



**Colchester High School:
Case of a Vermont Improving School**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Colchester High School is located in Colchester, Vermont, just north of Burlington, and is the only high school in the Colchester School District. School personnel explain that the school draws its 727 students from a variety of backgrounds: some students live in high-income homes, other students live in low-income homes, and others live on the islands of Lake Champlain. In 2014-15, almost all of the students (95 percent) were White. Twenty percent of students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch and 23 percent of students had special needs (i.e., had an IEP or a 504 plan).

Between 2009 and 2013, Colchester High School demonstrated gains in student performance in reading and mathematics. Specifically, in reading, from 2009 to 2013, the percentage of students at Colchester High who performed at the proficient or proficient with distinction levels on the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) exam increased by 8 points, from 74 percent to 82 percent. Additionally, the percentage of Colchester High students who scored in the proficient with distinction category increased by 19 points, from 39 percent to 58 percent. In mathematics, from 2009 to 2013, the percentage of Colchester High School students who scored at the proficient or proficient with distinction levels on the NECAP exam increased by 12 points, from 41 percent to 53 percent.

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

A shared language and vision. Educators at Colchester High School share a common vision for the school; they consistently articulate that they want the school to improve each year and they want to provide differentiated instruction to students throughout the school. They use a common language to express their goals and often refer to their efforts to promote “rigor, relevance, and relationships.”

Strong leadership and collaboration. Staff members report that the school has strong leadership and a hard-working, collaborative staff. They note that they have multiple opportunities for collaboration both within and outside the school day. Within the school day, educators work with each other to review student data, create and revise curriculum, and plan instruction. Outside of the school day, educators use faculty meetings, department meetings, and in-service days to work with each other in collaborative learning groups (CLGs) and ensure that new initiatives align with Colchester High School norms and goals.

Focus on core subjects and use of a common curriculum. At Colchester High School, teachers value rigor and report that they continually review core curriculum to ensure that it aligns with standards. They create common curriculum units and lesson plans, design common assignments, and administer common assessments. Educators at Colchester High also provide multiple opportunities for students to master core content, both within the classroom environment – where they prioritize giving students feedback for continual improvement – and outside the classroom environment – during daily intervention time that is required for all students.

Dedication to differentiated instruction. Throughout the school, educators are committed to differentiated instruction practices and create lessons with the aim of allowing students with different interest and readiness levels to access the curriculum and achieve to high standards.

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 socio-demographic context of the school, the school’s 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 59 members of the school staff (school administrators, instructional staff, and support staff) that occurred in November 2015.

SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CONTEXT

Colchester High School is located in Colchester, Vermont, and is the only high school in the Colchester School District. School personnel explain that the school draws students from a variety of backgrounds: some students live in high-income homes on the shores of Lake Champlain, whereas other students live in low-income homes, including homes at a nearby trailer community. Some students come from “the islands” of Lake Champlain (Grand Isle, North Hero, South Hero, Isle La Motte, and Alburg), since those areas do not have their own high schools. Parents of Colchester High students work in many areas including healthcare, manufacturing, retail, construction, and agriculture. Many parents of students at Colchester High work not in Colchester itself but rather in the surrounding communities of Burlington, South Burlington, Milton, Essex, or even in Montpelier.

In 2014-15, Colchester High School enrolled 727 students, which is a decrease from a decade earlier when the school enrolled almost 800 students. Given that the school employs 36 FTE core teachers (see more information below in the section on school staff), the average core class size across grades is 20.2 students (Table 1).

Table 1: Colchester High School students and core class sizes, 2014-15

| Grade Level | Enrollment |
|---------------------------------------|------------|
| 9 | 165 |
| 10 | 203 |
| 11 | 183 |
| 12 | 171 |
| Adults without diploma | 5 |
| Average core class size across grades | 20.2 |

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

In 2014-15, almost all of the students (95 percent) were White, and thus only small percentages of students were Asian, Black or African American, or Hispanic or Latino (1, 2, and 2 percent, respectively; Table 2). One-fifth (20 percent) of students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch and 23 percent of students had special needs (i.e., had IEP or 504 plans).

