

South Kortright Central School, Grades 9-12 *South Kortright Central School District*

School Context

Nestled in the northern part of the Delaware River Valley is the rustic town of South Kortright, a predominately agrarian community whose population of fewer than 1700 continues to decline as a result of changing economics. The combined phenomena of a rising tax base brought on by a surge in urban second home buyers and a loss of farms resulting from ever-increasing operating costs have left the local population facing a higher poverty level. Some have chosen to relocate due to lack of affordable housing.

At the heart of this town pulses the South Kortright Central School, a centralized (K-12) district that serves four neighboring communities as well. Home to about 380 students, 155 of whom are in the high school, the district reports more than 50% of its student body qualifying for a free or reduced lunch. Further, the district must meet the special needs of both a high level of students with disabilities and a number of students coming from the two residential foster homes within the district. Despite these challenges, South Kortright makes an extra effort to fulfill its mission “to aggressively provide all students, in an environment that is caring and challenging, the diversity of experience to gain the skills and attitudes necessary for the lifetime acquisition of knowledge, aesthetics and ethics.”

Student Demographics 2005-2006: *South Kortright Central School District*¹

	South Kortright Central School	South Kortright CSD	New York State
% Eligible for Free Lunch	35%	35%	37%
% Eligible for Reduced Lunch	17%	17%	8%
% Limited English Proficient	0%	0%	N/A
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution			
% African-American	1%	1%	20%
% Hispanic/Latino	2%	2%	20%
% White	95%	95%	53%
% Other	2%	2%	7%
% Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards on Secondary Level English Assessments	79%	70%	69%
% Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards on Secondary Level Mathematics Assessments	85%	78%	71%
% Students Graduating	85%	76%	67%
Total Enrollment	126 (grades 9-12)	355	2,772,669

Best Practice Highlights

South Kortright Central School is characterized by:

- A pursuit of “learning for life”
- A philosophy of going “the extra mile”
- A culture based on community support and collaboration

Learning for Life

Each student is an individual here.

Another priority is how students feel about success.

Do they have a vision of what they can be and what is possible?

Administrators in South Kortright are well aware that they have the unique advantage of having grades K-12 under a single roof, which allows them to follow student progress from beginning to end. “Our ultimate goal,” they say, “is for everyone to have a terminal diploma, . . . which may be GED or Regents,” and “Success has to be measured in terms of how well we prepare students for what’s next, after schooling.” Thus, besides insuring a wide range of academic and trade school opportunities and support, they deem enrichment and character building experiences equally important. Going on cultural field trips, working on building projects, or participating in student political action committees are among the many offerings helping students to achieve these goals. Character building is further enhanced by having older students supervise after-school elementary activities, and high school Honor Society students tutor middle-school students. A walk towards the elementary wing further reflects lessons in community action as one looks out at a greenhouse built by the high school Agricultural Club and utilized by all.

Going the Extra Mile

We do everything we can.

We frequently find that when new mandates come out, we’ve already met them.

Administrators say that just because a school is in a high poverty district, it does not mean that students need to be deprived of opportunity, as many resources exist both within and without the school structure. Having two SUNY campuses as well as a private college all within a half hour’s drive opens up doors for students to take on-line courses, receive early college credits, and participate in workshops and field trips. Teachers also benefit. The district’s BOCES offers student tech classes and teacher conferencing. The high school also partners with another BOCES’ distance learning program to provide students a more diverse course selection that caters to specific needs and interests. The district brings in local artists and community “experts” to enhance enrichment programs as well. The school also uses its staffs’ talents to best benefit students. Thus, a sixth-grade teacher also teaches a high school agricultural class, which allows a third science credit; an elementary art teacher offers a high school ceramics class; and other schedules are adjusted as need or desire arises. Extensive grant writing by administrators and staff alike allows for ever-evolving classes, programs and field trip opportunities.

Encouraging Community Support and Collaboration

The school is the community.

