

# Martin Van Buren High School

## FINAL REPORT



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# Introduction

## About This Report

This final report is the result of an external school curriculum audit (ESCA) of Martin Van Buren High School conducted by Learning Point Associates, an affiliate of American Institutes for Research. This audit was conducted in response to the school being identified as in need of improvement under the New York State Education Department (NYSED) differentiated accountability plan, pursuant to the accountability requirements of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as reauthorized by the No Child Left Behind Act. The utilized ESCA process was developed for and carried out under the auspices of the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) Office of School Development, within the Division of Portfolio Planning.

## About Martin Van Buren High School

Located in Queens Village, Martin Van Buren High School (Q435) is a high school with 2,817 students in Grades 9–12. The school population comprises 59 percent Black, 15 percent Hispanic, 2 percent White, and 23 percent Asian students. The student body includes 8 percent English language learners and 10 percent special education students. Boys make up 53.72 percent of the student population; 46.28 percent are girls. The average attendance rate for the 2009–10 school year was 85 percent. Approximately 42 percent of the student population is eligible for free lunch, and 6 percent of students are eligible for reduced-price lunch.

Martin Van Buren High School (MVBHS) is unique in that it remains a large, comprehensive high school in an ever-changing environment featuring the emergence of small, specialized high schools throughout New York City. With nearly 3,000 students and more than 200 staff members inhabiting the massive campus in Queens, the school's size and diversity are one source of many of its strengths and some of the issues it faces. MVBHS has the infrastructure to serve its students through a variety of curricular options, extracurricular activities, support resources, and specialized programs unthinkable in a smaller school.

With this size come certain challenges, however. A student population this large presents a massive level of diversity in achievement/ability levels, demographics, and special needs markers. In addition, programming and scheduling students and staff in order to foster the supportive interpersonal relationships essential for school success proves difficult due to the sheer number of moving pieces. MVBHS has taken proactive steps to address this. In the past school year, the “house” model employed for incoming freshman was expanded for all grade levels. The school is in the process of working to ensure that teachers serving different student groups no longer have to move across the building to do so. The school functions in two shifts between 7:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. to accommodate as many students as possible in as efficient a manner as possible. The school also has a fully functioning safety and security system, partnering with the Office of Youth Development. Additional challenges involve engaging parents and families of students to partner with the school in pursuit of academic success for all students.

## Audit Process at Martin Van Buren High School

The ESCA approach utilized at the high school level examines six topic areas: student engagement, academic interventions and supports, support for incoming students, classroom instruction, professional development, and courses and extracurricular activities. Data were collected at the school level through teacher surveys, administrator interviews, classroom observations, and an analysis of documents submitted by MVBHS. From these data, Learning Point Associates prepared a series of reports for the school's use.

These reports were presented to the school at a co-interpretation<sup>SM</sup> meeting on May 19, 2011. During this meeting, 19 stakeholders from the MVBHS community read the reports. Through a facilitated and collaborative group process, they identified individual findings, then developed and prioritized key findings that emerged from information in the reports.

The remainder of this report presents the key findings that emerged from the co-interpretation process and the actionable recommendations that Learning Point Associates developed in response. Please note that there is not necessarily a one-to-one connection between key findings and recommendations; rather, the key findings are considered as a group, and the recommended strategies are those that we believe are most likely to have the greatest positive impact on student performance at MVBHS.

# Key Findings

## Critical Key Findings

After considerable thought and discussion, co-interpretation participants determined a set of key findings. These key findings are detailed in this section.

### **CRITICAL KEY FINDING 1:**

**Student tardiness is a major disruptor.**

This key finding was the top finding identified by the MVBHS co-interpretation team. It is supported by evidence from the observation report and interview data. Observation data identified tardiness as the greatest disruptor to classroom instruction, and interview subjects identified it as an impediment to student success, requiring significant school resources to address.

### **CRITICAL KEY FINDING 2:**

**Instructional time is lost due to classroom switches, requiring set-up time for lessons, displays, technology, etc.**

This key finding is supported by data from the observation report. Wasted time and lost productivity were noted in 21 percent of observed classrooms. Observation notes captured several examples of instructional time lost to teachers performing necessary classroom set-up, delayed because the teacher was required to navigate crowded hallways during passing period to get from the previous class's location to the current location.

### **CRITICAL KEY FINDING 3:**

**Of the 76 classrooms observed, 46 were rated in the low or mid-range for student engagement. Fewer students in the classes were on task than off task.**

Data from the observation report support this key finding. More than half of the 76 observation cycles featured student engagement in the low or mid-range, with the majority falling into the mid-range, indicating that students were not engaged on a consistent basis across classrooms or lessons. Observed classrooms were characterized by a mix of active and passive engagement, with the majority of students only passively participating and paying attention throughout the observation periods. In these classrooms, some students participated actively, while others acted off-task, engaged in social conversations, and in some cases spread off-task behavior to their fellow students. Passively engaged students sat quietly, possibly even taking notes or reading along, but they did not otherwise participate or seem interested in the lesson.

## Additional Key Findings

Additional key findings were identified by co-interpretation participants but were not prioritized by the group for action planning. However, the auditors found these key findings worthy of consideration in developing recommendations.

### **ADDITIONAL KEY FINDING 1:**

The amount of collaboration among teachers at MVBHS varies.

Teacher survey data indicate mixed perceptions among MVBHS staff regarding how much collaboration occurs and in what forms.

### **ADDITIONAL KEY FINDING 2:**

MVBHS has both a schoolwide inquiry team and content area inquiry teams that meet weekly to share resources, best practices, and more.

This key finding, supported by both interview and document review data, speaks to the inquiry teams' role in fostering collaboration among teachers and between teachers and administrators.