Table 2. Colchester High School student characteristics, 2014-15

| Student Characteristics | Percentage of Student Population |
|--|----------------------------------|
| Race/ethnicity | |
| American Indian/Alaska Native | ‡ |
| Asian | 1 |
| Black/African American | 2 |
| Hispanic/Latino | 2 |
| Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander | ‡ |
| Two or more races | ‡ |
| White | 95 |
| Eligible for free or reduced-price lunch | 20 |
| English language learners | ‡ |
| Students with special needs | 23 |

‡ 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 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 Colchester High School: 2014-15.

STUDENT PERFORMANCE

Between 2009 and 2013, Colchester High School demonstrated gains in student performance in reading and mathematics; gains were especially noteworthy with respect to the percentage of students who fell in the proficient with distinction category in reading.

Specifically, in *reading* (Table 3), from 2009 to 2013, the percentage of students at Colchester High who performed at the proficient or proficient with distinction levels on the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) exam increased by 8 points for all students. More notably, the percentage of Colchester High students who achieved to the proficient with distinction level increased by 19 points for all students and 11 points for students who were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

The gains outlined above and displayed in Table 3 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.

In *mathematics* (Table 4), from 2009 to 2013, the percentage of Colchester High School students who scored at the proficient or proficient with distinction levels on the NECAP exam increased by 12 points for all students and 5 points for students who were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

Table 3: Percent of Colchester High School Students who performed at the proficient or proficient with distinction levels on the NECAP grade 11 reading test, by student characteristics: 2009-2013

| Performance Level | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 |
|---|------|------|------|------|------|
| All students | | | | | |
| Percent proficient | 35 | 39 | 37 | 35 | 24 |
| Percent proficient with distinction | 39 | 46 | 50 | 50 | 58 |
| Total at proficient level or above | 74 | 85 | 87 | 85 | 82 |
| | | | | | |
| Students eligible for free or reduced-price meals | | | | | |
| Percent proficient | 41 | 42 | 27 | 42 | 16 |
| Percent proficient with distinction | 18 | 24 | 27 | 33 | 29 |
| Total at proficient level or above | 59 | 66 | 55 | 74 | 45 |
| | | | | | |
| Students with special needs | | | | | |
| Percent proficient | 21 | 20 | 37 | 25 | 5 |
| Percent proficient with distinction | 4 | 7 | 5 | 0 | 5 |
| Total at proficient level or above | 25 | 27 | 42 | 25 | 9 |

‡ 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: Proficiency results are not presented for English language learners, African American/Black, Hispanic/Latino, Asian, American Indian/Alaskan Native, or Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students due to small numbers of students who took the assessment.

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

Table 4: Percent of Colchester High School Students who performed at the proficient or proficient with distinction levels on the NECAP grade 11 mathematics test, by student characteristics: 2009-2013

| Performance Level | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 |
|--|------|------|------|------|------|
| All students | | | | | |
| Percent proficient | 37 | 47 | 44 | 48 | 47 |
| Percent proficient with distinction | 4 | 7 | 8 | 7 | 6 |
| Total at proficient level or above | 41 | 55 | 51 | 55 | 53 |
| | | | | | |
| Students eligible for free or reduced-price meals | | | | | |
| Percent proficient | 21 | 28 | 27 | 29 | 26 |
| Percent proficient with distinction | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 |
| Total at proficient level or above | 21 | 28 | 27 | 31 | 26 |
| | | | | | |
| Students with special needs | | | | | |
| Percent proficient | 4 | 6 | 5 | 8 | 5 |
| Percent proficient with distinction | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Total at proficient level or above | 4 | 6 | 5 | 8 | 5 |

‡ 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: Proficiency results are not presented for English language learners, African American/Black, Hispanic/Latino, Asian, American Indian/Alaskan Native, or Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students due to small numbers of students who took the assessment.

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

SCHOOL STAFF

According to the Vermont Agency of Education School Report for 2014-15, the average teacher salary at Colchester High was \$64,188, which was lower than the average teacher salary for the district (\$65,740) but was higher than the average teacher salary for the state of Vermont as a whole (\$56,387).

According to school personnel, teacher turnover at Colchester High School varies year-to-year; some years, the staff will experience very little turnover, and other years, the school may need to replace several educators. School staff members perceive that if teachers leave the school, they do so for personal reasons, not because they are dissatisfied with the school or its environment. Table 5 provides an overview of staff at Colchester High School during the 2015-16 school year.

