrollment | 453 | 1,349 | 2,772,669 |

The Greene Central School District includes these two schools as well as a primary and intermediate school with a total (K-12) enrollment of about 1350 students coming from Greene and a number of surrounding communities. While it lacks ethnic diversity, it faces the challenge of social and economic diversity, with nearly one third of its student population eligible for a free or reduced lunch. Its administration and staff are a blend of veterans and newcomers working together toward the common goal, as established by the board of education, to provide “quality programs to prepare all students with skills and knowledge to become responsible citizens, productive workers and lifelong learners.”

The high school succeeds, in part, by taking advantage of its location within the scope of two BOCES districts as well as seven institutions of higher learning, all of which combine to offer a myriad of resources available for the benefit of students and staff alike. Educators also credit the new pool and sports complex, which they note could not exist without community support, as a means of “motivation to help keep kids in school.” Other evidence of community support includes the passage of a \$36.1 million geothermal project for a future cheaper and “greener” heating system. The Parent Teacher Organization also helps with fundraising to promote trips, programs and other student activities within the high school.

Best Practices Highlights

Greene High School is characterized by:

- Communication, collaboration, and consistency
- Across-the-board respect and trust
- Knowing and serving every student

One of the things I tell people why we are as successful as we are: We have a wonderful communication system -- department chairs, team leaders, special liaisons.

Students need consistency. We've got to have consistency and discipline in the classroom.

The biggest thing is support one another and support the kids, and if you don't have that, you don't have that trust there, and you'll never be able to achieve what we have achieved here.

[The district cares] about success for every student – that they become better people and prepared when they leave here.

Communication, Collaboration, and Consistency

These three C's appear to be at the heart of the success Greene High School has achieved. When asked about what they deem to be among their best practices, the word communication is heard time and time again. Those interviewed stress that this communication exists at all levels. The administration is often praised for listening and responding to teacher suggestions and concerns. Faculty members are in constant communication with one another, at both subject and grade levels. According to one teacher, “One thing we do a good job with that benefits the kids -- we adults communicate with each other a lot, whether on special projects or working together towards a common goal.” Another component spoken of is the home-school connection. One administrator points out that “teachers are really good about connecting with parents” and that “parents (also) feel they can come in and meet with any administrator, top to bottom.”

This type of communication seems to automatically lead to collaboration. Speaking to one another leads to sharing ideas and, as the superintendent notes, putting a committee structure in place helps enhance that. Thus, what the principal refers to as a three-tier “cross-referencing” process keeps department, grade, and district levels constantly interacting with one another at an academic level. Parent feedback is incorporated into the Shared Decision Making Plan that affects many of the policies and decisions within the district.

Such collaboration helps bring about the consistency needed to maintain a climate conducive to academic and personal success. This consistency may come at the instructional level, where materials, content, and approaches are shared and coordinated, with the end result, according to one teacher, reflected in “continuously high Regents scores.” It also exists at the disciplinary level where teachers say it is important to make kids responsible for doing their homework and knowing where to go when they need help. If students fall short of their responsibilities, teachers say they are “pretty good at holding them to the consequences” and that they know they will receive full administrative support.

Across-the-Board Respect and Trust

Respect and trust seem to come naturally to those at Greene High School. Praise is heard as equally for the custodians who keep the building clean as it is for board of education members who do “a nice job of trying to meet the needs of the education program” and “provide the philosophical oversight for the district.” Regarding parents, the principal notes that if a parent comes into his office, he drops what he is doing. He thinks “the community feels we listen to their concerns.” From a teacher standpoint, one frequently hears variations of the sentiment, “The administration has been great....They are real trusting of us...not putting strict limits or guidelines on us.” In return, the principal speaks of his “straightforward” approach with his faculty, telling them, “You do your job, and I’ll support you.”

These across-the-board feelings of trust and respect extend to the student body as well. One repeatedly hears “We have got good kids” when speaking to administrators and faculty alike. The reason for this is best summed up in one teacher’s advice to other schools, which is to “start by developing a positive relationship with the students and work collaboratively as adults. A lot comes down to the way you treat kids. You get respect from students if you give them respect, and they’ll work with you. It’s important to have a good relationship with kids – have an investment in them. I always listen to what they have to say. Even if they don’t like my answer, I gave them the respect of listening.” This seems to be a common practice at Greene. One way the school shows this trust is by giving those seniors who are in academic good standing the privilege of access to the senior lounge – something, it is said, “all classes look forward to.” This lounge area is in a large foyer near the main office where they can gather, play ping pong, and chat rather than be in an assigned room.