### **ADDITIONAL KEY FINDING 3:**

The school does not offer vocational services and programs for regular education students who do not go to college.

Interviews and data show no evidence of course offerings based in vocational or career preparation or programs for development of career readiness skills. During the co-interpretation meeting, MVBHS staff clarified that while career readiness programs exist for special education students, they are not available to all students.

### **ADDITIONAL KEY FINDING 4:**

Negative climate was observed in some classrooms with off-task and disrespectful behavior as the major disruptor.

Learning Point Associates observers noted negative climate as a disruptor in 13 percent of observed classrooms. In support of this, observers noted passive engagement, inappropriate language, and lack of respect between teachers and students.

# Recommendations

## Overview of Recommendations

The team of co-interpretation participants from MVBHS developed a large number of key findings during the co-interpretation retreat at the school in May 2011. The team identified several key findings that pointed to issues for improvement at the school, positive key findings, and several key findings on which staff perceptions were mixed. While the co-interpretation team reached consensus to prioritize three key findings for recommendations, four additional key findings directly relate to the critical key findings and provide contextual support to the recommendations for improvement.

Across the three critical key findings and four additional key findings, a theme emerged that fuels the content of the recommendations that follow in this report: optimizing the school environment to engage students and allow teachers to focus on quality instruction.

## THE THREE RECOMMENDATIONS

With these issues in mind, Learning Point Associates developed these three recommendations:

1. Implement school-, family-, and community-focused approaches to reduce truancy and increase student engagement, improve scholastic behavior, and promote academic success.
2. Continue reorganization efforts at MVBHS to a) maintain progress with the expansion of the house model outside the Ninth Grade House, b) restructure staff schedules to mitigate and/or eliminate loss of instructional time due to travel between classrooms during passing period, and c) build a stronger sense of community to aid teaching and learning.
3. Initiate a schoolwide process for increasing student engagement and creating a sustainable and supportive learning environment. The aim is to improve student attendance, enhance participation, reduce boredom, end negative behaviors and the associated classroom management issues, and increase student achievement in academic and social skills.

Each recommendation provides a review of research, online resources for additional information, specific actions that the school may wish to take during its implementation process, and examples of real-life schools that have successfully implemented strategies. All works cited, as well as suggestions for further reading, appear in the References section at the end of this report.

Please note that the order in which these recommendations are presented does not reflect a ranking or prioritization of the recommendations.

## Recommendation 1: Addressing Tardiness and Attendance

**Implement school-, family-, and community-focused approaches to reduce truancy and increase student engagement, improve scholastic behavior, and promote academic success.**

Part of the in-day tardiness and truancy issue at MVBHS relates to the school's size and number of students; adopting characteristics of small learning communities can address this logistical issue. Global tardiness and truancy also can be addressed, as demonstrated below, through efforts to increase student engagement in school; this issue is addressed in both Recommendations 2 and 3. Unfortunately, urban issues such as traffic and delays in public transportation will create issues of tardiness and truancy that the school cannot change, but the other strategies suggested below can help mitigate the impact of those factors outside the school's control. That being said, this issue is large, pervasive, and challenging, and it is important to balance the desire for long-term, large-scale cultural change with the need for smaller, incremental improvements that address the broader problem and generate momentum.

### LINK TO RESEARCH

Truancy has been identified as one of the 10 major problems in U.S. schools (Rohrman, 1993). In New York City's public school system, 99,635 students, approximately 10 percent of the entire population, were absent on any given day during the 2009–10 academic year.

The consequences of truancy are serious and numerous. Truancy, whether for a full school day or isolated to individual class periods during the day, is often one of the first and best indicators of academic failure, suspension, and expulsion (Trujillo, 2006). Students with the highest truancy rates have the lowest academic achievement rates, and because truants are the youth most likely to drop out of school, they have high dropout rates, as well (Dynarski & Gleason, 1999). Furthermore, truant youths often are absent from school for such a long time that it is difficult, if not impossible, for them to catch up. "This leads to further disengagement from school, from teachers and ultimately can lead to serious antisocial behavior like juvenile delinquency" (Gonzales, Richards, & Harmacek, 2002). Truancy has been linked to serious delinquent activity in youth and to significant negative behavior and characteristics in adults, such as substance abuse, gang activity, and involvement in criminal activities (Bell, Rosen, & Dynlacht, 1994; Dryfoos, 1990; Garry, 1996; Huizinga, Loeber, & Thornberry, 1995; Rohrman, 1993). These studies provide convincing evidence that educators and researchers need to take seriously the issue of student absenteeism and the need to improve attendance (Trujillo, 2006). After all, research indicates that students with better attendance score higher on achievement tests (Lamdin, 1996; Myers, 2000) and that schools with better rates of student attendance tend to have higher passing rates on standardized achievement tests (Ehrenberg, Ehrenberg, Rees, & Ehrenberg, 1991).

Improving student attendance at school requires a holistic approach that addresses school and classroom factors, as well as factors outside of school. Several school characteristics and classroom practices are predictive of student attendance rates. Student perceptions of the classroom or teacher as chaotic, uncaring, or boring were associated with student absenteeism and truancy (Duckworth & de Jung, 1989; Roderick et al., 1997). By contrast, attendance was better, even in high-poverty schools, if there were quality teachers, courses, and extracurricular offerings (Eskenazi, Eddins, & Beam, 2003). Schools and teachers, however, cannot solve attendance problems alone.

