



Academy School: Case of a Vermont Improving School

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*Using the Evidence-Based Method to
Identify Adequate Spending Levels for Vermont Schools*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Academy School is located in Brattleboro, Vermont, which is in the southern part of the state, close to the borders of New Hampshire and Massachusetts. The school is the largest of three elementary schools in the Brattleboro Town School District and is also part of the Windham Southeast Supervisory Union. The school enrolls a student body that is socioeconomically diverse: in 2014-15, over half of the school's 386 students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Sixteen percent of students had special needs and five percent of students were English language learners. Over three-quarters of the students at Academy School were White, though the school also enrolled small percentages of students who were Asian American or Pacific Islander, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, and more than one race or ethnicity.

In recent years, Academy School has demonstrated noteworthy gains in student achievement. For instance, from 2009 to 2013, the percentage of Academy School students who scored at either the proficient or proficient with distinction levels on the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) increased by 19 points in reading, from 61 percent to 80 percent, and 15 points in mathematics, from 53 percent to 68 percent. Additionally, the percentage of students who scored at the proficient with distinction level increased by 22 points in reading, from 8 percent to 30 percent, and 13 points in mathematics, from 12 percent to 25 percent. These school wide gains in student achievement were mirrored or even surpassed for some subgroups of students. According to Academy School personnel, the school's accomplishments are "doable by any school," and school staff share the attitude that "to a significant degree, [school staff] have control over student outcomes."

This report describes the context in which these gains occurred. At Academy School, the following conditions permeate the school:

Strong building leadership. School staff consistently describe the principal as a strong leader who ensures that teachers have the resources they need to do their work and who holds teachers accountable for student performance. The principal encourages teachers to use curricular and instructional strategies that are supported by research or student outcome data, focus time on core subjects, and assume that all students can achieve to high levels.

Common curriculum. In recent years, educators at Academy School and throughout the Windham Southeast Supervisory Union have made changes in their curricular approach, especially in English language arts and mathematics. Specifically, Academy School educators adopted a common school-wide curriculum, with a phonics emphasis in English language arts and problem-solving focus in mathematics.

Consistent focus on student outcome data. Teachers at Academy School take student data seriously, and they have access to multiple resources that allow them to rely on student performance information as a key driver of curricular and instructional decisions. First, they have access to a wide range of assessments (and the resulting student data) because of the supervisory union's dedication to assessment. Second, they have access to real-time data management systems that allow them to review student information at any time. Third, they are

able to analyze student data and interpret the results – abilities they gain through professional development, practice, and support from a data coach.

Culture of responsibility for student outcomes. Administrators and teachers at Academy School assume that all students can achieve to high levels and that, in the words of one educator, “to a significant degree, [school staff] have control over student outcomes.” When student outcome data suggest that students are struggling to achieve to high standards, educators at Academy School seek to identify the problem and take steps to address it.

Collaboration among staff members. At Academy School, teachers are organized into grade-level teams, whose members have common planning time. Grade-level teams meet at least once per week, and teachers report that they often meet more frequently. During common planning time, these collaborative teams of teachers analyze student data to assess the effectiveness of instruction and to plan instructional strategies.

Use of time as a valuable resource. Staff at Academy School have deliberately scheduled their time such that they (a) focus on core instruction and (b) allow for teacher collaboration. Specifically, teachers at Academy School are required to spend significant time each day on instruction in English language arts and mathematics, and interventions for struggling students supplement rather than supplant these large blocks of time. Additionally, teachers collaborate in grade-level teams during the school day and in whole-school meetings regularly outside the school day.

Support from the supervisory union. Academy School teachers receive consistent support from the supervisory union. Much of this support comes from coaches, particularly a literacy coach who is able to devote full-time effort to the role and who will observe teachers and provide feedback on lessons and instruction and is often at the school at least once per week. The supervisory union also provides support for a common curriculum and allows access to multiple assessments.

INTRODUCTION

This report is one of five cases of improving schools that are part of a study of the cost of an adequate education in Vermont. The study is being conducted for the Vermont Legislature by Picus Odden & Associates and their partner consultants. The objective of the study is to identify a level of funding that is adequate for all schools to deploy strategies that give every student in Vermont an equal opportunity to achieve to Common Core college and career ready standards. This case describes how the improvements in student performance in the case school took place. The following sections of this report describe the school’s socio-demographic context, student performance levels, staff, goals, schedule, curriculum and instruction, assessments, interventions, professional development, and culture. The report draws upon information from two main sources: (a) review of documents provided by school officials or available online and (b) individual and focus group interviews with 19 members of the school and supervisory union staff (school administrators, instructional staff, and support staff) that occurred in October 2015.

SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CONTEXT

Academy School is located in Brattleboro, Vermont, which is in the southern part of the state, close to the borders of New Hampshire and Massachusetts. The school is the largest of three elementary schools in the Brattleboro Town School District and is also part of the Windham Southeast Supervisory Union (WSESU), which includes nine schools and a regional career center. According to school staff, the families that send their children to Academy School are economically diverse, and parents work in a range of occupations, from healthcare to the service sector. The school also has diversity in terms of family ancestry, and the school community includes a number of families in which grandparents, parents, or the students themselves were born in other countries. Students at the school live in homes with a variety of family structures; some students live at home with two parents, others live in homes with one parent, and others live in homes where their grandparents are the primary caregivers.

Information from the Vermont Agency of Education outlines that, in 2014-15, Academy School enrolled 386 students. The school has three class sections per grade. Table 1 provides an overview of the average number of students in each classroom by grade.

Table 1: Academy School average class sizes, 2014-15

Grade Level	Average Class Size
K (3 classes)	17.7
1 (3 classes)	18.7
2 (3 classes)	19.7
3 (3 classes)	16.3
4 (3 classes)	17.7
5 (3 classes)	18.7
6 (3 classes)	20.0
All grade average	18.4

Source: Vermont Agency of Education, Enrollment Report for Windham County: 2014-15, and personal communication with school staff.

Eighty-three percent of the students at Academy School were White in 2014-15, though the school also enrolled students who were Asian, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, and more than one race or ethnicity (Table 2). More than half of the students (61 percent) were eligible for free or reduced-price school lunch and 16 percent of students had special needs. Academy School is the elementary school in Brattleboro that provides services for English language learner (ELL) students; in 2014-15, five percent of the student body was ELL students. According to school staff, these ELL students’ families represent speakers of more than 10 different languages.

Table 2: Academy School student characteristics, 2014-15

Student Characteristics	Percentage of Student Population (%)
Race/ethnicity	
American Indian/Alaska Native	‡
Asian	5
Black/African American	2
Hispanic/Latino	4
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	‡
Two or more races	5
White	83
Eligible for free or reduced-price lunch	61
English language learners	5
Students with special needs	16

‡ Indicates that student subgroup had no members, that the number of members in the subgroup was too small to report, given student privacy considerations, or that data were not available for the school or at the time of posting the information.

Note: The percentage of students with special needs includes students with an IEP or a 504 plan. It *excludes* students who have an EST plan.

Source: Vermont Agency of Education, School Report for Academy School: 2013-14.

STUDENT PERFORMANCE

Academy School has demonstrated impressive improvement in student performance from 2009 to 2013.

In *reading* (Table 3), from 2009 to 2013, the percentage of Academy School students who were at either the proficient or the proficient with distinction levels on the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) exam increased by:

- 19 points for all students,
- 20 points for students who were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch,

- 6 points for English language learner (ELL) students,¹
- 32 points for students with special needs,
- 18 points for White students, and
- 30 points for African American or Black students.

Additionally, the percentage of students at the proficient with distinction level in reading increased by:

- 22 points for all students,
- 12 points for students who were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch,
- 12 points for ELL students,² and
- 23 points for White students.

¹ Because scores were not reportable for ELL students in 2009, this percentage point difference is from 2010 to 2013.

² Because scores were not reportable for ELL students in 2009, this percentage point difference is from 2010 to 2013.

Table 3: Percent of Academy School students who performed at the proficient or proficient with distinction levels on the NECAP grades 3-8 reading test, by student characteristics: 2009-2013

Performance Level	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
All students					
Percent proficient	53	52	53	56	50
Percent proficient with distinction	8	22	25	22	30
Total at proficient level or above	61	74	79	78	80
Students eligible for free or reduced-price meals					
Percent proficient	43	53	54	55	52
Percent proficient with distinction	6	14	16	16	18
Total at proficient level or above	50	67	69	71	70
ELL students					
Percent proficient	‡	64	57	53	57
Percent proficient with distinction	‡	9	0	7	21
Total at proficient level or above	‡	73	57	60	79
Students with special needs					
Percent proficient	13	38	40	62	45
Percent proficient with distinction	0	4	5	6	0
Total at proficient level or above	13	42	45	69	45
White students					
Percent proficient	54	52	53	57	49
Percent proficient with distinction	8	22	27	23	31
Total at proficient level or above	62	74	80	79	80
African American or Black students					
Percent proficient	41	36	50	40	69
Percent proficient with distinction	14	7	5	13	15
Total at proficient level or above	55	43	55	53	85

‡ Indicates that student subgroup had no members, that the number of members in the subgroup was too small to report, given student privacy considerations, or that data were not available for the school or at the time of posting the information.

NOTE: Totals are based on unrounded estimates. Proficiency results are not presented for Hispanic/Latino, Asian, American Indian/Alaskan Native, or Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students and students of two or more races due to small numbers of students who took the assessment.