As shown in Table 5, Colchester High School has a principal, two assistant principals, an athletic director, a director of student support services (who oversees special education and 504 services, the guidance department, and the alternative education program), and a 504 coordinator. Administrative assistance support includes a bookkeeper, an attendance secretary, and four

administrative assistants. Technical support personnel, who are employed by the district, provide on-site technical assistance to educators at Colchester High School.

Colchester High School had 36 FTE positions for instruction in the core subjects of English language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, and world languages, for an average core class size across grades of 20.2 students, very close to the Vermont EB model secondary school core class size allocations. The school has 9.3 FTE elective teachers in the areas of business, health, physical education, driver's education, and fine arts (which includes visual arts and music). Elective teachers are 25.8 percent of core teachers at Colchester High School, which is less than the EB model provides. One library/media specialist works with teachers and students throughout the school. Colchester High School has a part-time instructional coach who works with teachers across disciplines, and five teachers have part-time responsibilities (0.2 FTE each) as team leaders, wherein they meet with school administrators as members of a leadership team.

Several special educators work at Colchester High School in different capacities. Two special educators work with the Crossroads program, which serves students with very high needs, and four special educators work in the general education setting. One special educator works with students who receive out-of-school placements at a technical education center or for employment/internship experiences, and another special educator works with special education students who receive out-of-district placements.

Colchester High School includes the Colchester Alternative Program (CAP), which serves students who face challenges such as those associated with behavior, discipline, or substance abuse issues. This program has its own 3.8 FTE teachers – including a humanities teacher, a math teacher, a science teacher, and a special educator – and additional support staff discussed in the paragraphs below.

Many para-educators and other staffers provide assistance throughout the school.¹ The special education program employs 21.6 para-educators, who work in large group settings, small group settings, and, in a small number of cases, with individual students. The school has one para-educator in the library and another part-time staffer who works with the Math Lab program. Two para-educators work with CAP.

Several personnel work to support students in non-academic ways. Colchester High School has three school counselors, a nurse, and a nurse assistant. The school has 2.8 FTE positions for social workers; one social worker serves CAP and is compensated through the school budget and the remaining FTEs work in the general school setting, are compensated by an outside agency, and are only able to work with students who qualify for Medicaid. Colchester has one behavior intervention specialist and a part-time speech language pathologist. The school staff also includes an athletic trainer, whose salary is paid by an external agency.

¹ While Colchester High School employs several para-educators who work in a variety of functions, the number of para-educator positions is lower in 2015-16 than it had been in previous years. School staff explain that the school reduced the number of para-educator positions in order to increase the number of special educator positions.

Table 5. Staffing in Colchester High School, 2015-16

| Category | FTE |
|---------------------------------------|------|
| Administration | |
| Principal | 1.0 |
| Assistant Principal | 2.0 |
| Athletic Director | 1.0 |
| Director of Student Support Services | 1.0 |
| 504 Coordinator | 1.0 |
| Administrative Support | 6.0 |
| Technical Support* | 5.8 |
| Main Program | |
| Core Teachers | 36.0 |
| Elective Teachers | 9.3 |
| Library/media specialist | 1.0 |
| Instructional Coaches | 0.4 |
| Team Leaders | 1.0 |
| Special Education High Needs | 2.0 |
| Special Education | 4.0 |
| Other Special Education | 2.0 |
| ESOL Teachers | 0.4 |
| Alternative Program Teachers | 3.8 |
| Aides | |
| Special Education Paraprofessionals | 21.6 |
| Math Lab Staffer | 0.4 |
| Library Paraprofessional | 1.0 |
| Alternative Program Paraprofessionals | 2.0 |
| Pupil Support | |
| School Counselors | 3.0 |
| Social Workers* | 2.8 |
| Nurse/Nurse Assistant | 1.8 |
| Behavior Intervention Specialist | 1.0 |
| Speech Language Pathologist | 0.5 |
| Athletic Trainer* | 0.8 |

* Technical support personnel are employed by the district. The athletic trainer is employed by a rehabilitation center. One social worker is employed by the school while the remaining 1.8 social worker FTEs are employed an outside agency and can only work with students who qualify for Medicaid.

Source: Personal communication with school staff.