### QUICK LINKS: Online Sources for More Information

Reports and Publications  
From the National Center  
for School Engagement  
(Reports)

[http://www.  
schoolengagement.org/  
index.cfm/Reports](http://www.schoolengagement.org/index.cfm/Reports)

Truancy Publications From  
the Office of Juvenile Justice  
and Delinquency Prevention  
(Publications)

[http://www.ojjdp.gov/  
search/SearchResults.asp?ti  
=11&si=32&kw=&p=topic&  
strItem=&strSingleItem=Pub  
lications&PreviousPage=sear  
chResults](http://www.ojjdp.gov/search/SearchResults.asp?ti=11&si=32&kw=&p=topic&strItem=&strSingleItem=Publications&PreviousPage=searchResults)

*What Research Says About  
Family-School-Community  
Partnerships* (Research  
Review)

[http://www.  
schoolengagement.org/  
TruancyPreventionRegistry/  
Admin/Resources/  
Resources/WhatResearch  
SaysAboutFamily-School-  
CommunityPartnerships.pdf](http://www.schoolengagement.org/TruancyPreventionRegistry/Admin/Resources/Resources/WhatResearchSaysAboutFamily-School-CommunityPartnerships.pdf)

Educators have a responsibility to help families and communities become involved in reducing student absenteeism. Studies show that when schools develop programs of school, family, and community partnerships, they have higher levels of parent involvement (Desimone, Finn-Stevenson, & Henrich, 2000; Epstein, 2001; Sheldon, 2003b; Sheldon & Van Voorhis, 2004); higher percentages of students pass standardized achievement tests (Sheldon, 2003a); and schools take fewer disciplinary actions with students (Sheldon & Epstein, 2002). There is, then, good reason to believe that the development of partnership programs can decrease absenteeism.

## IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

Implementing initiatives to address truancy and tardiness is a daunting task, and the strategies presented in this recommendation, while shown effective through research and practice, are large in scale and aimed at long-term change to the school culture. In considering the strategies and practices to address this issue, it is important to understand that real change does not happen immediately and requires sustained focus. In light of this, MVBHS staff should seek a tiered approach to any of the research-based practices, implementation considerations, and examples from the field.

This tiered approach should start with simple, smaller scale activities that can generate “quick wins” for the school. The purpose behind this initial pursuit of quick wins is multifaceted. First, quick wins are still wins, regardless of their size. In addition, quick wins, partnered with the school’s best efforts to publicize the positive changes, can build community buy-in and enthusiasm toward greater efforts and changes down the line. Furthermore, large-scale, long-term change requires significant, sustained momentum; starting that process with quick wins initiates that momentum. The school should continue to identify opportunities for quick wins to maintain and/or inject momentum throughout the course of bigger changes that require more time and sustained attention.

### **1. Involve parents/guardians and family members.**

Involving parents or guardians and family members in truancy prevention and intervention is critical. There is a large body of research demonstrating the positive outcomes associated with increased parent or guardian involvement in school activities, including improved academic achievement and reduced likelihood of dropout. Involving parents or guardians in truancy programming is more than simply inviting their attendance at a school meeting. True participation means that parents or guardians are sought after for their advice, experience, and expertise in the community, as clients of our public system of care, and in their children’s lives. This means engaging parents/guardians as a natural course of events, not just when things are not going well (National Center for School Engagement [NCSE], 2005).

According to the NCSE, to be meaningfully engaged, parents must have access to information and be empowered to act on it. Parents must be able to work with school staff to promote student achievement, close the achievement gap, and reduce the dropout rate. Therefore, parents also must be involved in the decision making at their school.

Meaningful parent involvement should meet all of the following National Standards for Parent or Family Involvement Programs (developed by the National PTA through the National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education, based on the six types of parent involvement identified by Joyce Epstein from the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University):

- **Communicating:** Communication between home and school is regular, two-way, and meaningful.
- **Parenting:** Parenting skills are promoted and supported.
- **Student learning:** Parents play an integral role in assisting student learning.
- **Volunteering:** Parents are welcome in the school, and their support and assistance are sought.
- **School decision making and advocacy:** Parents are full partners in the decisions that affect children and families.
- **Collaboration with the community:** Community resources are used to strengthen schools, families, and student learning (Epstein, 2001).

**Potential Quick Win:** Implement a system in which teachers call parents/guardians of students who have missed more than two days in a given week, and “houses” collect teacher logs of calls home. Include monitoring of these logs with existing attendance data review, and allow teachers to use some of their dedicated planning, supervision, and/or professional learning time to place these calls.

## **2. Collaborate with the community.**

It is important to identify and use community resources and services to strengthen schools, families, and student learning and development. Although students’ school-community link is the least supported and publicized component of the school-family-community partnership model (Jordon, Orozco, & Averett, 2001), research indicates that the quality of those connections influences children’s school learning (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001). Effective partnerships are based on understanding the cultural, socioeconomic, health, social, and recreational needs and interests of each school’s families. Efforts to that end include family literacy programs, health services, English as a second language programs, and vocational training (Espinosa, 1995). In addition, according to the National Center for School Engagement (2007), there is a need for schools to form partnerships with local businesses and law enforcement in order to limit the areas where students can congregate while they are away from school during the day and to have truant youth returned to school.

**Potential Quick Win:** Request that local businesses and/or community spaces post signs promoting school attendance.

## **3. Take a comprehensive approach.**

Effective programs simultaneously focus on prevention and intervention. As described by the National Center for School Engagement (2007), many factors contribute to truant behavior: Youth fail to attend school due to personal, academic, school climate, and

family-related issues. A truancy program may be called upon to help a family obtain counseling, to advocate for a family to receive entitlement benefits such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), to negotiate a new school schedule, to figure out transportation solutions, and to perform other more traditional social work activities such as mental health evaluation and counseling services. An effective truancy plan will address these issues; school staff will be prepared to respond to the first unexcused absence of an elementary student and not give up on the 100th absence of the habitually truant adolescent.