Knowing and Serving Every Student

As one teacher says, “We treat everybody equally. Everybody has the same opportunity; everything is available to every kid who wants to take advantage of it.” This approach transcends academic instruction, as providing each “kid with the right opportunities” and the chance to be “well rounded” is deemed to be equally important. Thus, ample opportunity in the arts, sports, community service projects, and vocational training exists for students. Helping to point them in the right direction is the guidance department, which is credited with doing “a good job working with the strength of each student.” One look at the course offerings listed in their “Gateway to Education” handbook reveals a wide array of needs and interests being met. This includes college credit and competitive opportunities for the gifted and talented, apprenticeships and BOCES services for the vocational minded, and a variety of interest-specific in-house courses as well as the traditional core and remedial curriculum. Department meetings and Child Study Teams also serve to identify concerns about particular students and how best to meet their needs. Those identified as potential dropouts meet monthly, sometimes weekly, with the principal, who tries to encourage them to stay.

A Closer Look

Communication, collaboration, and consistency; across-the-board respect and trust; and knowing and serving every student are evident across five broad themes that frame the best practices study of which this case is one part.ⁱⁱ The sections that follow discuss specific practices at Greene High School within each theme.

Curriculum and Academic Goals

Communication is strong – everyone knows the goals and expectations.

The district goals are very broad. The teaching goals are narrower and fit into the broader goals.

Each department sets goals and we're good at integrating those goals.

All levels within the Greene Central School District develop goals based upon past achievement. Each summer the board develops broad-range goals in the areas of academics, budget, physical plant, and communications. More specific to the academic needs are those developed through the aforementioned cross-referencing approach, used by their LINKS team, which has evolved through their local BOCES out of a Goals 2000 student achievement plan. (No one seems to remember what the LINKS acronym originally stood for.) Goals emerging from this team's collaboration put a priority focus on helping students achieve at or above state standards, as well as having a greater number reach the mastery level on state assessments. The LINKS Integrated Improvement Plan also establishes a number of goals relating to professional development for staff "to assist all students to reach higher academic achievement," with a focus on "ongoing curriculum awareness" and a "unified implementation of curriculum." This is achieved through alternating meetings at subject, grade and district levels, from which more specific departmental and individual classroom goals are derived. As one teacher says, "I don't think most of the goals are unilaterally decided by the board or the superintendent or teachers. If anything needs a point of emphasis, it's pretty much a community effort."

Most high school teachers agree that they go above and beyond the state standards, using the "standards as a minimum, not a maximum guide"; as one teacher puts it, "I like to see my students excel at the mastery not just the passing level." They also report that teachers across schools and grades work together to coordinate what they do. Each content area has developed its own curriculum, described as a work in progress. To avoid having teachers miss valuable instructional time, summer time, half days, or time set aside for teachers to stay at the end of the day have been used for this purpose. One end result is the creation of curriculum binders. These binders reflect the vertical alignment of K-12 curriculum, in respect to both grade levels and state standards. A typical binder focuses on Key Objectives, Classroom Activities, Methods of Assessment and Suggested Resources for that discipline. For instance, an 11th-grade curriculum guide for history first suggests unit topics and then lists possible activities ranging from debates to projects to discussion approaches. It includes a list of suggested resources such as videos, texts and periodicals to supplement particular lessons. This is followed by key concepts by unit and of item analyses and error coding reports from a past Regents exam. Teachers say these binders are particularly useful to new teachers and note that veteran staff are available and always willing to answer questions and offer help. Pacing guides are also supplied for some courses.

Staff Selection, Leadership and Capacity Building

The biggest change is the new principal. He supports the staff in ways we weren't seeing previously.

I'm signing papers all the time for "X" number of hours for [teachers to attend] this program or that.

The union does some socials, as does the sunshine group. The school supports this – relieves us from 9th period.

As one teacher notes, "There hasn't been a big turnover of teachers. This is great for the kids. It is important for kids to get to know the faculty. It's harder for kids with high faculty turnover." There seems, however, to be a balance between veterans and newcomers, with newer staff coming on primarily to fill retirement positions. This is especially true at the administrative end where six of the nine members of the administrative team within the district have been hired within the last three years. When openings do arise, the principal says he relies on his "professional network of colleagues, former colleagues, and college faculty to help him find the right candidate." He adds, "There's a lot of communication between superintendents and administrators in the region," noting that "area schools forced to downsize will try to place teachers they're laying off locally." Greene also recruits by advertising on its website, in local papers, and through Job Search and local colleges.