Source: Vermont Agency of Education, All NECAP Data Files.

In *mathematics* (Table 4), from 2009 to 2013, the percentage of students who scored at the proficient or proficient with distinction categories increased by:

- 15 points for all students,
- 19 points for students who were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch,
- 15 points for students with special needs,
- 15 points for White students, and
- 21 points for African American or Black students.

Additionally, the percentage of students who scored at the proficient with distinction level in mathematics grew by:

- 13 points for all students,
- 13 points for students who were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch,
- 12 points for ELL students, and
- 13 points for White students.

Table 4: Percent of Academy School students who performed at the proficient or proficient with distinction levels on the NECAP grades 3-8 mathematics test, by student characteristics: 2009-2013

Performance Level	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
All students					
Percent proficient	42	54	48	44	43
Percent proficient with distinction	12	15	25	27	25
Total at proficient level or above	53	69	73	72	68
Students eligible for free or reduced-price meals					
Percent proficient	33	54	46	50	39
Percent proficient with distinction	7	9	20	17	20
Total at proficient level or above	40	63	66	67	59
ELL students					
Percent proficient	45	55	43	20	36
Percent proficient with distinction	9	18	14	40	21
Total at proficient level or above	55	73	57	60	57
Students with special needs					
Percent proficient	13	30	27	50	25
Percent proficient with distinction	0	0	8	5	3
Total at proficient level or above	13	30	35	55	28
White students					
Percent proficient	42	53	48	44	44
Percent proficient with distinction	11	15	26	27	24
Total at proficient level or above	53	68	74	72	68
African American or Black students					
Percent proficient	32	‡	50	60	62
Percent proficient with distinction	9	‡	5	13	0
Total at proficient level or above	41	‡	55	73	62

‡ Indicates that student subgroup had no members, that the number of members in the subgroup was too small to report, given student privacy considerations, or that data were not available for the school or at the time of posting the information.

NOTE: Totals are based on unrounded estimates. Proficiency results are not presented for Hispanic/Latino, Asian, American Indian/Alaskan Native, or Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students, and students of two or more races due to small numbers of students who took the assessment.

Source: Vermont Agency of Education, All NECAP Data Files.

The gains outlined above and displayed in Tables 3 and 4 suggest that the school was successful in not only increasing the percentages of students who moved from the proficient category to the proficient with distinction category but also increasing the percentages of students who moved from below proficiency to the proficient category.

According to Academy School personnel, the school's accomplishments are "doable by any school." The foundational principle that underlies change is the understanding that, "to a significant degree, [school staff] have control over student outcomes." This attitude – which is shared across the staff – drives the work of the school and leads to an environment where the faculty does not look for excuses for low performance but rather seeks to address failure directly.

SCHOOL STAFF

According to the Vermont Agency of Education School Report for 2014-15, the average teacher salary at Academy School was \$54,750, which was lower than the average teacher salary for the supervisory union (\$57,696) and the state of Vermont as a whole (\$56,387).

School staff report that teacher turnover at Academy School is low as of October 2015, the time of data collection. However, a group of teacher leaders explained that approximately nine years ago, after the current principal came to the school in 2006-07, the school went through a number of changes in terms of curriculum, instruction, decision-making strategies, and overall culture, and that staff turnover was higher during that time, in part due to retirements and to educators' decisions to move to other schools. Table 5 provides an overview of staffing at Academy School for the 2015-16 school year.

Academy School has one principal, one assistant principal, and two administrative assistants. The school has 21 classroom teacher positions which produce an average class size of 18.4. In addition, the school has almost five FTE electives teachers who offer instruction in enrichment, Spanish, physical education, music, vocal music, band, and art. The school has one library media specialist who sees students for an elective period. Four full-time teachers and one part-time teacher work as special educators, and the school has one ESOL teacher. Academy School has seven Tier 2 interventionists. Generally one interventionist works with each grade, but the school shifts resources as needed so that grades with higher numbers of struggling students have access to more support. Sixteen para-educators support the classroom teachers, special education teachers, and interventionists.

Academy School implements a service strategy for students with severe behavioral needs called Supportive Teams for Educational Progress (STEP). This approach integrates students into the general education setting and provides targeted assistance to help the transition. In addition to the full-time and part-time coordinators of this program, STEP has five para-educators and an intern from a nearby postsecondary institution.