**Potential Quick Wins:** Integrate data reviewed by the school's attendance team with data reviewed within the houses and departments, and triangulate this data with other academic data. Allow flexible scheduling and attendance arrangements for students taking a portion of their coursework in online, asynchronous environments or through partner schools and colleges.

#### **4. Use incentives and sanctions.**

Meaningful sanctions for truant behavior and meaningful incentives for school attendance are key components of promising and model truancy programs. Sanctions, traditionally used to respond to truancy, frequently mirror the punitive steps taken against other undesirable behaviors: detention, suspension, petition to juvenile court, denial of privileges, etc. Incentives tend to be recognition-based, but may include special experiences or even monetary rewards. The critical task is to design sanctions and incentives that are meaningful to youth and their families. Addressing truancy and tardiness as problem behaviors as part of a schoolwide system of positive behavior support ties directly to this practice. For more information, see: <http://www.pbis.org/>

**Potential Quick Win:** In addition to incentives already provided to high-attendance students, provide tangible incentives to students who reach tiers of improvement in tardiness and attendance.

#### **5. Improve afterschool programming.**

Studies have shown that participation in afterschool programming can yield significant benefits for youth, families, and society. In many studies, the greatest benefits were realized among low-income students. These studies found that youth who were enrolled in effective afterschool programs that included academic support, mentoring, recreation, and cultural/social enrichment often fared better than their peers in a variety of areas. Improved behavior resulting from participation in afterschool programs includes better school attendance (Little & Harris, 2003; Kane, 2004).

**Potential Quick Wins:** Ensure that afterschool opportunities available to students on the "early" attendance shift also are available before school to students on the later attendance shift. Integrate student voices in developing and setting agendas for extended-day activities.

## **Student Attendance Best Practices**

**The National Center for School Attendance (2007) compiled the following examples of student attendance best practices from school districts across the United States:**

### **TRACK AND MENTOR STUDENTS:**

A “daily attendance accountability log” is a tool to help redirect truant students with a proactive approach to time management and attendance accountability. Through the use of an attendance log and mentoring, students are shown structure, responsibility, and accountability and begin to understand the importance of attendance and academic achievement. *Source:* Truancy Reduction Achieved in Our Communities Project, San Antonio, TX

### **COLLABORATE IN ATTENDANCE PLANNING:**

In Virginia, students and their families come together with the school, court, and community to discuss and implement appropriate levels of intervention, including an attendance contract, monitoring, and treatment. *Source:* Alexandria School District, Alexandria, VA

### **REENGAGE TRUANT STUDENTS:**

Project Reconnect is a court-ordered, 30-day tracking program that reengages students in school. Students use a tracking form that must be completed every hour by every teacher. The form records attendance, homework, and behavior. Students also are required to complete community service hours based on their specific needs. *Source:* Warner Robbins Schools, Warner Robbins, GA

### **OFFER INCENTIVES:**

As a reward, a lunch-time soccer game is organized by school staff for students with good attendance. *Source:* Summit School District, Frisco, CO

Promote family-school-community events: A school in California participated in International Walk to School Day in October, during which 200 students and families walked to school together. The school was able to partner with the Nutrition Network, which supplied water and fresh vegetables to the participants. *Source:* Schmitt School, Westminster, CA

Expand family and community involvement: In addition to attending the standard “parent night,” parents and students are required to complete hours toward building community partnerships (e.g., volunteering at the local museum, city clean-up day). These types of strong, supportive partnerships lead to the development of leadership, community involvement, attendance accountability, and responsibility. *Source:* Truancy Reduction Achieved in Our Communities Project, San Antonio, TX

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Reprinted from *21 Ways to Engage Students in School*, available online at <http://www.schoolengagement.org/TruancyPreventionRegistry/Admin/Resources/Resources/21WaysToEngageStudentsinSchool.pdf>. Copyright © 2007 National Center for School Engagement. Reprinted with permission.

Additional resources for engaging students in a manner that can improve attendance can be found in Recommendation 3: Student Engagement.

## QUICK LINKS:

### Online Sources for More Information

*Leading the Conversation: Lessons Learned and Recommendations for Converting to Small Learning Communities* (Report)

<http://www.gatesfoundation.org/learning/Documents/LeadingtheConversionProcess.pdf>

*Career Academies: Long-Term Impacts on Labor Market Outcomes, Educational Attainment, and Transitions to Adulthood* (Report)

<http://www.mdrc.org/publications/482/overview.html>

*Characteristics of Career Academies in 12 Florida School Districts* (Issues & Answers Report)

[http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/southeast/pdf/REL\\_2011106.pdf](http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/southeast/pdf/REL_2011106.pdf)

*Expansion of an Alternative School Typology* (Article)

<http://www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/EJ853379.pdf>

*Navigating the National High School Improvement Landscape* (State Profiles)

<http://www.betterhighschools.org/map/default.asp>

## Recommendation 2: Small Learning Communities

**Continue reorganization efforts at MVBHS to a) maintain progress with the expansion of the house model outside the Ninth Grade House, b) restructure staff schedules to mitigate and/or eliminate loss of instructional time due to travel between classrooms during passing period, and c) build a stronger sense of community to aid teaching and learning.**

MVBHS co-interpretation participants prioritized the issue of loss of instructional time due to staff travel between classrooms during passing periods, a result of the expansion of the house plan for every grade level. During co-interpretation, school administrators indicated that they had already decided to eliminate this practice, but considered developing strong strategies to facilitate this to be a priority. To that end, this recommendation offers some options for creating smaller learning communities within MVBHS while maintaining the larger school identity. The intent is not to recommend a full switch to small learning communities, but rather to provide some information on practices and strategies that work in small learning communities that could help improve the learning environment for both staff and students.

