

Practices Implemented by Rural High Schools that Produce College and Career Ready Graduates

July, 2014



The majority of high schools in the United States are in rural settings. In spite of barriers of reduced resources, small communities and high unemployment rates, several rural high schools in one Midwestern state are doing quite well. Post-school outcomes data from 2013 revealed 32 high-performing rural high schools. In these schools graduates with and without disabilities were participating in higher education and employment at very high rates (93%-100% for all students, 100% for students with disabilities).

Additionally, these schools graduated students at higher rates than the state average (95% compared to 89% for all students and 87% compared to 77% for students with disabilities). Interestingly, these 32 rural high schools were located across the state and reported an average of 47% of their students as eligible for free or reduced lunch rates. Clearly some rural high schools are doing great at graduating students and seeing them succeed in employment and postsecondary education!

What accounts for the high graduation rates and positive post-school outcomes in these rural high schools?

Given that these 32 high schools have so many positive outcomes (graduation, participation in post-secondary education and employment), a central question is “What accounts for the positive outcomes?” This report will summarize information provided by a random sample of five of the 32 high-performing rural schools. Staff from these five schools participated in focus groups, administrator interviews and surveys in the Spring of 2014.

Information from the five high performing rural schools has been organized around three main questions:

1. What are the five biggest influencing factors on whether your students graduate and succeed after high school (e.g., employment and postsecondary education)? [Page 3]
2. As teachers/administrators, what do you do that promotes graduation and post-school success? [Page 4]
3. What structures are important to graduation and post-school success? [Page 20]

By providing responses and testimony from administrators and educators within these schools, this report answers these questions.

1 What are the five biggest influencing factors on whether your students graduate and succeed after high school?

- 1. Strong, supportive adults as mentors**
- 2. Teachers' shared vision and high expectations**
- 3. High family expectations and support**
- 4. Academic and behavioral support matched to students' needs**
- 5. Application of academic content to real-life context**

Teachers and administrators from the five high-performing rural high schools agreed that these five influences are most important to successful outcomes. The Q-sort rating process included 16 statements identified from research literature as influences on students' high school completion and post-secondary success. Each statement was printed on a card which participants placed on a seven-point grid shaped as a quasi-normal distribution of Least Influential (1) to Most Influential (7) characteristics.

2 As teachers/administrators, what do you do that promotes graduation and post school success?

Voices from the Field

In the pages that follow, comments and quotes have been grouped around ten promising practices and characteristics of these five high-performing rural schools to provide clear voices from the field.

To collect these thoughts, a researcher visited each of these five high-performing schools between February and March 2014. Teachers participated in 75-minute focus groups and administrators participated in 60-minute interviews. Recordings were transcribed, analyzed around themes and organized by promising practices and characteristics.

Promising practices within these five high-performing rural schools include:

- 1. Build relationships with students,**
- 2. Foster relationships with families,**
- 3. Set and reinforce high expectations for academic performance and school completion,**
- 4. Establish a shared vision with administration,**
- 5. Teach intra- and interpersonal skills through content connected to real life,**
- 6. Promote multiple paths for postsecondary success,**
- 7. Develop students' career awareness and decision strategies,**
- 8. Strengthen teachers' instructional practices, and**
- 9. Communicate clear expectations for appropriate behavior.**

For more information on the qualitative methodology, analysis and results, contact Research Collaboration at researchcollab@ku.edu.

Everything we do is about relationships; doing the right thing for kids and making sure that they understand why we are doing that to them or for them.

Most of our kids would say that there is at least one person on faculty here that they connect with, and they know that if they needed something that they could rely on that person.

[Our teachers and staff] take a more individual interest in ... every one of our kids.

These are our kids and we take ownership of them. Every single one of these kids is my kids.

I think that level of involvement invests these kids in the school, too; being in Pep Club or being on the team or being in a club. They're invested. They spend time up here after school doing things that they don't necessarily have to do, and they care.

Our students are pretty comfortable coming back and asking for help from the counselor on different things, even when they're post-graduate.

We know where every one of our kids is. We very seldom have one that we don't know where the kid is or what they're doing. They still come back here.

They don't want to disappoint you. It's that relationship again.

We have very few kids who don't absolutely love their tutoring experience (part of A+ program), which is amazing to me. Mostly they just love being role models to [elementary school students].... There's a little hero worship that goes on with the little kids, and you get to be the big dog for some people. My kids do a really good job with it, and they take it very seriously.

Hopefully we've developed that relationship where they feel they can take time to do [things like post-graduation surveys]. Very rarely do we not know that someone's either working or at a trade school, or at a college, or something. We're able to stay in touch with our kids.