Table 5: Staffing in Academy School, 2015-16

Category	FTE
Administration	
Principal	1.0
Assistant Principal	1.0
Clerical/Administrative Support	2.0
Main Program	
Core Teachers	21.0
Elective Teachers	4.94
Special Education Teachers	4.5
Special Education Intensive Support Program	1.5
ESOL Teacher	1.0
Library/Media Specialist	1.0
Interventionists	7.0
Aides	
Para-educators	16.0
Para-educators (Intensive Support Program)	5.0
Intensive Support Program Intern	1.0
Pupil Support	
Counselor	1.4
School-Based Clinician/Social Worker	1.0
Nurse	1.0
Nurse Assistant	0.5
Speech Language Pathologist	0.8
Communications Facilitator	1.0
Other Pupil Behavior Support Personnel	1.0
Custodians and Maintenance Staff	3.0

NOTE: Special education and English as a second language (ESOL) teachers are school-based employees of the supervisory union. The school-based clinician is an employee of an external health organization. Tier 2 interventionists work at a slightly reduced rate, such that each of the seven interventionists listed above is technically at a 0.973 FTE.

Source: Personal communication with school staff.

Several staff members support students’ wellbeing. The school has a full-time counselor as well as a part-time counselor and a school-based clinician who support students’ social-emotional health. Academy School also has a speech language pathologist (0.8 FTE), a full-time nurse, and a part-time nurse assistant.

Five teacher leaders (two for English language arts, two for mathematics, and one for data analysis) have extra responsibilities associated with professional development and curriculum

planning. However, these teachers carry full-time teaching loads at Academy School, so their responsibilities as leaders come in addition to their teaching responsibilities. Additional instructional coach support comes from the supervisory union, which employs a full-time literacy coach and a part-time math coach.³ Especially for issues related to English language arts, where the supervisory union coach is able to devote full-time attention to instructional support, teachers at Academy School frequently ask the coach to observe lessons, model instructional practices, and use research-based models in designing lessons for students.

GOALS AND SCHOOL ORGANIZATION

Goals

As is also noted in the report on Oak Grove Elementary School, the Windham Southeast Supervisory Union maintains an action plan with three main goals: (1) have safe and healthy schools; (2) improve student learning; and (3) increase educator, parent, and student leadership in the system. In terms of student learning, WSESU has a goal to “decrease [the] achievement gap by 10 points on the NECAP results” and another goal to “increase Special Education student participation in general education classrooms to 80 percent pK-12.”

Academy School’s action plan aligns with the WSESU plan and provides more targeted action items for Academy School. A school improvement team, which comprises a large faculty council that includes representatives from all grade levels and multiple content areas, creates and monitors progress on the school’s plan. This faculty council meets to discuss school goals, and members of the council help communicate these goals to the entire faculty. For the 2015-16 school year, action items on Academy School’s plan focus on:

- Ensuring that educators use results of diagnostic and other assessments to inform curriculum and instruction and to target services to students as needed
- Providing students with the tools they need to develop critical thinking skills
- Promoting healthy social-emotional development
- Cultivating relationships with parents and families, and
- Ensuring that educators receive appropriate, job-embedded professional development in the areas of data use, implementation of the multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) model, classroom content, and students’ social-emotional development.

Daily Schedule

For students, the school starts at 8:18 a.m. and ends at 2:50 p.m. School staff report that, during a period of change in the school several years ago, faculty members focused energy and attention on the topic of instructional time and made changes regarding what configuration of time would

³ As is also noted in the Oak Grove report, the level of instructional coach support from the supervisory union has decreased over time. When the supervisory union had American Reinvestment and Recovery Act funds, the central office had a full-time data coach, a full-time math coach, and a full-time literacy coach, in addition to mathematics and literacy curriculum coordinators. At the time of this report, the supervisory union has a part-time data coach, a part-time math coach, and a full-time literacy coach, in addition to a part-time mathematics curriculum coordinator and a full-time literacy curriculum coordinator.

advance student learning. Now, educators are more aware of how they use instructional time and protect time for core subjects. Specifically, each classroom is expected to spend 90 minutes of uninterrupted time on literacy and 70 minutes (60 uninterrupted minutes plus 10 additional minutes at some point during the day) on mathematics. Students have a lunch and recess period that varies across grades from about 55 to 60 minutes. Students have specials periods that also vary from approximately 30 to 45 minutes per day; they rotate through the electives so that they receive each elective one time per week. The remaining instructional time is used for other topics such as social studies and science. In addition to this daily schedule, the school sets time aside for school-wide gathering and celebration; once per week, Academy School holds an all-school assembly called All School Sing that lasts for approximately half an hour.

Teachers' contracted work days are seven hours and 30 minutes long. In addition to having a duty-free lunch, teachers have an average of 30 minutes of planning per day. Teachers' schedules are set such that each grade-level team has common planning time every day during this thirty-minute period. Teachers meet as a team at least once per week during the common planning time; some teachers report that they meet more frequently. During collaborative planning time, teachers co-plan, go over student data, assign students to interventions, make curricular decisions, and share materials.

CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAM

The Windham Southeast Supervisory Union attempts to provide guidance and support for its schools in terms of appropriate curriculum and instruction for students across the supervisory union, and it employs curriculum coordinators and instructional coaches to assist with school-level implementation of high-quality curriculum and instruction. Despite support for consistency in curriculum and instruction across the supervisory union, leaders in the central office are open to reasonable change that improves outcomes for students.⁴ In a number of cases, changes in curriculum and instruction have come from educators at Academy School, who have led efforts that have impacted teaching and learning not only at Academy School but also throughout the supervisory union.

Curriculum

Prior to the adoption of the Common Core State Standards, Vermont had state standards for multiple content areas, including English language arts, mathematics, social studies, health, science, and foreign language. Vermont has adopted the Common Core; consequently, the Common Core standards serve as the framework for curriculum in English language arts and mathematics. Additionally, Vermont has adopted the Next Generation Science Standards, which now provide a framework upon which science curriculum can be built. In general, curricula for

⁴ Supervisory union and school personnel note that, in the immediate wake of the transition to the Common Core, some degree of variation existed in mathematics curriculum. The purpose of this variation was to determine what mathematics curriculum would align well with the Common Core and work well for their students. The goal was that this period of variation would lead to a choice of a common curriculum that would eventually be implemented throughout the supervisory union. At the time of data collection, most educators in the school relied on Engage New York materials for mathematics.

other subjects, such as social studies, align with existing Vermont state standards. The following paragraphs detail how WSESU and Academy School implement these curricula.

Driven in part by efforts of educators at Academy School, WSESU has shifted its English language arts curriculum from a whole-language to a phonics-based approach, which educators believed would more effectively help students in the supervisory union learn to read. In most grades throughout the school, teachers rely on the Foundations curriculum; some teachers report that they supplement this text with materials from the Haggerty Phonemic Awareness curriculum. In grade 5 English language arts, teachers use novels and other grade-level books instead of textbooks.

In recent years, including those over which the school made student performance gains, the school used the Investigations mathematics curriculum, which is a program focused on problem solving. Amid the shift from Vermont state standards to the Common Core State Standards, teachers across grades have recently changed their mathematics curriculum from Investigations to Engage New York. Some teachers in the lower grades still use some Investigations materials, and teachers also report that they use supplementary materials from enVision math.

Academy School does not have set curricula for science or social studies. In science, grades 2, 4, and 5 use a curriculum created by National Geographic. Grade 3 teachers use a curriculum called Seeds of Science/Roots of Reading. In general, while the school does not have a standardized science curriculum, teachers report that they attempt to align their science curriculum with the Next Generation Science Standards. Teachers, working independently or in collaboration with their peers within Academy School or across the supervisory union, create social studies curriculum that aligns with Vermont's social studies standards.

Instruction

As noted above in the section on the school schedule, teachers spend 90 uninterrupted minutes on English language arts and 60 uninterrupted minutes on mathematics. Staff members at Academy School report using a variety of instructional strategies. One of the school's key instructional strategies that is particularly common for English language arts is a Reader's Workshop model, which includes a short whole-group lesson followed by small guided reading groups. A key instructional strategy for mathematics at Academy School is daily exit tickets, or short checks for understanding of the day's lesson. Exit tickets serve a dual purpose; not only are they a key instructional strategy, but also they are useful formative assessments.

Assessments

The Windham Southeast Supervisory Union emphasizes the use of data from multiple assessments to inform instruction.⁵ The supervisory union began to focus increased attention on data-based decision-making several years ago, when it used American Reinvestment and Recovery Act (ARRA) funds to hire a full-time data coach. While the supervisory union no

⁵ Oak Grove Elementary School, another school in the Windham Southeast Supervisory Union, is another improving school included in this series of reports. The information in this section that pertains to the supervisory union is repeated in that report.

longer has the resources to employ a full-time data coach, the groundwork laid by the data coach remains. Based on the work of the data coach and other central office personnel, educators across the supervisory union now have access to a variety of resources, including a data management system (GoogleDocs) that allows for real-time, shared access to student performance data. The supervisory union also maintains an Assessment Toolkit document that outlines the supervisory union's approach to assessment, provides an overview of the suite of assessments that it expects schools within the supervisory union to utilize, and details the timelines and other requirements for assessment of students within the supervisory union.

According to the Assessment Toolkit, elementary grade students take a variety of assessments throughout the academic year, including:

- Multiple types of AIMSWeb literacy assessments,
- the Quick Phonics Screener,
- the Spelling Inventory,
- Phonological Awareness Test,
- Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System,
- Running records of student reading,
- End of unit tests in literacy,
- Multiple types of AIMSWeb mathematics assessments,
- Interview-based mathematics assessments (including the Primary Number and Operations Assessment, Assessing Math Concepts; teacher-developed Concrete-Representational-Abstract assessments; the Mathematics Reasoning Inventory; and the Numeracy Project Assessment),
- End of unit tests in mathematics, and
- Summative state assessments (formerly the NECAP; now the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) test).