Reorganization efforts should consider the following:

- Applying characteristics and implementation strategies from one or more of the following school-within-a-school models:
  - Career academies
  - Freshman academies
  - House plans
  - Content area clusters or “majors”
- Creating a regular education career academy within the larger school structure
- Structuring staff assignments around affiliation with specific small learning communities

### LINK TO RESEARCH

Small learning communities within MVBHS can provide strategic solutions to the issues presented in the key finding driving this recommendation (loss of instructional time due to teachers’ travel between classrooms during passing period) through their structural requirements, as well as by creating more favorable conditions for student learning.

Logistically, engaging students in a smaller subsection of a large building also can address tardiness and truancy issues.

At a basic level, *small learning communities* refers to a subdivision of large school populations into smaller, autonomous groups of students and teachers. Typically, these structures are grouped geographically within a larger building and are served by instructional staff who are assigned only to that unique group of classes and students (Bernstein, Millsap, Schimmenti, & Page, 2008). When you develop formal small learning communities in a larger high school, you give staff consistent access to instructional resources, which allows them to be adequately prepared for instruction once the students enter the classroom. Principals who have experienced a conversion to some form of small learning communities at the high-school level have noted an improvement in collaborative efforts to plan instruction. One principal emphasized “changing the way we do business instructionally...” from the high school teacher

as “an island” in an environment in which “...they would shut their door and they would do their work and no one would intrude, and if someone did come into the room it wasn’t a natural event” (Nehring & Lohmeier, 2010, p. 192). Smaller groups of staff working toward a common charge, and placed in proximity to one another, can cultivate greater collaboration among staff.

In addition to the advantages provided to staff working within the physical boundaries of the individual learning communities, creating small self-contained communities within the large school yields benefits to the student-teacher and student-student relationships that foster success and relate to the student engagement struggles identified during co-interpretation and addressed in other sections of this report. According to Ongaga and Thompson (2011), “In a basic sense, small learning communities are rooted in ethics of care, particularly in terms of a focus on close, reciprocal relationships between students and teachers and the personalization of the school environment” (pp. 43–44). They explain that research demonstrates that small learning communities can create greater equity in access to academically challenging courses and support more productive teacher collaboration and innovation.

Complex social network analysis also provides insight into the positive impact of small learning communities on student achievement. Maroulis and Gomez (2008) explain that there is a great deal of research supporting the notion that ideas such as “social capital” and “social support” yield positive results for students (p. 1992). Their study also describes how both dense, highly connected networks within communities and more loosely connected and broader horizon-expanding networks act as sources of potential positive impact to student achievement, as students bond closely in an atmosphere that values achievement and/or gain exposure to successful peers outside their normal social group. The goal should be to leverage “dense, norm-enforcing networks” in which students “may reap the benefits of increased trust, conformity, and belonging” while, when applicable, connecting students in heterogeneous communities in which students “may reap the benefits of increased diversity of information and autonomy” (p. 1924). Maroulis and Gomez caution, however, that these relationships work best in heterogeneous situations, such as those occurring in randomly assigned elements such as homerooms, rather than situations in which students are purposefully tracked by achievement level. Creating environments where “the student population one is trying to help contains a large population of low achievers...may not be beneficial” (p. 1922).

## **IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS**

In order to leverage the benefits of connectedness and ensure efficient implementation that allows staff to fully engage, small learning communities should be established to serve specific populations of students, thematically, or some combination of these. In addition, while staff may teach exclusively within a community, students should not be required to take all of their courses within a thematically organized small learning community.

When considering implementation (or expansion, as MVBHS already features a “house” model that originated as a ninth grade academy and expanded to all grades) of any of these models, the school should leverage the current administrative structure and expertise. Assistant principals (APs) at MVBHS, in addition to general management duties, are typically

instructional leaders for academic content areas. To create greater efficiency and scale administrative expertise, APs might consider shifting most, if not all, duties related to content-area leadership to lead teachers and moving to management roles within the small learning communities. This might allow the houses or academies to take on greater autonomy. A distributed leadership model allows APs to focus on leadership and management within their small communities and on the smaller groups of students served by each community. Content-area lead teachers could function across communities and facilitate horizontal and vertical alignment (when applicable) of curriculum and instruction throughout the school. Both APs and content-area lead teachers could conduct classroom observations and provide instructional feedback to teachers. APs also would serve as the connection between individual communities and the school principal, who would continue the overall management of the school.

In the *Implementation Study of Smaller Learning Communities*, Bernstein, Millsap, Schimmenti, and Page (2008) identify the following structures around which small learning communities are created and for which research indicates positive results when implemented with fidelity. It should be noted that these models are not mutually exclusive; many may be implemented within the same building, based on students' needs, building structure, and instructional staff capacity.