The “we’re all in this together” attitude seems second nature to those in this district, where many of the staff were born or came to reside. School events are often community events and vice versa. Together they cheer on their highly successful sports program and together they produce the annual Spring Equinox Celebration and Veteran’s Day assembly. Administrators are especially proud of the recent “graduation” of two World War II veterans who had never had the chance to finish school and earn a diploma.

Approving recent renovations to the elementary wing and the creation of new technology and art wings are further signs of public support. Administrators say the elected board of education, many with connections to the school through children or staff, is “always interested in the success of the school” and “not there to oppose budgets.” When funding was depleted for an after-school program, board members took the initiative to allot necessary monies, which the community supported despite a 2% additional increase in the tax levy. When its members heard of a study showing how relating agricultural experience to math and science has been shown to increase learning in rural communities, they went to the superintendent, who in turn took it to the staff. After further investigation, it is now being successfully incorporated into the curriculum. Community members also actively partake in the shared decision making process, including hiring and policy making.

Entering the building from the main parking area, one is immediately greeted by walls lined with photos of graduating classes from 1946 to the present and introduced to the sense of family that permeates the district. Continuing on brings visitors to the cafeteria, which doubles as auditorium and is shared by a community theater group. Its stage is usually full of props and scenery for an upcoming production, which can expect a full audience. The principal speaks highly of the cafeteria staff, who combine “restaurant experience” and “farm cooking” to provide staff and students with nutritious meals. He notes the cafeteria lady is “Mom to everybody here” and that there are “all sorts of Mom and Dad figures here.” A student-built ramp created for the handicapped provides access to the grant-funded fitness room, which is also available for public use “after hours.” The school further insures the well being of its students by partnering with a nearby hospital to offer an in-house clinic where students can receive cost-free health care.

A Closer Look

These characteristics – learning for life, going the extra mile, and strong community support – reflect best practices that are evident across the five themes that frame the best practices study of which this case is one partⁱⁱ. The sections that follow discuss specific practices in South Kortright within each theme.

Curriculum and Academic Goals

Goals are data driven.

Establish high expectations and help students achieve them.

A district evaluation of its progress over a five-year period ending in 2006-7 outlines goals, objectives, and activities developed to help meet the established goals. For example, one goal states that, “South Kortright Central School students will participate in activities that will expand their horizons and raise their aspirations.” Measurable objectives are to raise the percentage of students pursuing Regents diplomas and pursuing further education and training after graduation.

Administrators explain that since many of their students never leave the county, exposure to culture and other areas could inspire some to higher ambitions. Over the five-year period, the percentage of students earning a Regents diploma rose from 50% to 80%. At the four-year mark, those pursuing further education upon graduation had risen 20% (with a slight decline in the fifth year). In 2007, 95% of those applying to a post-secondary institution were accepted.

Classroom goals are more subject-specific and aim for success in a student's ability to communicate, analyze, question, and problem solve.

The administration would like teachers to have free reign to do what they do...we know our population best.

"The best practice" philosophy is encouraged here. Teachers attend best practice conferences and then present speeches, presentations to try to incorporate ideas into our curriculum.

For the most part, those interviewed report that the administration trusts teachers to develop their own curriculum and offer as evidence that no mandates are placed upon their instruction. Administrators describe teachers as professionals who are "knowledgeable about their subjects and focused on student success." Teachers say they use the state syllabus more as a guideline to be aware of the goals and requirements of the curriculum they teach, or as a check to be sure there are no gaps in their instruction. Most agree that it is important to go above and beyond the state standards and further challenge students and that the subject matter, not the test, is their main focus. As for resources, the administration is "wonderful" in allowing teachers to keep materials updated and relevant to curriculum changes. Some use on-line curriculum aids that are available to all.

Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building

Recruitment and Shared Decision-Making

Once teachers get here they stay.