Academy School teachers use many assessments from the district's toolkit to learn about their students' performance. In addition to state summative assessment (formerly NECAP, now the SBAC), some of the assessments that Academy School staff routinely use are teacher-administered AIMSWeb, Fountas and Pinell Benchmark Assessments, the Primary Numbers and Operations Assessment, and the Spelling Inventory. For unit tests, teachers of lower grades primarily use Foundations unit assessments, but staff members report that teacher teams sometimes make their own unit assessments as well. As noted above in the section on instructional strategies, teachers often use daily exit tickets, which provide formative assessment information.

Reliance on data-based decision-making has evolved over time at Academy School. While data use is common now, it was not common at the time that the current principal came to the school. When the current principal first arrived at the school, he committed to data use and chose a book about using data to promote school improvement for the first leadership team book study. According to school personnel, this book study, coupled with multiple professional development sessions aimed at proper use of student data, were influential in helping shift the culture toward one of reliance on student performance information to drive decisions about curriculum and instruction.

Educators at Academy School take assessment use very seriously, and staff members report that they are proficient at analyzing student data and interpreting results of student performance analyses. Staff members have school-level support for data use from a data coach,⁶ because the person who holds the part-time data coach position at the supervisory union also works part-time at Academy School as a teacher. Analyses of student data by teachers are regular and ongoing. Academy School teachers meet with central office officials three times per year to review students' AIMSWeb data. Teachers at the school also hold monthly data meetings, where they monitor students' progress toward proficiency. Grade-level teams, which meet at least once per week, rely on information about student outcomes to make decisions about lessons, instruction, and student grouping. According to staff at Academy School, real-time access to GoogleDoc spreadsheets allows for continuous monitoring of student outcomes, and Academy School teachers review these data both within and outside these aforementioned formal times set aside for data review.

Academic Interventions

Struggling students have multiple opportunities for extra support at Academy School. For instance, Academy School offers an intervention period called skills block three times per week. Students who are struggling in English language arts or mathematics skills are able to access Tier 2 interventions during this time, while students who are not struggling are able to access enrichment material, which they receive from some of the school's elective teachers. The instructional format for skills block varies; teachers employ a mixture of pull-out, push-in, and team-teaching during this time.

Like all schools in Vermont, Academy School puts educational support team (EST) plans into place for students who consistently struggle to perform, regardless of whether or not these students have an IEP or a 504 plan. These plans outline the particular resources that individual students will need to ensure that they succeed in the academic environment.

Students with special needs receive pull-out instruction from special educators during skills block (and during non-intervention time on days that the classroom does not hold skills block). Special educators also push-in during class time and provide additional support within the general education classroom setting. Co-teaching (one special educator and one general educator teaching the whole class) is not common, but teachers at Academy School have begun to implement this model in limited instances.

In order to maximize the extent to which the ESOL teacher is able to meet with and provide services for ELL students, the school attempts to schedule ELL students into one classroom per grade, when possible. The ESOL teacher is able to meet with ELL students during the skills block period and during class time on the days of the week when they do not have skills block. The ESOL teacher uses a National Geographic Reach for Reading curriculum and also works with the grade 5 teachers so that students can work on reading the books that they are reading in English language arts class.

⁶ As noted in the section on school staffing, Academy School does not have any non-teaching instructional coaches; instead, the school's teacher leaders also carry teaching loads.

In addition to supports within the school day and year, Academy School students have access to additional supports. For instance, teachers at Academy School report that the school has an afterschool tutoring program. Additionally, teachers at Academy School tutor students at risk of regressing over the summer for a total of approximately 15 hours over the course of the summer break. The district also holds a summer school that is open to participation from Academy School students; while teachers may recommend summer school to students and their families, attendance at summer school is voluntary.

Behavioral and Social-Emotional Interventions

According to school staff, adults across the school hold similar behavioral expectations for students. These expectations are encapsulated in the school's "STAR" guidelines: Sit up, Track the speaker, Ask and answer questions, and Respect those around you. School staff report that students are familiar with these expectations and hear consistent language regarding their responsibilities to uphold these standards. When students struggle with behavior, they are able to access social-emotional resources offered by the school. For instance, the school has school counselors and a social worker who can help students work through behavior and other challenges. Additionally, like schools throughout the state of Vermont, Academy School creates educational support team (EST) plans for students who struggle academically or behaviorally.