They do see the value. They'll gripe about it, but they see value in it or they wouldn't stay here.

Voices from the Field

1 Build Relationships with Students

That goes back to the whole idea of the expectations of everybody, and the family atmosphere. The kids see that too. For the most part, the kids realize that the teachers here do care about them, and ... they don't want to let the teachers down either.

They really do try their hardest for us, because they take pride in their school. If they take pride in their school, they want their school to do well.

[Students feel] a sense of pride and a sense of belonging to the point where they feel good about it and the students that are here. The faculty feels good about it. I think they want to come back and be a part of that. I also think they want to take that with them elsewhere and show that pride and have a positive effect on people in the future.

The kids still have a high respect for their parents and the people who they worked with. They don't just go off and say, "To heck with it." They still have respect for their elders, and their peers. They have a teacher who worked with them, say, just one time on something, they remember that.

The term "welcoming" is important. Even to this date, you have students that come back. Let's say it's spring break. They still live in town. They want to come lift weights, or they want to come visit a teacher. Maybe that teacher at one time took time out of their day to help them with a problem situation. I think they appreciate that.

College freshmen or college sophomores come back and talk to the seniors.

The kids feel like they're responsible for giving back to the community because of how much the community gives to them.

I think our parents really do want their kids to do well and want the best for their child, and are willing to work with us on that, as long as we open those lines of communication.

Our parents... appreciate the fact that their kids can rely on us for whatever it is that they need while they're here.

[We have] respect for parents.

My number one goal is to have a good relationship with the parents.

I don't know of one [parent] that doesn't support me.

We have ... good...relationships [with parents]. ...[W]e work well with parents, and keep them informed when things are not going well, and when they are going well, making sure that we celebrate successes with them.

Our parents, if you contact them and show that you really, deep down, just care about their kid. That's why you're contacting them; we get good results.

Interaction... helps. I see parents, and I see these kids up at the ball games, or I see them up at the store. We get to spend time with one another, not just in ... the school setting.

The teachers and staff have a long connection with the community and the schools.

I know when kids are out when they're not supposed to be or what they're not supposed to be doing. Sometimes, I can say things to them like, "You weren't at school, what are you doing out driving around at 9:00 at night?" When you can get in their business and talk to their parents, maybe I text a parent or something, I say, "Hey, I saw your child out doing something." When they know that you're involved as much as that and that you know their parents, it pushes them.

Voices from the Field

2 Foster Relationships with Families

If you're willing to spend time, talk to them [parents], and show that you're really trying to help their kids, then they come around and they're willing.

The nice thing about a small community is that if one of the parents doesn't show up (for a conference), I can run them down at a basketball game. I'm usually there. Or a volleyball game, or chili supper night, or something like that.

I would say, getting to know them on a personal level... is probably the best way you can foster communications.

The majority of [community members] came from right here, graduated from this school, and have been here their whole lives.

It has something to do with people's willingness to support the school. In our small towns, in a lot of cases, the public school is the hub of the town and if you take away the school, you wouldn't have much. I think it's a place that matters, a lot of times, with community pride.

There's a good portion of the people in the community [who] see how involved the kids are and all the activities that they're doing and know that they are very busy. We're talking about a pretty small group of people... everybody knows everybody... It's like a big family atmosphere.

We have several families that the kids going to school here are the third generation of that family going to school here.

We're all part of one community.

If you're willing to spend time, talk to them, and show that you're really trying to help their kids; I'm talking about 90 percent of our students will have at least one parent [at] parent-teacher conferences. Our spring turnout is between 85 and 90 percent. Every year it amazes me because I've seen the other side where maybe it wasn't like that. That goes back to that community support then they come around and they're willing.

In a town, like this, when they value the education that well, they really do want to add to that community and that school, and help those students be successful.

Online Grades

We have a grade system that the parents have access to check their grades at any time. If they're not checking them, then we're still calling, texting, or communicating via email with them.

We... have an online grade program where parents can sign up to have a password... so they can always check their student's grades.

We have the parental login for our grade books now. The parents that have Internet access, which is hit and miss, they can login and see their kid's grades. I've gotten emails before, "I see so and so has a zero, what happened?" "He didn't turn in..." "Well, that's not going to happen again."

Voices from the Field

2 Foster Relationships with Families

We had a celebration Sunday here at the school. There were 11 organizations that were represented. What is very unique about our school versus other smaller schools around is that the majority of the kids are in everything.

[Students here are active in] the community and [work] on many different levels with many different age groups of people. [They have a] community-wide cleanup. They have senior citizens' card parties, a tikes' Easter egg hunt.