The district has little turnover in its largely veteran staff. When asked why they stay, responses range from "people feel supported here" to "I like the smaller classes; you get to know the students" to "it's more family atmosphere oriented." Several teachers echo the sentiment, "The administration treats us with respect and trusts us to do our job" as another reason to stay on.

A two-fold process is in place when it does come time to hire. At an unwritten level, if someone is deemed a potential asset to the district, he or she is actively recruited. When the district looked to develop an alternative education program, the principal sought out a former colleague whom he knew to have experience and skill in the field. The school also hires two full-time subs who are certified teachers, which gives them a chance to "get a good look at how they work with kids and staff." The traditional route of posting through BOCES and the newspapers is also employed.

As part of the collaborative process that permeates this district, once applications are received, all members of the Shared Decision Making Committee are invited to come and review them. This committee is comprised of community members, parents, students, board of education members, licensed teaching assistants (LTAs), and administrators. Once the committee comes to a consensus, it passes its recommendations on to the superintendent, who then presents them to

the board of education. In keeping with the sense of family and mutual respect, this same procedure is used to hire anyone who wishes to work in any capacity within the district, from administration to custodial staff.

Resourceful and Supportive Leadership

We've been fortunate in securing grants to get the extra things we need. It makes a difference in the morale of the staff.

Administration is able to see the bigger picture, not just test scores and budget.

The relationship between faculty and administration is characterized as a “free and open environment.” Administrators view teachers as “highly intelligent” and try to encourage them whenever possible to pursue new ideas and training. In return, teachers say, “You can come up with ideas, be creative, and go to the administration about problems or ideas.” This results in an atmosphere of mutual trust, respect and appreciation.

Grant Writing

The superintendent, a former science teacher in the district, says “When I was teaching, I felt I was teaching in the poorest school in the country. Now that’s not the case. A lot of teachers secure grants. We have access to technology through grants.” In his own words, “One of my major areas of success is helping teachers dare to dream.” As a result, the principal says that the district in the past six years has undergone “a systematic infusion of technology.” Now, attendance and report cards are done electronically; they have computer labs, mobile presentation carts in constant use, and a distance learning center used for multiple purposes, including by the guidance counselor, who takes students on “virtual field trips.”

Grant writing also funds two other successful programs that have been incorporated into the district. GEAR UP, a federal program designed to encourage students to go to college after high school, “has worked well for us” says the superintendent. It allows the district to assign a tutor to a particular grade to follow those students through and beyond high school. “It gets them out to colleges so they know what’s out there and that they can afford it.” Four classes have been involved so far, and the “percent of students going on to college has risen dramatically.” He credits this program with the fact that last year nearly 100% of those who applied to college were accepted. The superintendent also speaks of securing a \$75,000 Extended School Day Violence Prevention Act Grant that he says was written so “we could provide our students with opportunities that more fortunate students have to expand their horizons.” This allows for a guided one-on-one tutoring program and increases in art programming, field trips and other forms of enrichment. Monies from this grant also helped develop an end-of-day activity period for various purposes. The superintendent sets the tone for grant writing, leading by example.

Teachers following his initiative have not only developed grants in the technology field, but in enrichment areas as well. One special education teacher notes grants have allowed her to partake of a four-day Landmark College workshop as well as to teach a dance class during the tenth-period activity time.

Administrators also speak of leveraging BOCES aid to “suit needs best.” In the case of Alternative Education, after the district realized they could serve as many as fourteen students within their own district for what it cost them to service three at BOCES, they instituted their own program. They recruited an experienced teacher, developed the program, and now attribute

the rise in diplomas and decline in referrals, in large part, to the success of this program, which has become a model for other districts in the area.

Collaborative Problem Solving

The principal describes the superintendent as a “wizard” at creating the master schedule with its “hybrid block schedule” as well as its complex five-day rotating tenth-period activities.