GOALS AND SCHOOL ORGANIZATION

Goals

In general, in terms of state summative assessment results, leaders at Colchester High School hope that students will make gains each year so that they outperform their peers from the previous year.² The most commonly referenced school goals, however, are broader than assessment results, and school staff share a common language regarding these broader school goals. According to school staff,

R x R x R = LCWRS,

where the *Rs* stand for rigor, relevance, and relationships, and where *LCWRS* stands for life, college, work ready students. According to school staff, educators at Colchester High School strive to implement rigorous curriculum and instruction, to make learning relevant to students' lives, and to form strong, positive relationships with students. School staff also explain that the school wants to implement the three *Rs* in order to help students achieve six essential expectations, which are to (1) read, (2) write, (3) think, (4) act, (5) communicate, and (6) learn.

School staff endeavor to promote the six essential expectations – through consistent application of the three *Rs* – in an environment marked by differentiated instruction (DI). In differentiated classrooms, teachers “engage students in instruction through different approaches to learning, by appealing to a range of interests, and by using varied rates of instruction along with varied degrees of complexity and differing support systems” (Tomlinson 2014; pp. 3-4). The goal of such differentiation in instruction is to allow students at different levels of readiness and with different interests to achieve to high standards.³ Teachers at Colchester High embrace this perspective; according to the 2014-15 Colchester High School Faculty Handbook, “The curriculum is differentiated for students depending on their readiness, interests, and learning style” (p. 7). Throughout the school, educators stress commitment to DI and explain that their goal is to ensure that each individual student is able to access the rigorous curriculum.

School staff members consistently report that educators throughout the school work to make sure that new initiatives fit the Colchester environment and align with the goals of promoting the three *Rs*, prioritizing the six essential expectations, and aligning with the practices of differentiated instruction. The school's leadership team, which comprises the principal, both of the school's assistant principals, the director of student support services, the instructional coach, the 504 coordinator, and teacher team leaders (one lead teacher from the elective, humanities, science/health, math, special education, and guidance teams), meets every Wednesday during the school day and creates school-level plans for curriculum, instruction, and assessment that align with Colchester priorities. The rest of the faculty, too, engages in collaborative planning (which

² School personnel note that this goal is hard to measure when the state assessment changes, as it did during the shift from the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) to the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC).

³ Tomlinson, C. A. (2014). *The differentiated classroom: Responding to the needs of all learners*. (2nd ed.). Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

is discussed in more detail in the section on professional development) regarding how to ensure that new initiatives align with established Colchester goals and norms.

Daily Schedule

The student day at Colchester High School begins at 7:45 am and ends at 2:20 pm. The school uses a block schedule with 5-module A and B days; each day has four long blocks of approximately 80 minutes of instruction (with one of the long blocks including just under half an hour for lunch). Each day also has a short, thirty-minute block that the school uses for an intervention period called Academic Acceleration, Access, and Advising Time (AT), which is discussed in more detail below in the section on academic interventions.

Over the course of a set of A and B days, teachers instruct for five of eight long modules and have planning for 2 of eight long modules.⁴ One long module is for a duty, which could include supervising in the lunch room or in a study hall, working in the Math Lab, or working in the Writer's Workshop. Therefore, teachers have instructional or duty responsibilities for 6 of 8 blocks and have planning for 2 of 8 blocks.

CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAM

Curriculum

Students at Colchester High School are organized into the Green House for grades 9 and 10 and into the Blue House for grades 11 and 12. The Green House includes structured curriculum and heterogeneous grouping, whereas students have more flexibility and curricular choice in the Blue House. Across their time in both the Green and Blue Houses, Colchester High School students must obtain 24.5 credits in order to graduate. These credits must include:

- 4 credits of English language arts,
- 3 credits of mathematics,
- 3.5 credits of science,
- 3.5 credits of social studies,
- 1 credit of fine arts,
- 1.5 credits of physical education, and
- 0.5 credits of health.

At Colchester High School, English language arts and social studies are together in one humanities department. In the Green House, students take required, team-taught humanities courses that enroll approximately 40 students and cover topics in both English language arts and social studies. The grade 9 humanities course is called Thinkers and Revolutionaries, and the grade 10 humanities course is called the American Experience. Once students enter the Blue House, they are able to choose from a wider variety of humanities courses, including offerings in literature, psychology, philosophy, geography, international politics, modern media, journalism,

⁴ More detailed discussion of individual and collaborative planning activities is located in the section on professional development.

and Advanced Placement (AP) English language arts, social studies, and history courses. Students must take credits in essential writings, American history, and civics to graduate.

