

## High Schools That Work - Feb. 2012 (page 7)

### Community Support

Another aspect of reform was to seek assistance from community-based organizations such as Partnership with Children, a nonprofit that provides emotional and social support to at-risk children. Maxwell operates a school-based program known as Open Heart-Open Mind and participates in professional development through the Center for Capacity Building.

### Four Goals

The staff at Maxwell selected four areas of improvement for special emphasis: attendance, discipline, graduation rates and scholarship.

- **Attendance improved from 69 percent in 2006-2007 to 85 percent in 2010-2011.** The methods included case conferencing in each small learning community (SLC), an attendance contest among the SLCs, SLC teams for student outreach, recognition ceremonies for improved attendance, home visits by the community liaison, phone messages to students' homes, attendance meetings, targeting attendance in periods one and eight, and tracking student and teacher attendance.
- **Discipline referrals declined from 308 in 2006-2007 to 102 in 2010-2011.** The school used strategies such as conflict resolution training, mediation, in-house suspensions, after-school detentions and hallway sweeps to prevent classroom tardies. In implementing a new dress code, the school required students to wear uniforms comprising khaki pants and white shirts. Security officers at the school are linked to the local police department.
- **The graduation rate increased from 43 percent in 2006-2007 to 62 percent in 2010-2011.** The school is working to increase the rate even more. The strategies have included a credit recovery program, evening school, Saturday school, intensive extra help, individualized attention for students, an Adopt a Senior initiative giving students support and encouragement, mock Regents exams, independent studies, case conferencing in SLCs to reach every student, and specialized advisement to help students graduate on time.
- **Scholarship is improving year by year.** New York State Regents Exam data shows that the passing percentage of Maxwell students rose from 49 percent in June 2005 to 75 percent in June 2011 in English/language arts and from 38 percent in 2005 to 80 percent in 2011 in physics. The passing rate in chemistry climbed from 46 percent in 2005 to 76 percent in 2010. Strategies used by the school to improve scholarship consisted of professional development, a preliminary grade review, grade conferencing between teachers and students, intensive tutoring, team building, tracking students with five or more credits, and the Power of I. To improve scores on the state Regents exams, the school offered advisory sessions with mock exams, individualized study strategies, matching students with teachers, case conferences in SLCs, peer tutoring, Regents-style questioning in all classes (academic and career/technical), departmental tutoring before and after school, and a specialized Regents prep period daily.

"We still have to deal with issues in attendance, lower funding and getting everyone on board, but the school team and the students believe in what they are doing," Palmisano said. "We have made great strides in five years by instituting strategies that will lead to increased student success, but we must continue to improve."

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### Technology and Project-Based Learning Engage Students at a Career/Technical High School Making Strides to Improve

Teachers at **Maxwell Career and Technical Education High School** in Brooklyn, New York, have increased the use of technology to engage students in learning. In 2010-2011 the school began working with consultants from **Breakthrough Education Strategies (BES)** of West Hartford, Connecticut, a company with 15 years experience helping urban high schools and middle grades schools use the power of technology to engage low-performing students.

BES trained all teachers in grade nine to use SoftChalk module development software with BES electronic templates to write learning modules in their subject areas. The templates ensure that the modules adhere to state standards and the *HSTW* Key Practices for school improvement. In using this technique, teachers are preparing students for success on the New York State Regents Exams and are instilling 21st-century knowledge and skills. In other words, they are designing the work that students need to do to reach their academic goals.

### Classroom Dynamics

"This instructional method brings a huge change in classroom dynamics," said **Michael Suntag** of BES. "It allows teachers to help students take control of their own learning." The instructional emphasis is on performing authentic tasks in a meaningful curriculum. Students work with others to solve real-world problems and to produce quality projects. They use dialogue, discussion and debate.

Since all students in the core subjects at Maxwell have laptop computers, they use the Internet to do research connected with the learning modules. Then they bring the information back to engage in discussions with teachers and other students.

"Teachers' use of the modules has improved dramatically over time," said **John Tarnuzzer** of BES. "Teachers have become experts in writing the lessons and have even taken it to the next level." The modules are easily shared electronically among teachers as best practices.

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