According to the superintendent, both of these innovations were ideas initially teacher generated. In the case of the hybrid block schedule, English and social studies teachers desired longer time frames for instruction, so their classes were blocked into two-period sessions. All others, by preference, remain on a traditional schedule. The “tenth period” came about as the need arose for more AIS (Academic Intervention Services) and academic tutoring time. Since all students must be present during tenth period, specific days were also set aside for student mentoring, teacher collaboration and enrichment activities. In each case the process was the same. It began as ideas from teachers, discussed first in a large group format, then implemented by the administration.

Mentoring

While a formal mentoring procedure is in place for new arrivals, it is seldom needed because of the low turnover. When the need does arise, administrators say they ask a mentor teacher to work with a new teacher until tenure is reached, if so desired. So far, it has been done on a voluntary basis. All also agree that people automatically welcome and offer assistance to anyone new to the system. Newcomers get further aid by attending meetings in August and September that focus on getting ready for the first day of school, mediation with students, classroom environment, self-assessment, and goal setting.

Learning Communities

The principal values his monthly participation in a Principal’s Academy, which involves a group of administrators discussing various issues and concerns as they arise, listening for new ideas and receiving training in a range of areas. Administrators recognize that this type of atmosphere is equally valuable to teachers.

While core and consultant teachers collaborate, and time is set aside for teacher collaboration once a week, the fact remains that there is mainly one teacher per subject in the high school. As their School-Wide Monitoring Report reflects, “During the 2006-7 school year the district began studying the potential for implementing Professional Learning Communities [PLC].” Because of size limitations, they realized the only way to take advantage of this approach was to join with faculties from neighboring schools. Thus, they put together groups of two to six teachers from like disciplines or grade levels and organized a joint Superintendents’ Conference Day with three neighboring schools to determine the feasibility of a multi-school PLC effort. As a result of this conference, they arranged for a number of groups to meet with a professional development specialist who has been trained in PLC four times during the 2007-8 year. They also report working with BOCES to see if they can develop a model for other small schools to follow.

Academic interschool collaboration is happening through other channels as well. One teacher tells of four schools arranging to have interscholastic discussions and of English classes going to Hartwick College’s Pine Lake to “re-create” Walden Pond. Another speaks of how he and the superintendent are working to bring to alternative education an on-line class setup similar to the ones in use in the general program. He says they are looking at cross-coordinating instruction with area schools whereby, for example, their teacher would teach alternative education English classes to area schools and someone in another school might offer a social studies class. He concludes that doing so would also allow them to keep courses aligned to state standards.

Individual Professional Development

While South Kortright may not offer many in-house workshops, teachers say that when it comes to opportunity for pursuing professional development, “There is lots of it.” Superintendent’s Conference Days are generally BOCES generated and teachers have the option of what to take. Most professional development, however, tends to be self-generated. The principal points out that “all [teachers] are professionals” who should be “responsible for their own professional development.” Thus, administrators try to say yes to whatever they can and have sent teachers to some “pretty expensive stuff,” ranging from technology to literacy training. One teacher speaks enthusiastically about training geared towards “preparing special needs kids for college.” Another speaks of attending best practices and citizenship conferences. Yet another had the opportunity to learn about a new calculator that will soon be in use.

Professional Assessment

The principal reports that only non-tenured teachers are formally observed, and those observations take place three times a year. All teachers, however, are subject to a year-end Annual Professional Performance Review (modeled after National Board for Professional Teaching Standards) in which they are expected “to think about and plan for their own professional development.” The principal advises each teacher to think about weakness and what she or he needs to work on. Collaboratively, they determine the need and decide what to focus on; at the end of the next year, they will re-evaluate to see if the goal has been achieved.

Instructional Programs, Practices and Arrangements

The school does a very good job of reaching all students, not only in reaching the less able, but in challenging the more able.

This mission will be fulfilled by an empowered school and community working together to develop and continually assess an educational program that utilizes a wide variety of learning strategies, experiences and support services to enable our students to be productive, contributing members of society.