Teachers in the mathematics department offer a range of courses including algebra I, geometry, algebra II, statistics, precalculus, calculus, astronomy math, consumer math, and college algebra. The school used to offer trigonometry as a separate class, but this year, teachers have integrated trigonometry material into other courses. Some sections of mathematics courses follow the AP curriculum. Students must take credits in algebra I and geometry to graduate, and educators at Colchester High School strongly encourage students to take algebra II.

Teachers in the science department offer courses in earth systems, biology, chemistry, physics, a small number of semester-long science electives, and AP science courses. In order to graduate, students must take earth systems and biology (which they take in the Green House as freshmen and sophomores, respectively), as well as credits in chemistry and physical science.

Students take courses in required and elective subject areas from Colchester High School educators in the humanities, mathematics, science, fine arts, world languages, and other areas (such as driver's education). In addition to the aforementioned courses offered by Colchester High School teachers, students at the school are able to enroll in the Massachusetts-based Virtual High School. Colchester High School has an arrangement with the company whereby a Colchester High School educator teaches a virtual course for use on the platform and, in exchange, 50 seats in a variety of courses are open for Colchester student enrollment. This arrangement allows students at the school an opportunity to take electives courses without requiring the school to hire additional electives teachers.

With the exception of Advanced Placement courses, all curriculum at Colchester High School is teacher-created. In collaborative groups, teachers examine standards (in prior years, standards were state-created, but now these standards include Common Core standards for English language arts and mathematics, Next Generation Science Standards for science, and state standards for other disciplines including social studies), create curriculum units and lesson plans that align with the standards, and design common homework assignments and assessments. Teachers report that they continually review and revise lesson plans and assignments in order to increase curricular rigor, continue the use of effective lessons, and discontinue the use of ineffective lessons.⁵

Instruction

Differentiated instruction is the dominant pedagogical theme of the building. Colchester High educators consistently express a commitment to differentiated instruction; comments from teachers indicate that their lesson plans and rubrics are designed to allow students at different readiness levels with different interests to access the curriculum. Teachers integrate technology

⁵ Throughout the school, educators are working to create curricular documents called “know, understand, and do” (KUD) documents. The purpose of the KUDs is to outline the enduring understandings and essential questions embedded within each lesson and create a repository of high-quality lessons. Staff are also incorporating learning targets into the KUDs, an effort to lay the foundation for proficiency-based grading and personalized learning plans (PLPs) required under Vermont’s Act 77 of 2013: Flexible Pathways Initiative.

into lessons in order to facilitate instruction; each teacher has a tablet, each classroom has a cart of laptops, and some teachers allow students to use smart phones for instructional purposes. Educators say that they value the opportunity to give differentiated feedback to students. Educators have access to Google classroom software, which allows for teacher feedback, and they also have access to time – either class time or time during AT, which occurs daily – to provide individualized feedback and instruction to students.

Assessments

Educators at Colchester High School routinely rely on student performance information to make decisions about curriculum and instruction. In fact, staff members note that use of student data is necessary to inform differentiated instruction practices, because educators need to assess student progress in order to make adjustments to lessons. This student performance information comes from a variety of sources.

First, Colchester High school staff use results from summative state assessments to give them a high-level picture of student progress at their school. As noted above in the section on school goals, school leaders want to see continuous improvement in the school's state scores and articulate to students that they want each class of students to outperform their peers from the previous year. School staff report that they rely on state assessment data to assess how their school compares to other schools in Vermont and in the nation.

Second, educators use the results of unit tests and other classroom assessments to assess at a more fine-grained level the extent to which students have gained an understanding of course content. Teachers use collaborative planning time to review student course assessment data to learn how to tailor lessons to address students' areas of understanding and misunderstanding. They also collaborate to determine whether the assessments themselves accurately capture students' understanding of content and are properly aligned to standards as well as how to assign consistent and fair grades to student work.