Community Activities

We had a panel of former graduates. Some of them have moved back into the area and have jobs here. We have one, an engineer, who travels to [a larger city]. We had a banker in [a neighboring town].

They're (students are) doing three to five community service projects in each group. Mrs. (teacher) does FBLA, and they do at least three a year. Student council does upwards of five community service projects. NHS (National Honor Society), another four.

Communication

Fostering parent-school communications, the two-week grade reports. That's been the biggest thing that we do with our kids that are academically at-risk is every two weeks we print out the kids who have Ds and Fs. If you have a student on that list that's in your class you have to make parent contact and say, "John's grade is a D. This assignment is missing," or, "He could prepare for this test by doing this." Basically tell the parents, "Their grade is this, but this is what we can do to help change that."

[There are] so many ways... to communicate with our parents. We can send them text messages,... email. ... [P]arents can log on and see their [students'] school grades.

Encourage; [We] encourage parents to call us no matter how hard the call is to make.

I monitor [attendance] almost every week... If we've got a kid that's academically at-risk and also has an attendance problem, [we contact their] parents immediately.

I talk to parents at least twice a week. Whether it's to tell them something good that their kid's done, or something bad, or this is what we're looking at as far as grades for the quarter. I talk to parents on the phone all the time. They call me, or I call them.

We have an open line of communication with the parents. I text a lot of my parents, not only when their child is struggling, but when their child does well.

I (teacher) email them regularly. I call them if I need too.

They've learned that from their parents and from the expectation at school and in the community to work hard and be responsible.

The parents, the community, the teachers, the administration, instill a work ethic in the kids. You need to do this, you need to accomplish this, you need to be involved in these things, you need to show up when you say you are going to show up. You need to work when you are here.

Our softball team [has] made academic all-state as a team for the last five years, so I think that pressure of them knowing...I say, "Hey, girls. You're part of this. Your scores count on this." Those other girls are like, "We're not going to not make it because of one person."

Little things like that, the (lesson) planners, no zeroes (for incomplete or missing assignments), a lot of little things that by the time they're juniors and seniors they've pretty well settled in and buckled down and they understand what's expected.

We have high expectations for them; Parents have high expectations.

Kids that are at-risk... when you get them talked into going on the football team...all of a sudden their grade in math comes up because that's the expectation of the football team.

Voices from the Field

3 Set and Reinforce High Expectations for Academic Performance and School Completion

The expectations for students are also directed toward their post-secondary options.

Picking people up, being there for each other.

We talk to the kids all the time about thinking outside the box. Who's going to be the next person to invent something better than Google? Getting kids to think outside the box and take risk, I think we have to model that as a school. We can't keep doing things the same way. I think we have to be progressive.

Graduation Expectations

I don't think we promote graduation. It's expected.

You'll graduate from high school. That's the very least we can do for you.

It's like it's an expectation. You will graduate from school here. You have...so many people helping you, there's no reason you should not graduate from high school; at the very least from high school. It's not even an option.

They just know that that's what they're supposed to do. That's what you do in life. You graduate from high school.

Everything is geared towards how are you going to get to graduation, and then the other things really don't come in until maybe if they haven't, if they come back or something, then we'll talk about an alternative. But it's always, everything is geared towards, how are we going to get you to graduate?

Not graduating is not an option.

Some of the people who have come in, who, if they hadn't come to this school, probably might not have graduated. It's that personal connection. It's that, "We're going to make it so you can succeed."

We just work really hard with every senior class in terms of the students that we know need every single credit in order to graduate. The guidance counselor and the principal are on top of [it].

If you go into the elementary [school], you see those kids with [letterman] jackets on. I saw a "Class of '22" the other day over there, or something crazy. They know, I'm going to graduate in '22, and I'm going to graduate with my group of friends that I've been with forever.

Voices from the Field

3 Set and Reinforce High Expectations for Academic Performance and School Completion

We run grades weekly. If you have a D and an F, you're going into mandatory tutoring five days a week during the day. If your Ds and Fs aren't gone, then you're going to go to after-school tutoring two days a week.

"This student is failing in these two classes. Who's willing to put together a team? Who's willing to help this many nights after school?"

The biggest thing... is the data on the students has to be monitored. You can't wait until the end of the semester and decide that that student is academically at risk or attendance is poor and they're not going to pass this semester. You really have to monitor that on a timely basis.

The smaller schools really have a great benefit when it comes to graduation rate, but only with persistence and really monitoring their kids. If you don't keep track of what's happening with them there's no way to prevent, or to promote, or to get them on that positive path.