One teacher notes that “even though we are a very rural school, there is a lot available here for our students.” He and others say that small classes, heterogeneous grouping, innovative programs, and creative scheduling all play an important role in their students’ success. Teachers have two prep periods, which allows time to plan, collaborate, offer extra help or, if they agree and with appropriate compensation, be available to teach an extra class. With no mandated instructional approach, one teacher speaks of her “hands-on,” individualized approach, while another cites using the “Socratic method” to get students “to learn to question authority with respect.” All speak of several programs and practices put in place to meet the needs of everyone and of accessing all resources available to them in order to enhance the learning environment.

Although no AP classes are available, fifteen students are presently earning college credit as a result of the school’s partnership with SUNY Delhi; adjunct courses are either taken on-line or taught in-house by an appropriate subject teacher. Independent Study in art and foreign language is also available.

Students “who should be succeeding, but are not” because they are “disconnected” for various reasons are identified by the superintendent and guidance counselor and placed in an alternative education program. Its instructor uses high-interest materials that teach content and are relevant to student experience. For some subjects, on-line electives are available to these students, with instruction supervised by a teacher in the field. Students also have the option of attending any

regular education classes if they feel they are able to handle them. Special education students may be among those selected for alternative education, and the teacher says appropriate accommodations are made for them.

We have no tracking. That's a wonderful thing here.

Inclusion is strongly supported, and a special education teacher or a licensed teaching assistant is part of most classrooms. A special education teacher describes her role as that of a “co-teacher,” letting the subject teacher take the lead in planning while she modifies, reinforces and builds upon “what is being taught so that my students fully understand the material.” She notes a lot of discussion and collaboration takes place between her and the subject teacher.

Scheduling has been adjusted to best meet academic needs. As discussed above, a hybrid block schedule was developed to adjust class length by subject teacher preference. English and social studies meet daily in a double block, completing each course in a half year. While one teacher says the blocked period makes it somewhat more difficult to get through material, another claims that it takes some pressure off students by completing some course requirements mid-year and not having to “take all their tests in June.” It also offers teachers smaller class sizes and an easier time keeping up with corrections. He also notes that the longer period forces “teachers to really turn away from lecture” and that it is “always positive to have activities.” Other scheduling adjustments help at-risk students and allow for more enrichment opportunities. These include structured study halls and the tenth period for mentoring, AIS, and tutoring. Other tenth-period offerings include classes ranging from modern, belly and ballroom dancing to fly fishing and wildlife painting. Students may also join the myriad of clubs available, including clubs that focus on agriculture, debate, community service, and recycling.

Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis and Use of Data

Pay attention; track results.

The Comprehensive District Plan completed in July of 2007 reveals one way the district uses data to identify student academic needs and establishes objectives to use as a basis for developing and putting interventions into place. In 1998, in response to new state graduation requirements, the district created a database of the performance on all New York State Assessments of students who graduated from South Kortright Central School for the prior ten years. This database was used to determine the percentage of students at risk of not meeting the new requirements. Performance on all Regents exams was correlated to student performance on state exams in the earlier grades:

Based on this analysis, several important facts became immediately evident. 1) More than a third of the students who graduated from South Kortright Central School during the prior ten years would not have graduated if they were required to meet the new graduation requirements. 2) Performance on the reading and writing . . . tests in fifth and sixth grades was strongly correlated with performance on all high school Regents exams and was the best predictor of success on these exams.

The report went on to conclude that developing stronger English language arts skills in the elementary grades would be a “very effective way to increase the likelihood that future students will be able to meet the new graduation requirements” and that “without some new intervention, many current students would not meet the new graduation requirements.”

The superintendent annually creates spreadsheets of the most recent results of testing and course and grade failures, which he presents to the board of education. A Professional Development Day is used to share this information with faculty for discussion and item analysis of Regents exams so they might assess their own instruction and adjust their curriculum accordingly.