Third, educators regularly use information from formative assessments to track student progress at a micro level, to modify daily lessons based on student readiness, and to determine student grouping practices for each class session. Teachers at Colchester High school use a variety of formative assessments, which can vary based on content area. For instance, mathematics and science teachers report that they regularly rely on concept testing, whereby teachers have short sets of questions that are aligned with segments of course content that they can administer to students throughout the course. Humanities teachers do not use concept testing; rather, they design assignments that allow for multiple rounds of teacher feedback and student revision.

Finally, educators have recently revised assignment, grading, and report card policies to align with their use of both formative as well as summative assessments. The school has defined three distinct categories of assignments: academic achievement assessments (AAAs), practice assessments (PAs), and completion assignments (CAs). While AAAs are summative in nature, both PAs and CAs are formative. Teachers must use all three types of assessments in their courses, and they are required to base the majority of each course grade on student performance on AAAs. Additionally, beginning in the 2015-16 school year, educators at Colchester High

School are required to include not only traditional academic information on report cards but also information on students' learning dispositions (self-regulation, persistence, organization, collaboration, and commitment). The purpose of including assessment of learning dispositions on report cards is to provide students and their parents clear information about student progress in these areas without masking it in an overall academic grade.

Academic Interventions

Educators at Colchester High School provide multiple opportunities for students to receive extra academic support. The foundation of this effort is through the implementation of the Academic Acceleration, Access, and Advising Time (AT) program, but students at Colchester High School have access to other supports as well.

Every student at Colchester High School is required to participate in AT, and students have a dedicated, 30-minute AT period every day. Each Monday, students use the AT period to participate in "homebase," where homebase teachers work with groups of approximately 11 to 15 students and help them identify areas in which they need extra support.⁶ On Monday, based on their understanding of their progress in each course as well as guidance from their homebase teachers, students "book" sessions for Tuesday through Friday. Teachers can "pre-book" students if they know that particular students are struggling in one of their classes. Students attend AT periods outside of their homebase rooms on Tuesday through Friday and use that time to get extra support in areas that they are struggling.

While AT is one ongoing source of academic support, Colchester High students have access to a variety of additional supports. For instance, many students have a study hall period in their schedule, which they can use to receive additional support. The school runs a Writer's Workshop, which is staffed by teachers (as noted above in the section on the school schedule), and a Math Lab, which is staffed by both teachers and a part-time math expert.⁷ Students who are struggling in mathematics can also enroll in strategic algebra or geometry courses that they take during the same semester that they take the traditional algebra or geometry course. Additionally, Colchester High School also has a before-school homework club for help in any subject that is staffed by a para-educator.

Educators at Colchester High School, like educators throughout the state of Vermont, can also put educational support team (EST) plans into place in order to create formal plans for struggling students, regardless of whether or not the students qualify for special education services or have an IEP. These plans could include a variety of supports, including supports within the school day or before or after school, and remain in place for as long as needed.

Social-Emotional and Behavioral Interventions

As noted above in the section on school staffing, Colchester High School has a number of staff members who provide social-emotional and behavioral assistance to students, including school

⁶ With the introduction of PLPs under Act 77, homebase teachers now work to create and implement students' PLPs.

⁷ According to school staff, an individual with a Ph.D. in mathematics comes to the school twice a week to work in the Math Lab.

counselors, social workers, and a behavior intervention specialist. These staff members serve students in the general education population as well as in the alternative program, so students who face mild or intermittent challenges and students who face severe or ongoing challenges can receive support.

Additionally, if students consistently struggle with social-emotional or behavior challenges, educators at Colchester High School can create ESTs for them, because ESTs can be put into place to address behavioral issues as well as academic issues.

Professional Development

School staff members describe an approach to professional development that is coherent and relevant to the context at Colchester High School. According to school staff, the school administration in general, aided by the school's professional development committee, plan experiences that teachers perceive to (a) advance their professional learning, (b) help them make decisions or plans that directly impact their classrooms, and (c) advance their goals of aligning curriculum to standards or increasing student test scores. In the words of one staff member, "we don't check the box" for professional development but rather "build the box that fits Colchester."

According to school staff, though teachers do sometimes participate in district-wide professional development opportunities, such experiences are rare, and most work occurs at Colchester High School and is targeted toward specific Colchester High School initiatives. Professional development occurs during faculty meetings, department meetings, and in-service days. In recent years, professional development emphases have included grading and assessment policies as well as proficiency-based learning.