Upon his own hiring three years ago, the superintendent utilized a committee of stakeholder groups to screen candidates for other administrative positions. These stakeholders included parents, teachers, students, support staff, the high school secretary, and a board member. After formulating a list of qualifications and receiving applications, they narrowed down and interviewed a list of candidates. From these, they selected a finalist, who went on to be recommended to the board of education – a "recommendation all [could] support."

New teachers at the high school have access to the BOCES resource center. Until tenured, they meet monthly with the principal to go over "everything from the evaluation process to lesson plan evaluation." While the new contract mandates an official mentoring program, most agree that the staff is very good at checking in with new teachers to be sure they have what they need and that department chairs "unofficially mentor." Adhering to contract specifications and its evaluation tool, the principal observes non-tenured teachers up to five times a year and tenured teachers once annually. He says, "Our weak teachers here aren't weak; they may have an area where they need improvement." Feeling a teacher "doesn't want a boss to micromanage them," he says his approach is to let them know they are "doing a good job" and to help them determine how "they can even further improve."

When it comes to support, the principal sees himself as "an enabler," saying, "Whatever they need I try to give them." One area in which faculty verify and praise this support is that of discipline and making students accountable, which, as one teacher puts it, is why "we don't have much turmoil [here]." One teacher lauds the administration for allowing teachers to "uphold responsibility" and stick to deadlines so that those students who do not do so, "with lots of documentation to back it up," do not receive credit. She notes this "boosts responsibility" and credits it for the fact that "children are stepping up to the plate a little bit more." Administrative support comes not only from listening, but also from responding to suggestions. As one teacher says, "I've given opinions that resulted in change" and he goes on to tell how he first worked with administration and guidance to adjust scheduling and, eventually, was instrumental in the

hiring of a new teacher so that the needs of the students in his specific subject matter could be better met.

Teachers report ample opportunity for increasing capacity. They are encouraged to choose from the twenty to thirty workshops available annually through BOCES, with topics ranging from technology, library searches and test administration to AIS (Academic Intervention Services), inclusion, and best practices. Some teachers use in-service time to receive training, as well as certification and credit, from places such as Cornell and Colgate, bringing back new programs to incorporate into their curriculum. Others report that going next door to tour the Raymond facilities helped them to open new doors of opportunities for their students, as well as increase their own community awareness. At the heart of capacity building, however, is the in-house collaboration and sharing. This occurs formally at department meetings, which are curriculum focused and where teachers may present lessons to share, or at grade-level meetings, which are more student focused and where they “can discuss what’s going on in the classroom and share concerns about any issue” or individual student. As one teacher puts it, “Meetings with my colleagues are almost always productive.” Teachers also speak of constant informal collaboration through daily conversations about what they are teaching, what is effective, what is not and say, “If we find something students are enthusiastic about, we share it.” This sharing extends from teachers “letting people look through (their) stuff,” to the principal “always offering videos and things,” to the librarian being “real good about trying to work with us.”

Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements

People here care about their subjects. In the hallway, between classes, we are talking about politics and history. Kids see that and feed off of that.

I go through and get the basics and then expand, flesh out, review.

If I teach in a way that is more whole and that they’re interested in, I feel they’re going to understand it better and care more and get more excited about it.

You try to teach a lesson every day so that when the lesson is over, they’re still thinking about what they did.

I try to teach my students to learn math as much as they learn my curriculum.

Several programs are in place to meet the various needs of the students at Greene High School. While some courses are grouped by teacher recommendation and test scores (i.e., those with students taking a Regents in January versus those taking it in June versus those enrolled in a two-year program), for the most part, inclusion prevails. Whether special education teachers are in the actual classroom with the subject teacher or not, they maintain constant communication with regular education teachers through the use of a Mainstream Communication Sheet; on this sheet regular education teachers inform the special education teacher of assignments, upcoming tests, and the degree of accomplishment of designated students. The special education teacher, with subject teacher input, then works with the student and, if necessary, modifies the tasks or tests according to the particular students’ disabilities and modifications. A paid aide within the special education department handles the organization and distribution of these materials. One teacher offsets her concern about going too slow for higher-level students by “making a conscious effort to be sure that those other kids get stimulation,” some of which carries over into study hall discussions.

A number of students take advantage of the wide array of career and technical programs offered through BOCES, which range from auto mechanics, to child care, to culinary arts, to conservation, nursing, and security and law enforcement among others. Alternative education is also available, as are apprenticeships. As an apprentice, a student works ten to twenty hours a week and rotates through a series of placements within one of five career areas. This may lead to Regents credit and, eventually, could lead to the equivalent of two years of college for those who want to pursue this option. The Raymond Corporation has also developed a paid apprenticeship program with the school as part of its outreach program.