Academy School also created and implements an approach to addressing the behavioral needs of students with severe behavior problems. This approach, called Supportive Teams for Educational Progress (STEP), supports students who have an IEP, a 504 plan, or an EST plan and serves approximately 30 students each year. The school began to implement STEP in 2009 as a program for students with autism spectrum disorder, but the program has evolved to serve a wider range of students. The purpose of STEP is to integrate high-needs students (especially those whose needs manifest themselves in severe, challenging behaviors) into the general education program. STEP personnel encourage positive behaviors through a range of supports, including (a) consulting with classroom teachers to provide strategies for handling disruptive behavior within the classroom setting, (b) working on positive behavior support plans for students, (c) providing support throughout the day for students, (d) performing crisis management when necessary, and (e) supervising the five para-educators who carry out students' plans. They also provide academic support, such as consulting with special education staff, helping general education teachers differentiate lesson plans, and monitoring students' academic progress.

Professional Development

Professional development at Academy School is a mixture of school-based, supervisory-union-sponsored, and individually-chosen professional development.

Multiple forms of ongoing professional development occur at the school level. First, as noted above in the section on assessments, Academy School staff meet monthly to go over student data. Second, as noted above in the section on the school schedule, teachers are organized into grade-level teams. These teams have common planning time every day, and teams meet at least

once per week to engage in collaborative planning. Third, educators at Academy School hold faculty meetings after school every Tuesday. Teacher leaders meet with the principal every two weeks to set the agenda for the faculty meeting, and these meetings focus on substantive issues. In addition to working on plans for the implementation of the MTSS model at Academy School, staff use faculty meetings to focus on a variety of curricular and instructional issues. Starting in the 2015-16 school year, the staff has decided to dedicate a particular week each month to specific activities. The first meeting of the month focuses on student behavior, the second meeting focuses on vertical team meetings, the third meeting is dedicated to teacher-led professional development, and the last meeting of the month is reserved for whole-staff professional development in one content area.

The supervisory union also provides professional development for Academy School teachers. For instance, central office literacy and mathematics coaches hold grade-level meetings twice each year. These meetings provide an opportunity for cross-school collaboration and planning. Additionally, supervisory union personnel offer content-focused professional development across four days each year. Recent content-focused professional development sessions, for example, have included Letrs and Keys to Literacy trainings, among others.

Finally, some resources exist for individual teachers to engage in professional development of their choosing. Teachers have access to funds that equal three credits at the University of Vermont; they can use this money for tuition or they can apply it to other opportunities, such as professional conferences.

School Culture

Staff members consistently attribute their school's success to the strong leadership of the principal. According to school staff, Academy School underwent a major shift in school culture when the current principal came to the school in 2006-07. At that time, the principal and a core group of teachers worked together to transform the school. This core group made changes to all aspects of the school, from the use of physical space (e.g., they moved classrooms so that teams of teachers could work near each other), to the vision of the school (e.g., adults used to make excuses for lack of student success, whereas teachers now assume there is no excuse for poor performance, and adults throughout the school take responsibility for student performance results), to the organization of students for instruction (e.g., they shifted from a mixture of single- and multi-age classrooms to only single-age classrooms), to curriculum (e.g., they adopted a common curriculum). For all changes, the principal and teachers made decisions based not on personal preference but rather after analysis of extant education research and outcomes for students in their school. They also base decisions on the premise that adults are responsible for student achievement and that all students are capable of achieving to high levels.

Faculty at Academy School describe an “empowering” atmosphere, where teachers have a voice in the operation of the school and students have a voice in their learning. Teachers describe their approach to work as one of problem-solving. They explain that they are not resistant to change and are willing to try different approaches in order to solve a problem. They regularly observe each other's practice, share curricular and instructional materials and lesson plans, and work together to strengthen instruction across the school. They also explain that educators believe that

“all kids are all of ours,” or that all adults share the responsibility for achievement for every student, regardless of whether or not particular students are members of their classroom.

Finally, staff describe Academy School as a “happy place” filled with adults who actively support and encourage students and each other. Teachers and other instructional staff are not the only staff members who take on the role of creating a positive culture; according to teachers, the school secretaries are “amazing.” They help other staff members coordinate games, activities, auctions, and other events for the school community and for the wider community (including parents and families). School staff report that these types of activities are important to the school culture and school success because “it makes all the difference to play together.”

SUMMARY

This report describes the teaching and learning context at Academy School. At this school, the following conditions are evident:

Strong building leadership. School staff consistently describe the principal as a strong leader who ensures that teachers have the resources they need to do their work and who holds teachers accountable for student performance. The principal encourages teachers to use curricular and instructional strategies that are supported by research or student outcome data, focus time on core subjects, and assume that all students can achieve to high levels.

Common curriculum. In recent years, educators at Academy School and throughout the Windham Southeast Supervisory Union have made changes in their curricular approach, especially in English language arts and mathematics. Specifically, Academy School educators adopted a common school-wide curriculum, with a phonics emphasis in English language arts and problem-solving focus in mathematics.