**Career Academies.** These are small learning communities with curricula focused on one or more careers or occupations, featuring integrated academic and occupation-related classes. Career academies offer relevant, authentic learning experiences that engage students (as explained in Recommendation 3) who prefer to enter the workforce directly after high school rather than pursue postsecondary education. High-implementing career academies include the following characteristics:

- Common planning time for teachers (for such purposes as facilitating integration of academic and vocational opportunities or discussing the needs of students whom they teach in common)
- Autonomy over program policies such as staffing decisions and discipline
- Work-based learning opportunities and internship programs for students
- Career-related graduation requirements that include both coursework and service learning projects or a cooperative work experience
- An increased number of courses that integrate academic and vocational instruction or are specific to the small learning communities theme
- Students taking more than half of their course load within the career academy
- Enrollment by race in each academy matching the school as a whole

**Freshman or Ninth Grade Academies.** MVBHS already has created a ninth grade academy, or "house," designed to bridge middle and high school. Implementation of these recommendations should supplement the work already being done by the school in this area. Ninth grade academies respond to the high ninth-grade dropout rate experienced by some high schools. Large schools may have more than one ninth grade academy within their

larger structure. Well-implemented freshman or ninth grade academies typically feature the following characteristics:

- Heavy use of available data on incoming students
- At least weekly common planning time for teachers, so teachers may discuss the needs of students whom they teach in common
- Autonomy over select program policy areas
- Enrollment by race in each academy matching the freshman class as a whole

**House Plans.** In addition to the existing ninth grade academy mentioned above, MVBHS has created houses for each grade level, and these implementation considerations should provide additional insight into that approach. Grouped by grade or theme, house plans consist of students assembled across all grades or by grade level (e.g., all 11th- and 12th-graders) and assigned to groups of a few hundred each. In addition to integrating many of the characteristics described above, each house has its own disciplinary policy, student activity program, student government, and social activities. Students take some or all courses with their house members and from their house teachers.

**Career Clusters, Pathways, and Majors.** These are broad areas that address all careers within a specific content area, from technical through professional. Career clusters identify academic and technical skills needed by students as they transition from high school to postsecondary education and employment. These features may be integrated into career academies and houses grouped by content area or theme.

### Implementation Elements for Successful Small Learning Communities

- Consistent staff with most, if not all duty assigned to the community
- Community autonomy over program policies such as staffing decisions and discipline
- Heterogeneous student grouping from the pool of students (based on grade level or individual interest in thematic structure)
- Common planning time for teachers
- Recognition of the community as a distinct entity within the larger school
- Focus on interpersonal relationships among students and between teachers and students within the community

## **Streamwood High School**

**Streamwood High School in Elgin, Illinois, serves 2,275 students in Grades 9–12. The school has had success creating a thematically clustered small learning community within a large high school.**

Streamwood High School applied the school-within-a-school model to create a small learning community geared toward international studies within a large, traditional comprehensive high school. Formally called the World Languages and International Studies Academy, the small learning community was founded in 1997 in School District U-46, in the northwest suburbs of Chicago. Students from around the district can apply for admission to this Academy, where they engage in an academic program that focuses on world languages and global awareness, with curriculum and instruction geared toward creating leaders with a global perspective who are prepared to engage in international affairs.

While the Academy functions as a school-within-a-school, it is still a formal part of Streamwood High School; students have a “dual citizenship” of sorts, functioning simultaneously as students of both the Academy and the larger high school. Math, science, physical education, and elective courses are taken in the comprehensive high school, and students fill out their schedule within the Academy in classes that comprise the Academy’s unique curriculum. Similarly, the Academy is located within the structural confines of Streamwood High School but functions as a separate entity with a dedicated location within the school. The Academy also has a set of teachers and an administrator that work entirely within the small learning community.

The Academy’s curriculum focuses on interdisciplinary studies linking English language arts and social sciences, intense use of technology, and international business topics across content areas. Also, students engage in intense language study that allows them to complete six years of language instruction within their four years of high school. Foreign trips are integrated into the Academy curriculum, as well as service learning opportunities. Most course offerings are considered at the “honors” or advanced placement level.

Other schools seeking to implement a similar small learning community within a large high school should consider and plan around the following challenges experienced by the World Languages and International Studies Academy:

- Teachers outside the Academy questioning the operations of the small learning community in terms of equity of resources and student experience
- Alternate scheduling within the small learning community impacting the overall operation of the school and teachers’ contractual duties
- Students’ dual identities as members of both the Academy and the larger high school
- Creating autonomy of leadership in the small learning community while maintaining accountability to the school at large

Despite these challenges, the Academy offers interested students an opportunity for a more challenging and rigorous academic experience within a specialized, cross-disciplinary area of study, with a focus on college and career readiness and preparation for a global community.

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Description adapted from Barnish, M. (2002). International learning in a high school academy. *Educational Leadership*, 60(3), 79–82.

## Recommendation 3: Student Engagement

**Initiate a schoolwide process for increasing student engagement and creating a sustainable and supportive learning environment. The aim is to improve student attendance, enhance participation, reduce boredom, end negative behaviors and the associated classroom management issues, and increase student achievement in academic and social skills.**

Outside of the logistical issues addressed in Recommendation 2, the crux of Recommendations 1 and 2 is that creating a school environment that engages students in their education will improve outcomes for those students. While Recommendation 1 approaches student engagement as a means to improve school and class attendance, and Recommendation 2 focuses on increasing instructional time and time on task through more efficient operations and improved academic and social connectedness between teachers and students, Recommendation 3 addresses improving student engagement from a global school improvement perspective.

### LINK TO RESEARCH

Student engagement provides an essential foundation for increasing achievement levels. “Educators must work to build engagement levels if they hope to support students in meeting higher standards” (Learning Point Associates, 2005, p. 2).

Literature about school reform acknowledges the importance of an academically challenging and supportive environment to engage young adolescent learners. Student motivation, a meaningful curriculum, and student choice also are important factors for engaging learners (Caskey & Anfara, 2007; Learning Point Associates, 2005; Newmann, Marks, & Gamoran, 1995).