Other outside programs are being incorporated directly into the classroom for enrichment purposes. The Arts in Education program sponsored by Lincoln Center and supported by the New York State Council on the Arts is finding its way from the lower grades into the high school. One teacher speaks of working and planning with various local artists to enhance and bring in a non-traditional instructional approach to complement his subject matter and increase student exposure and interest. Another teacher has brought in a genetics program through Cornell University to enrich her curriculum. For this program, the university provides the necessary equipment and sends a “road warrior” to show teachers and students how to use it.

A number of opportunities are also in place for gifted students. These include a BOCES New Visions program for juniors and seniors as well as a number of college credit courses taught in-house by an appropriate subject teacher. Among these are college calculus (Syracuse University), foreign language classes (University at Albany), and English and social studies courses (Broome Community College).

The principal and guidance department are responsible for scheduling. One recent scheduling change is to start first period earlier and add a fourteen-minute break between first and second period, which can be used for various purposes, including breakfast. This change gives students who qualify for breakfast and arrive on a late bus time to eat, and it allows BOCES students to get in the entire first period before needing to leave the building. Another change is adding another section for juniors so teachers will have smaller classes to prepare students for the Regents exams.

In regard to class instruction, teachers report no formal mandates. They seem to appreciate this, along with the fact that most have their own room, limited preparations, and consistent class size, averaging about twenty students each. They stress the importance of knowing the material and being organized, and they see analysis, integration, discussion, and versatility all as key ingredients to successful teaching. Teachers feel students need to go beyond a basic understanding of facts and be able to see the connections from one subject to the next. One notes that when it comes to discussion, “When you are excited about something, kids will get excited. They want to know those things. And they remember those things.” The importance of presenting information in different ways is captured in the words, “When you can switch back and forth from notes to a PowerPoint presentation to a video, to a lecture – they [the students] are constantly engaged.” As for testing, “Kids do different things differently so we give them different kinds of tests: multiple choice, short answer, fill-in-the-blanks, extended writing....”

Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data

We try to create ways at the end of lessons that kids can let us know how much they’ve learned...free writing, thematic essays, DBQs. . . .

Teachers do a good job. They use student data to monitor.

Monitoring student progress through data analysis is key, not only to setting and revisiting goals, but also to adjusting to the needs of students as they arise. The major thrust of the LINKS committee is to review state indicators and federal and state benchmarks such as test results and school report cards in order to identify problem areas and come up with a strategy to improve in these areas. This is an ongoing process. At one level, the curriculum council meets every other month. This council includes department chairs, team leaders, special liaisons, and representatives from physical education, art and music, foreign language, special education and Academic Intervention Services. The council receives statistics from the principal and curriculum coordinator as to how each subject area is doing in regard to state assessments. This information is then taken back to each member's respective department. Also, after each state assessment, department chairs are responsible for having their departments develop a T-chart reporting on areas such as strengths and weaknesses identified while grading, as well as the difficulty of the test. This is shared with administrators and reviewed in teams. Grade-level meetings bring together teachers of all subject areas to monitor individual student needs and determine if a problem is subject- or teacher-specific or extends to the point where parent or guidance conferencing is needed.

From the classroom perspective, monitoring of student progress varies. According to one teacher, "Teachers on a regular basis are monitoring quizzes and exams and trying to analyze statistically the test they gave one year and the prior year to see what's working." Another describes looking at Regents exams to see what kids miss most. Some quiz over and over until the kids "get it right." Yet another says,

I use formal and informal assessments. I will discuss things with them – [and observe] anything from the answer to the body language in the classroom. I use objective and subjective questions on tests. I use some literal-level questions, but go to analytical whenever possible. I do it frequently. I use data to adjust instruction.

This is done by providing extra activities to adjust for any gaps identified. Teachers also send out five-week progress reports with the actual grade at the time, which gives students a chance to improve before the end of the term.

From a guidance standpoint, data are used to ease the transition of students from middle to high school. High school counselors praise the middle school counselors for "doing a really good job of giving us direction. They use eighth-grade scores to determine whether students should be placed in AIS or honors classes." Eighth-grade teachers recommend classes and BOCES placements for every student moving into the high school. Counselors also go through all students' transcripts every year to be sure they are on track for any college plans.

Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustments

The number of kids who stand up [to be recognized] for [having] an 85 or above all year . . . amazes me. It's powerful.

We continue to work with kids – expand special education staff, provide teaching assistants and aides to work with them and keep working with them. [We] don't give up.

We give them the resources to succeed; we follow up and give a lot of extra help to the ones who need it.

We try to find appropriate programs for kids. For a high-risk kid, we might point that kid to one of these programs – a high interest activity to keep them here.