After school every other Thursday, educators meet for a faculty meeting. The focus of these meetings is to work collectively on school-wide initiatives, and school staff report that these meetings are serious professional development opportunities. Approximately six to seven times per semester during these meetings, teachers work with their collaborative learning groups (CLGs). CLGs⁸ typically contain four to five teachers, though the number of educators per CLG can vary based on the focus of the CLG. The configurations of CLGs change each semester, and, depending on the focus of the CLG, the groups might be departmental or inter-departmental. The school's leadership team determines each semester's focus for CLGs.

Every other Monday, teachers meet in department meetings. While some department meetings may be used for CLG work, most department meetings are a time for teachers to go over student data, revise curriculum, create common lesson plans and assignments, and make assessments.

During in-service days, the whole faculty meets. While staff sometimes participate in a district-wide event, it is more common that Colchester High faculty meet by themselves. Generally, in-service days are opportunities for the whole staff to engage in higher-level discussions of the same topics of CLG work. In other words, in-service days provide an opportunity to engage in philosophical discussions of what is best for Colchester High School and analyze research on

⁸ Colchester High School formerly called these groups collaborative working groups (CWGs) but has shifted to the use of the term CLGs.

these topics, whereas CLG meetings allow teachers to create concrete plans for implementing desired initiatives.

While formal professional development opportunities occur at faculty meetings, department meetings, and in-service days, teachers often collaborate with each other during the school day. The school does not have a standardized approach to common planning time for teachers, but staff members report that educators value collaborative planning and that such planning occurs frequently in a variety of forms. For instance, some teachers – especially those who co-teach courses in the Green House courses – have structured common planning time and are able to meet every other day to co-create lesson plans. Other teachers – such as those who teach different sections of the same course – can ask administrators to schedule their planning periods at the same time so that they are able to discuss curriculum, instruction, and assessments throughout the year. Teachers report that when they request common planning time with their colleagues, administrators do everything they can to accommodate that request. Additionally, teachers meet with each other before and after school and in the hallways in order to work with each other. School staff report that teachers value the opportunity to collaborate and co-plan with each other and will attempt to create times for collaboration – either by requesting formal common planning time or by making time within or outside of the school day to work with colleagues.

School Culture

School staff report the school struggles each year to pass a budget because the town’s voters regularly reject proposed budgets. Despite these challenges, school staff say that the building has strong leadership and a capable, hard-working faculty. School personnel attribute school success to this combination of talented and hard-working administrators and teachers, who share a vision for the school and consistently engage in research- and data-based discussions regarding the best ways to promote that vision. They also describe a working environment that is marked by trust and collaboration between administrators and teachers and among the faculty.

School staff also describe a student-centered culture at Colchester High School. Several members of the staff argued that the driving question behind decisions at the school is what would be best for the students. Staff try to build relationships with students and want to cultivate a culture of “mutual respect” between adults and students. According to teachers at Colchester High, the culture of respect extends beyond teacher-student relationships, and teachers say that students support and respect each other.

SUMMARY

The previous sections of this report outline several characteristics that are central to the teaching and learning context at Colchester High School. These characteristics include:

A shared language and vision. Educators at Colchester High School share a common vision for the school; they consistently articulate that they want the school to improve each year and they want to provide differentiated instruction to students throughout the school. They use a common language to express their goals and often refer to their efforts to promote “rigor, relevance, and relationships.”

Strong leadership and collaboration. Staff members report that the school has strong leadership and a hard-working staff. They note that they have multiple opportunities for collaboration both within and outside the school day. Within the school day, educators work with each other to review student data, create and revise curriculum, and plan instruction. Outside of the school day, educators use faculty meetings, department meetings, and in-service days to work with each other in collaborative learning groups (CLGs) and ensure that new initiatives align with Colchester High School norms and goals.

Focus on core subjects. At Colchester High School, teachers value rigor and report that they continually review core curriculum to ensure that it aligns with standards. They create common curriculum, design common assignments, and administer common assessments. Educators at Colchester High also provide multiple opportunities for students to master core content, both within the classroom environment – where they prioritize giving students feedback for continual improvement – and outside the classroom environment – during daily intervention time that is required for all students.

Dedication to differentiated instruction. Throughout the school, educators are committed to differentiated instruction practices and create lessons with the aim of allowing students with different interest and readiness levels to access the curriculum and achieve to high standards.