In a report on the 2009 High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE), which was taken by 42,754 students, Yazzie-Mintz (2010, pp. 2–3) describes a spectrum of student disengagement—from temporary boredom to dropping out—and attributes this disengagement to the following: uninteresting and irrelevant material, work being too challenging or not challenging enough, no interaction with the teacher, not liking the school or the teacher, not seeing value in the assigned work, adults at the school not caring about the student, safety and bullying concerns, schoolwork not connecting to real world or real work, feeling little connection with any adult at the school, teacher favoritism, ineffective instruction or instructional methods, feeling unheard and not responded to or respected, and feelings of frustration and disconnection.

When students feel marginalized or alienated at school, they lose interest and become disengaged. Yazzie-Mintz (2010, p. 17) concludes that there are considerable gaps not only in academic achievement but also in student engagement. He suggests the integration of engagement data with academic data as a useful tool for school planning and decision making.

Factors that would increase student engagement, according to the surveyed students (Yazzie-Mintz, pp. 18–23) are as follows: supportive and nurturing schools; increased individualization; classes that are more fun as well as interactive, experiential, and relevant; a schoolwide belief in relationships, respect, and responsibility; coaching and modeling for the staff of good student engagement practices; reflection on and response to student ideas;

### QUICK LINKS: Online Sources for More Information

Center for Mental Health in Schools (Website)

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/>

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (Website)

<http://www.casel.org>

Illinois Learning Standards for Social/Emotional Learning (Website)

[http://isbe.state.il.us/ils/social\\_emotional/standards.htm](http://isbe.state.il.us/ils/social_emotional/standards.htm)

Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility (Website)

<http://www.morningsidecenter.org>

adult understanding of student skills, strengths, and interests and having these qualities inform instruction; experiential learning and interdisciplinary studies; and opportunities for students to work together on finding solutions to real-world problems and issues.

Students need to build a sense of self-efficacy (Alvermann, 2003) in an inclusive environment in which they can achieve competence. They should be engaged in authentic and personally meaningful work, using a culturally relevant curriculum with an appropriate level of difficulty and challenge—one that requires problem solving (Voke, 2002). In addition, Gordon (2006) suggests the recognition and leveraging of individual student strengths and recalls a typical student response from the 2005 Gallup Youth Survey (pp. 77–80):

“My teacher understood the way that I learned and worked. I was never criticized for my ideas or feelings, but I was met with questions and ideas that could change the way I looked at something.” —Jessica, 17, Waverly, IA (p. 77)

A rubric titled the “Partnership Guide for Culturally Responsive Teaching” (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2000, pp. 185–187) offers a list of engagement activities (establishing inclusion, developing a positive attitude, enhancing meaning, and engendering competence) and assessment tools. The Executive Summary of *Engaging Schools* (Committee on Increasing High School Students’ Engagement and Motivation to Learn, 2003) provides 10 recommendations for reaching “the goals of meaningful engagement and genuine improvements in achievement” for high school students (pp. 4–9). Easton (2008) discusses engaging struggling high school students by using experiential learning; essential questions; and a whole-child perspective in curriculum development, instructional strategies, professional development, and teacher evaluations. “If there is a secret to motivation in the classroom,” says Gordon (2006, p. 80), “it lies in the interaction between the teacher and the student.”

“There is a growing consensus that whatever else is done, schools must also become places where it is easier for students and teachers to know one another well and for students to connect to the school and its purposes, says Sergiovanni (2006, p. 58). “Schools in other words must be caring and learning communities.”

## **IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS: WHOLE-SCHOOL PRACTICES**

Incorporating student engagement practices should be part of the annual school improvement process. Whole-school practices such as building a safe and supportive school environment are part of this process. Students can learn effectively only in environments where they feel safe and supported and where their teachers have high expectations for their learning. Implementation of a schoolwide positive behavior plan that is based on prosocial values, social competencies, incentives, and positive peer relationships will lay the foundation for classroom-level work and must occur before the classroom work can begin.

The following guidelines were developed by the Victoria Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2009) for implementation of effective student engagement strategies across whole schools at the building level:

**1. Create a positive school culture.**

Teachers and staff must recognize students as individuals by acknowledging and celebrating the diversity of the student population. The school must find ways to connect students to school (through clubs, sports, student council, and other activities) so they develop a sense of belonging. The school should provide transition programs and practices at different stages of schooling that will minimize anxiety, increase resilience, and ensure that students develop a readiness to enter their new environment and make successful transitions between year levels.

**2. Encourage student participation.**

Giving students a voice is not simply about the opportunity to communicate ideas and opinions; it also is about having the power to influence change. Incorporating meaningful involvement of students means validating and authorizing them to represent their own ideas, opinions, knowledge, and experiences throughout education to improve the school.

**3. Proactively engage with parents/caretakers.**

Keys to successful partnerships with parents/caretakers and families include strong two-way communication, volunteer opportunities, curricula-related collaborations, shared decision making, community-based partnerships, and efficacy building.

**4. Implement preventive and early interventions.**

The school needs to determine how it will intervene when students exhibit disengaged behaviors—specifically poor attendance and antisocial behaviors. Prevention strategies should target the whole school and should be designed to reduce any risk factors that may contribute to attendance or behavioral issues.

**5. Respond to individual students.**

The school should have a process in place to identify and respond to individual students who require additional assistance and support. It is imperative to coordinate early intervention and prevention strategies that utilize internal as well as external support services in order to identify and address the barriers to learning that individual students may be facing.

Schools also can implement major changes to their structures that can make it easier to develop positive learning relationships, including small learning communities, alternative scheduling, team teaching, teaching continuity, school-based enterprises, and professional learning communities.

## IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS: CLASSROOM PRACTICES

Keeping students focused and engaged in the classroom is quite a challenge amid the entire complex changes—physical, intellectual, emotional, and social—that they experience during this phase of their lives (Caskey & Anfara, 2007).