Although as one teacher says, “Success is its own reward,” all acknowledge that recognition of student achievement is an important and ongoing occurrence that manifests itself in a variety of ways at Greene High School. More traditionally, honor students receive letters from the principal and are eligible for Honor Society, and an annual Awards Assembly is held to which the community contributes and at which teachers present special faculty key awards. The school also gives one boy and one girl from each grade level (9-12) a Student of the Semester award for “anything from performance to effort to attitude so that different kids with different abilities get recognized all the time.” On Math and Science Nights, students share exhibits, presentations, and lab activities. These nights, teachers say, are enthusiastically supported through high parent and student attendance and hands-on interaction. Moving Up Day in May appears to be the highlight of the year. One teacher describes this day as a time “to honor seniors,” with those with the top five averages getting special recognition; seniors are “picked on” by teachers who had them throughout the years. In the afternoon, seniors go on a picnic while the under classes have a double-period barbecue.

Several proactive steps are taken to help at-risk students, described by a guidance counselor as “kids falling through the cracks” who have become “disconnected from school.” One approach that has helped keep a lot of kids in school, he feels, even though they may not be meeting all graduation requirements, is to send them to BOCES early on – as a freshman or sophomore rather than a junior or senior. Students also have the option to attend the alternative education Career Academy offered through BOCES, from which they graduate with Regents diplomas; according to a counselor, some are “getting 80s and 90s there where they were getting 20s and 30s here.” Some few will still go to an adult education program for a GED, but not many. The principal adds that he feels “encouragement is the best we can do right now” and, as a result, meets with potential dropouts on a regular basis to try to keep them in school. At parent-teacher conferences, students often create a contract such as agreeing to mandatory days of extra help during the ninth period. Students who fail a course may retake it in summer school or in the fall. If it is a forty-week course and they can pass it in twenty weeks, they can receive credit and take something new at that time. Counseling also plays into helping these students to succeed. A social worker, drug and alcohol counselor, and family counselor are all available to students on both a preventative and present-needs basis.

Remediation is also available at many levels. The ninth period is set aside for just this purpose. According to one teacher, “We try to track what students are doing; if we see kids veering off track, [we] try to contact them and have them stay with us for ninth-period extra help.” Also in place is the AIS plan as written up by the LINKS team. Students for these classes are identified by previous scores and teacher recommendation. Academic Intervention Services at the high school are provided in separate classes. For example, an English student who is struggling or who has not passed the Regents is assigned to an AIS lab that meets every other day and serves to reinforce material and skills being taught in the core class. Resource rooms for students with disabilities are in place to allow back up to the inclusion process.

A guidance counselor describes scheduling: “We sit down each year to do the schedule in late summer and see what kid is where; then we create our schedule. Sometimes we move our schedule or move kids to match teacher and kid – or to match teacher with subject. Sometimes a student has been with a teacher for a couple of years and it’s time to change, or the other way around: it’s better for a student to stay with a teacher.”

An administrator notes, “We’re not afraid to be creative within our limits. We are developing a work/study program for special education. We piloted it last year for a high-risk student. We paired him with a custodial staff, found some money for a stipend. It worked. He felt great about himself. The CSE (Committee on Special Education) chair reported to the board about the success. We’d like to make that a possibility for more students. Our superintendent of buildings and grounds is willing to work with us.”

In a Nutshell

Greene High School demonstrates that having a strong, collaborative communication system in place that filters down into all levels of operation is one key to success. Keeping everyone informed and working together for a common goal breed consistency and respect for staff and students alike. These, in turn, help teachers and administrators serve the needs of every student while providing a solid academic program and continued above-average achievement.

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ⁱ Demographic data are of students in the 2002 entering cohort and are from the 2005-06 New York State Report Card (<https://www.nystart.gov/publicweb/AllDistrict.do>). This case study was conducted in spring 2008.

ⁱⁱ This case study is one of a series of studies conducted by Just for the Kids-New York, beginning in 2005. For the study of high schools, conducted during the 2007-08 school year, research teams investigated ten consistently higher-performing and five average-performing high schools based on student performance on New York State Assessments of English, mathematics, science, and history. Researchers used site-based interviews of teachers and administrators, as well as analyses of supportive documentation, to determine differences in practices between higher- and average-performing schools in the sample. In half the higher-performing schools, from one-third to three-quarters of students qualify for free or reduced lunch. Average-performing schools were matched as closely as possible to the higher performers in terms of student poverty levels, geographic location, size, and student ethnicity. Results were organized along five broad themes that form the framework of the national Just for the Kids study of which the New York study is part. The national study has been sponsored by the National Center for Educational Achievement (NCEA).