You just keep having those conversations with them. You know the kids that [students] run with. You tell those kids "Tell him I said hi. Tell him to come visit me. I want to talk to him sometime."

Drop-out Prevention

We had a young lady that decided school wasn't for her, and she did her GED. We still offer that support of having someone go to the Technical Center and set up the GED program with them.

[M]y counselor and I working with a team of teachers [to help students at risk of dropping out]. Usually, it's the teacher that that student has courses with. Once their grades start to slip, we'll say, "What assignments do we need to get done? Who can volunteer to stay after school? What test have you got them?" ...[It's difficult] coordinating it all, but once you get it coordinated, you know, "I'm responsible for this. I'm going to make sure the student gets this." We really come together on the work.

We are really driven to help those kids and form those teams... and say, "What can we do? What can we do?" There'll be a lot of times when we have early-out [inservice] and I'll say, "At the end of this meeting, we're going to meet about this student."

The kids know what's going to be a "no" answer. They know that nobody here would be supportive of them dropping out of school. They know that.

When [students who had left school] came back, you knew they needed support and we offered it to them.

[The A+ program] works really [well] for our... transfer [students] or a fifth year senior that are usually from another school. We rarely have a fifth year senior here. We'll come in and we'll look at their transcript to see what it is that they need. We will... let them work [independently] on catching up on the credits they need. Whether it's an hour a day... We had one student that really just needed a couple of classes, so we just let her stay in there for the semester and crank it out, so she could graduate.

I know it's probably the relationship that (principal) had with him, and the teachers have had with him.

We were really worried because of attendance and not showing up. There was a number of times that we go get those students. They don't make it to school, so we call them... They respect us enough that they would answer the phone when we call them.

[That's] why our dropout rate is as low as it is. We didn't give up on any of them. They came back to school.

We have [completion] Options available to you. Can I get you in the GED program?

I've always said that we have some students that school just doesn't fit very well for what they want to do with their life and what their interests are. We have to find ways to fit them better.

Our superintendent had done a really good job of setting the foundations of expectations.

In the past we've had inconsistency issues. If everybody knows what the rule is and they all know what the expectations are...this is common everywhere.

It does start at the top at administration.

I do think it helps to have someone who's here all the time and the philosophy is the same all the time and the rules are the same all the time.

I think consistency in the administration does have something to do with it.

Teacher Collaboration

They (teachers) may not have that formal agreement, but we've had that discussion of, "I'm going to get these kids' work. I'm going to check in with their teachers."

We're all on the same page with them, what's best for them.

Middle school core teachers are very good about doing that through email to one another checking on a particular student. "Hey, this student has missed X amount of days. Where are they at in your class? What can we do?"

Voices from the Field

4 Establish Shared Vision with Administration

[The principal is] not afraid to have the hard conversations (with students and parents).

Consistency in any district is key to establishing what the real vision is and where you're headed.

I (the principal) set the parameters and expectations at the beginning of the year. I try to get in classrooms, in the halls, and with the kids as much as possible.

[Be] bell-to-bell teachers. That means that you start off the hour with something that gets them engaged in the hour with assessing if your objective has been met.

... Even though we might be successful and do things well, we want to continue to get better. The only way to do that is change. You can't be afraid to change.

It's just a close knit group of people that work together to help these kids in every way they can.

I don't know of a lot of schools that I've been at where the teachers, the administration, and the counselor all work together to help this young man with [disability].

The other thing that I (principal) always do, if a teacher [says] "I've called the parent, I've emailed..." I always step in, and get involved, and make my own phone call. Eventually, if it gets to the point, we will have a full group parent-teacher meeting, [with] every teacher that they have, the counselor, anybody who needs to be there.

I do that (make daily classroom visits) for a number of reasons. I'm checking on the kids, sometimes, to see if something's going on and I need to know about it. You can just watch kids and have a pretty good feel about whether we're all getting along today or something's wrong.

Shared Vision

"Teach every minute." There are so many different ways to learn now. [We] have to expose our students to different ways to learn... schools... need to embrace change. The classroom instruction part, I think we do things a lot different.

We went to a "no zero policy."

If we are having quality instruction and our students are engaged,...they will be successful and on any test they take they will do as well as they can. We need to keep doing the things we're doing and find a way to make it better and adjust but not lose sight of everything, because if students are engaged here then I think they're going to be pretty successful.

Voices from the Field

5 Teach Intra and Interpersonal Skills Through Content Connected to Real-life

We play a little game, where they invest money into the stocks. That's the one that [students]... found exciting.