### 1. Relate lessons to students' lives.

A relevant curriculum relates content to the daily lives, concerns, experiences, and pertinent social issues of the learners. Teachers can gain insight into student concerns by taking periodic interest inventories, through informal conversations, and from classroom dialogue (Learning Point Associates, 2005). These issues and topics then can be incorporated into units, lesson plans, and further classroom discussions.

### 2. Make the learning authentic.

Newmann et al. (1995) advocate for authentic instructional practices to engage learners and offer three criteria for authentic instructional practices: construction of knowledge, disciplined inquiry, and value beyond the school.

The first criterion for authentic instructional practices is to facilitate the construction of knowledge by acknowledging students' existing understanding and experience. Identifying students' preconceptions and initial understanding is critical to the learning process. "If students' preconceptions are not addressed directly, they often memorize content (e.g., formulas in physics), yet still use their experience-based preconceptions to act in the world" (Donovan & Bransford, 2005, p. 5).

The second criterion for authentic instructional practices is to facilitate disciplined inquiry through structured activities; the inquiry process is critical to the construction of knowledge (Marzano, 2003; Newmann et al., 1995). This process consists of building on the learner's prior knowledge to develop a deeper understanding, integrating new information, and using the knowledge in new ways.

The third criterion for authentic instructional practices is value beyond school (Newmann et al., 1995). This criterion may entail connecting content to personal or public issues as well as the demonstration of understanding to an audience beyond the school. Examples of such activities include writing persuasive letters to the city council to advocate for a skate park, interviewing community elders for an oral history project, or communicating the impact of a development project using scientific concepts.

### 3. Give students choices.

Finally, providing choice in middle-level classrooms will engage learners. Providing opportunities for students to select a topic or text acknowledges young adolescents' need to exercise more decision-making power. Giving students ownership in their learning process increases motivation and keeps interest levels high. Students who have a strong interest in a specific subject may wish to pursue an independent project. These projects may be used as a differentiated way to explore the curriculum. (See "Regard for Adolescent Perspectives in the Classroom" on the following page.)

## Regard for Adolescent Perspectives in the Classroom

Following are some suggestions for showing regard for adolescent perspectives. These ideas are based on the work of Smutny, Walker, and Meckstroth (1997) and Tomlinson (1999).

- Independent projects will extend learning beyond the curriculum in the textbook and develop enthusiasm, commitment, and academic skills in addition to allowing students to develop deeper relationships with subject matter.
- “Brainstorming with...children on what kinds of projects they could do may also generate ideas teachers may never have thought of on their own” (Smutny, 2000, p. 7).
- Surveying students’ interests in the beginning of the school year will give teachers direction in planning activities that will “get students on board” from the start.
- Surveying again at key points during the year will inform teachers of new interests that develop as their students grow.
- Interest centers are designed to motivate students’ exploration of topics in which they have a particular interest. They are usually comprised of objects that students can explore, such as shells, leaves, maps, or projects, and are centered around broad topics. Students can choose from the menu and note their choices accordingly. Teachers decide how many items on the menu (minimum) that each student is required to complete. This is adjusted to meet instructional needs on an individual basis.

## **Examples of Student Engagement**

**The National Center for School Engagement (2007) compiled the following examples of student engagement best practices from school districts across the United States:**

### **FACTOR IN MATH FUN:**

In Oswego, New York, a Factoring Fan Club was created for 9th-grade math students to get them excited about factoring, to keep it fresh in their minds, and to be “good” at factoring. *Source:* Oswego School District, Oswego, NY

### **CELEBRATE PI DAY ON 3/14:**

This event was created to help students enjoy math by offering a fun-filled day honoring pi. Events included a pie eating contest, measuring the diameter and circumference of round objects to calculate pi, and other games related to circles. *Source:* Independence School District, Independence, VA

### **MOBILIZE COMMUNITY:**

Community Now! is an asset-based community development tool of the Connection Institute. It uses asset-based language and planning to bring the community together to discover what values the community shares as a whole. It then works to mobilize community members around its assets and shares values to become proactive in its planning rather than reactive. *Source:* Kittery Children’s Leadership Council, Kittery, ME

### **COLLABORATE WITH HIGHER EDUCATION:**

In Mesquite, Texas, a local college delivers 3.5 hours of continuing education courses (“Educational Opportunities”) to truant students and their families. The curriculum includes the negative consequences associated with poor school attendance and the positive consequences associated with scholastic achievement. Discussion of transition from high school to college is discussed and a tour of the college is provided. *Source:* Dallas Independent School District, TX

### **SUPPORT POSITIVE BEHAVIOR:**

Jacksonville School District adapted the principles of *Got Fish?* (a book to build business morale) for the classroom. Principles include: being there, play, choosing your behavior, and make their day. Students are recognized when observed “living” each of the principles. *Source:* Jacksonville School District, Jacksonville, FL

### **CREATE STUDENT-GENERATED CLASSROOM RULES:**

In Eugene, Oregon, students create a list of classroom rules to be followed. Each student signs off on the rules and is held accountable by fellow students. In addition, they developed their own “honor roll”, in which students are recognized for doing their best, following directions, and not talking out more than three times per day. *Source:* Linn Benton Lincoln Education Service District, Eugene, OR

### **FACILITATE POSITIVE STUDENT-TEACHER CONNECTIONS:**

Some schools in Oregon encourage students to sign up for a one-on-one lunch with their teacher during school time. The teacher uses this time to get to know the students and offers them encouragement and praise. Children and youth benefit when their teachers demonstrate that they care about student well-being in addition to academic success. *Source:* Linn Benton Lincoln Education Service District, Eugene, OR

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