Teachers agree that these data are helpful, but most also feel their own daily assessments within the classroom are more meaningful. These assessments may include observation as well as evaluation of oral and written assignments, both objective and subjective. One teacher “makes adjustments based on general impressions” and if he “has a class that seems to be struggling” he “will change the material.” Another collects homework every day to see if anyone is having difficulty. She also quizzes every five or six days, tests every two and a half weeks, and assigns a project with each chapter. Student progress is further monitored through student mentoring and structured study hall programs for extra help. Frequent discussions with one another, administration and support staff is also deemed important by teachers.

Another source of data is “nothing’s perfect” surveys, which are used to identify and address issues or problems. For example, these surveys have been filled out by students and teachers about the recently instituted tenth period. Results are to be shared in a faculty meeting for review and discussion as to what is working and what is not. Then smaller groups will be formed to try to solve particular issues.

Recognition, Intervention and Adjustments

The school honors student success in many ways, ranging from one-on-one praise to the more formal bestowing of pins, certificates, awards or public announcements. One feels a sense of school pride and accomplishment while walking through hallways lined with red, yellow and blue lockers cheerily complementing the artwork interspersed throughout. The walls of one corridor are filled with full-sized student murals; another showcases a variety of individual works of art -- with last year’s “art prize” framed and hung in its designated place of honor.

Administrators say that while “achievement is expected,” it also gets rewarded. Reward may come as an extra “pat on the back” to let students know they are doing well or as an in-class display of their work. Student items are also submitted to and published in *The Catskill Review* along with other area students’ work. A Student of the Month award is bestowed “not so much for academic excellence as for someone who works hard and is respectful.” These students, nominated by their teachers, get a certificate and can invite two friends to share in an ice cream and cake party in the guidance office. An end of the year Awards Assembly, supported by local benefactors, is designed so “everybody gets something” and they “spend a lot of time deciding who gets what.” One teacher deems his daughter’s “nice to newcomers” award as “one of the most valuable awards she got that year.” The School Community Organization also hands out pins and awards for various accomplishments. Then there is the more traditional annual National Honor Society induction, along with the publishing of a Superintendent’s List, and a High Honor and Honor Roll each marking period. Most years the school provides a special field trip for students who are on at least one of these rolls for at least three marking periods during the year.

Part of the secret is the tremendous teaching assistants who are so good at what they do. They are our unsung heroes.

Remediation is second to none. Our attempt to deal with students finding difficulty in achieving goals is a very strong point in our school.

In response to a too-high course failure rate and a district goal of reducing the number of failures, the district implemented after-school tutoring, structured study halls, and the tenth period. As a result, the numbers of individual course failures dropped from 107 to 59 over the five years from 2002-7, and the number of students failing classes was reduced from 51 to 34.

Teacher recommendations, 8th-grade test scores, Committee on Special Education meetings, and a review of individual students' grades, class work, and behavior patterns are reported as means of deciding who needs what interventions. Special education teachers and licensed teaching assistants are not only in the classroom, but also in the guided tutorial classes, to provide added support to anyone who needs or wants it. Students failing two regular classes or one blocked class are put on an academic ineligibility list and must stay after school every day for two hours of extra help if they wish to continue participating in extracurricular activities. The special education teacher also teaches a Math Applications (Consumer Ed) class to help students meet graduation requirements. Other interventions include placement of students in alternative education or BOCES tech classes, Job Corps, or GED programs or in allowing them to take summer school at an area school.

In a Nutshell

Keeping students involved, offering them diverse and multiple opportunities for success, honoring their success, and fostering “a sense of family” ... these are all elements reported to play an important role in fulfilling South Kortright Central School’s mission to “insure the best quality of life for the students and their community.” Administrators advise that a district needs to “look at the kids, personnel, community, culture . . . see what changes you can make to make it work.” They also feel it is important to “think small.” They suggest that even if dealing with a large district, classes can be kept small and personal interaction and a positive administrative presence can still take place. A strong support system for staff and students alike has also been key to this school’s success.

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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).