ALIGNMENT WITH THE EVIDENCE-BASED MODEL

Colchester High School aligns with the Evidence-Based (EB) model in many ways and diverges from the model in others. The following paragraphs outline key similarities and differences between practices at Colchester High School and the resource recommendations in the EB model.

Staffing

For most teaching staff, numbers at Colchester High School are in line with the resources that would be provided by the EB model. For instance, the EB model provides resources for 20 students in core classes, and the average core class size at Colchester High School is 20.2 students. Numbers of Colchester High library media specialists, library aides, counselors, and nurses are also the same as or similar to recommendations in the EB model. In other instances, staff numbers at Colchester High School are lower than what would be provided by the EB model. For instance, the EB model would provide resources for elective teacher staff numbers that are 33 percent of core teachers, whereas Colchester High's elective teachers are 26 percent of core teachers. Additionally, Colchester High School currently has 0.4 instructional coaches and no tutors, compared to the approximately 3.5 coaches and 2 tutors that the EB model would provide. Finally, in some ways, staff numbers at Colchester High School are higher than EB model resources. Specifically, the numbers of administrators, administrative assistants, and para-educators are much higher at Colchester High School than would be resourced by the EB model.

Focus on Core Curriculum

Educators at Colchester High School are very focused on core curriculum. On numerous occasions, staff members explained that they value rigor in curriculum and that they continuously review curriculum to ensure that it aligns with standards (notably, now, with the Common Core standards and the Next Generation Science Standards). The school requires that students take a substantial number of credits in core courses – 4 credits in English language arts, 3 credits in mathematics, 3.5 credits in science, and 3.5 credits in social studies.⁹ Educators provide instruction in core subjects in a structured way for students in the Green House and allow for more freedom and choice for students in the Blue House, but students in all grades are expected to pursue an education in the core curriculum.

Interventions for Struggling Students

Educators at Colchester High School want to ensure that all students perform to standards and that each individual student is challenged to excel. To that end, the school requires that every student at Colchester High School participate in AT, which provides a daily opportunity for students to receive academic support. Students receive guidance about what support seek out during AT from their “homebase” teacher, and teachers of any subject initiate an intervention by “pre-booking” a student to spend AT time in their classrooms. Additionally, Colchester High School operates both a Writer’s Workshop and a Math Lab, where students can receive additional support in English language arts and mathematics.

Focus on Student Data

Administrators and teachers at Colchester High School value the information provided by student assessment data and report that they require this information in order to pursue their goals of differentiated instruction. Educators look at state summative assessment data, unit tests, and daily formative assessment information to measure student progress, and they revise curricular and instructional plans based on this information.

Collaboration

Colchester High School staff report that their faculty meetings, department meetings, and in-service days are times of genuine collaboration on matters of substance. Teachers at Colchester High School also report that they value collaboration and that they frequently collaborate with their peers to create standards-aligned curriculum, to make lesson plans and assessments, and to discuss instructional practices. Some teachers meet every other day during common planning time, and teachers describe that they make time whenever they can to meet with their peers. Collaborative planning time, however, is not consistently built into the school schedule, and some teachers who want to have common planning time with colleagues need to request that time from administrators (requests that, according to teachers, are nearly always granted). While the Colchester High School emphasis on collaboration matches the EB model, the EB model provides resources for formal, scheduled collaborative meeting times three times per week; if

⁹ Colchester High School does not require students to take world language credits, but the school has world language teachers and this report includes those teachers in the counts of core teachers.

Colchester High School provided formal, protected time for collaboration, it would align more closely with the EB model.

Leadership

The EB model calls for “dense leadership,” where strong administrators empower educators throughout the school to engage in high-quality curricular and instructional practices. Staff at Colchester High School report that building leaders are consistently engaged in working toward school improvement and have a coherent vision for the school. They also report that the school has a hard-working staff that shares that vision.

In sum, in a few critical instances, resources for staff to support the core instructional program – specifically instructional coaches and certificated tutors – are lower at Colchester High School than would be provided by the EB model. In many ways, however, Colchester High School aligns with the EB model in many ways, especially with respect to its focus on core curriculum, provision of interventions for struggling students, educators’ reliance on student progress information to make decisions about curriculum and instruction, use of collaboration, and evidence of dense leadership.