Consistent focus on student outcome data. Teachers at Academy School take student data seriously, and they have access to multiple resources that allow them to rely on student performance information as a key driver of curricular and instructional decisions. First, they have access to a wide range of assessments (and the resulting student data) because of the supervisory union’s dedication to assessment. Second, they have access to real-time data management systems that allow them to review student information at any time. Third, they are able to analyze student data and interpret the results – abilities they gain through professional development, practice, and support from a data coach.

Culture of responsibility for student outcomes. Administrators and teachers at Academy School assume that all students can achieve to high levels and that, in the words of one educator, “to a significant degree, [school staff] have control over student outcomes.” When student outcome data suggest that students are struggling to achieve to high standards, educators at Academy School seek to identify the problem and take steps to address it.

Collaboration among staff members. At Academy School, teachers are organized into grade-level teams, whose members have common planning time. Grade-level teams meet at least once per week, and teachers report that they often meet more frequently. During common planning

time, these collaborative teams of teachers analyze student data to assess the effectiveness of instruction and to plan instructional strategies.

Use of time as a valuable resource. Staff at Academy School have deliberately scheduled their time such that they (a) focus on core instruction and (b) allow for teacher collaboration. Specifically, teachers at Academy School are required to spend significant time each day on instruction in English language arts and mathematics, and interventions for struggling students supplement rather than supplant these large blocks of time. Additionally, teachers collaborate in grade-level teams during the school day and in whole-school meetings regularly outside the school day.

Support from the supervisory union. Academy School teachers receive consistent support from the supervisory union. Much of this support comes from coaches, particularly a literacy coach who is able to devote full-time effort to the role and who will observe teachers and provide feedback on lessons and instruction. The supervisory union also provides support for a common curriculum and allows access to multiple assessments.

ALIGNMENT WITH THE EVIDENCE-BASED MODEL

Resource use at Academy School aligns with the Evidence-Based (EB) model in some ways and does not align in other ways. The following paragraphs outline some key similarities and differences.

Staffing

The number of core teachers at Academy School is slightly lower than recommended by the EB model. That is, average class sizes range from 16.3 students to 20 students, and the overall average class size is 18.4, which is just above than the EB model recommendation of 17 students per class in a K-6 school. Additionally, the number of instructional coaches is lower than recommended (which, given the size of the school, would be almost two positions); in fact, the school has no non-teaching instructional coaches, which it would have the resources to provide under the EB model. Conversely, in a number of ways, staffing levels are higher at Academy School than the EB model recommends. For instance, the numbers of Tier 2 interventionists, para-educators/supervisory aides, nurses, and administration (the assistant principal) are higher than EB model recommendations.

Focus on Core Subject Curriculum and Instruction

Several years ago, Academy School educators decided to dedicate substantial instructional time to English language arts and mathematics, and they adopted rigorous curriculum to use during this time. Now, teachers at Academy School use common phonics based curriculum for English language arts and problem solving focused curriculum for mathematics, and they share a number of instructional strategies, such as guided reading groups and mathematics exit tickets. They dedicate substantial time each day to Tier 1 instruction in English language arts and mathematics and provide multiple opportunities each week for Tier 2 instruction for struggling students. Each of these is supported by the EB model.

Collaborative Teacher Teams and Data-based Decision-making

As the EB model recommends, collaborative teacher teams at Academy School frequently analyze student data and use those data to inform lesson planning, student grouping, and other curricular and instructional decisions. The supervisory union offers a wide variety of assessments that produce timely student assessment data, which teachers at Academy School can and do use to improve student outcomes. While EB recommendations suggest that comprehensive assessment systems can streamline assessment practices and reduce the need to purchase or administer multiple testing packages, it is noteworthy that teachers within the Windham Southeast Supervisory Union in general and at Academy School in particular have access to regular and real-time student performance information.

Teacher Collaboration

Teachers at Academy School are organized into grade-level teams, and they have the opportunity to work together to create and evaluate lessons, group students, and share materials at least once per week and sometimes more frequently. While the school aligns with the EB model in grouping teachers into teams and providing common planning time, the model recommends meeting more often than once per week. Still, teachers at Academy School do meet regularly after school, and these meetings focus on substantive issues of curriculum, instruction, or professional development.

Strong Leadership

The school principal and teacher leaders have made conscious efforts to improve teaching and learning at Academy School, and they continue to support strong instructional practices throughout the school.

In sum, there are a number of ways in which the staffing numbers at Academy School do not match the EB model, with Academy School numbers both above and below recommended levels in some instances. Despite differences between EB recommendations and staffing levels at Academy School, many elements of the EB model – such as adopting new curriculum and instruction, committing to data-based decision-making, focusing class time more efficiently, providing interventions for struggling students, creating professional learning communities, and having strong leadership that supports instruction – are present at Academy School, and while certain parts of practice at Academy School may diverge slightly from the EB model recommendations, the general spirit of the elements exists.