We basically developed the Business Economics class, which is the second half of that Personal Finance book. We encouraged kids after Personal Finance to follow up with that business class.

Financial Literacy

[We ask students to] set up a monthly account of all the expenses that you have and let the kids see how expensive it is to live. Then...match that up with what they're going to do for a living and...get them to compare potential income to their expenditures for a month just to show them how expensive it is to live.

[W]e do a...section on...personal finance. We talk about budgeting.

We want to try to make sure that we have life experiences or real world applications in all of our classes. Right now, in accounting I'm making them do tax forms.

We talk about credit scores, and how your credit score goes with everything, loans and paying stuff off.

I think it's just something (teaching budgeting, money management) that all teachers probably do some time or another in the classroom

Self-regulation

Teaching them resiliency [is important], because they may not have any going into their senior year. Then they learn a lot of resiliency. They're used to this straight A report card and it doesn't quite pan out every time.

Our kids that are very busy have learned how to manage their time. I think that's what helps them be successful in things, too.

Our 7th through 10th graders are supposed to fill out a planner every day. We let the juniors and seniors do their own way of planning. ...[B]y the time they get to that level most of our kids have developed a way to manage their time because they're involved in a lot of things. They're taking upper level classes...they can take dual credit classes. They really have to manage their time especially if they have projects that involve group activity or deadlines that are in the future. They have to really plan their time.

Each of us at the beginning of each group will give the kids a note card and they'll set individual goals for six weeks, as a team and individually... Any time you have students set individual and team goals, then you revisit those and make them accountable. Then they seem to strike higher if you are checking with them on setting those goals.

Letting them realize that they have resiliency. A lot of them, they actually have it but they don't know it.

Independence, Self-care

In my Applied Communications class... we just finished a unit called "Living On Your Own." They had to really look at all the expenses, make a menu for a week, get a grocery list, what kind of household items, find a place to live, a car, a job.

We have two required Practical Arts for graduation, which is not required by the state, but required by our district.

We've only had [Family and Consumer Sciences classes] the last couple of years. But we have a couple of kids learning to cook who wouldn't have been exposed to that before.

The three Family and Consumer Science courses that we'd offered...were very, very good for a lot of our kids... We've tried to take some of that on in [other classes]. I know in economic ...[the teacher] did some stuff with simple interests. The actual living skills [cooking, doing laundry], some of those were very, very valuable in this push.

Independence, Self-care

[It's] staggering the number of kids who have never done a load of laundry.

Career & family leadership class

They have opportunities to practice some of those skills (kitchen skills) that they might not have in a large school, where they're not involved in so much stuff.

Everybody takes some sort of Family and Consumer Science class.

Citizenship

Teaching that sense of responsibility goes back to those high expectations...It's not necessarily grades. It's... what we expect of you to be a human being, to be a person.

If something has come up in the news, we...tie that to what we're teaching in class or vice versa. We use those real life examples. We try and participate in things, like Battle of the Belt, where we keep track of what students are wearing their seat belts when they're on campus.

We do as many hands-on projects as we can. Maybe, they're making posters. If you walk outside of classrooms, you can see some of their class work. We enter essay contests around the area.

Soft-skills for Employment

[Students] have to actually go to our school board and ask [for early release their senior year], which is a good skill for them to have, too, because they have to address a group and talk about what the benefits are to them.

We try to teach kids that if they work hard, they can be successful in whatever they choose to do.

I think our kids have a pretty strong work ethic.

The cooperative learning piece has helped ... teach kids to work together more effectively, and it's really led to instructional practices that have kept the engagement level way higher.

When I came here, it amazed me. These kids do everything. You are a Pep Club President. You are StuCo Vice President. You are FCCLA Secretary. You are also a Varsity Basketball player. I've never seen kids do so much. They come out really well rounded. We don't pigeonhole any of them to anything.

That it's very seldom to find a kid that's in one organization. They're usually in two or three, and on top of it they're playing sports.

Voices from the Field

5 Teach Intra and Interpersonal Skills Through Content Connected to Real-life

You have to learn to work with others...to listen to authority... discipline. It...helps your life stay grounded and focused.

We do a pretty good job of just teaching kids to work hard. If they can work hard, they'll be able to pass, and they'll be able to move forward. At least that's one of the things, trying to make them be productive and hard working.

We talk to them all the time about people skills and learning to work with people.

Contest participation with careers, interviews, and public speaking

We're not trying to create test takers. We're still trying to manufacture citizens.

We travel [with students] tremendously. Some of them are kids that have never been outside of the state before. We give them lots of opportunities to see what the world is like. That the world is bigger.

It's really important for them to feel like they can still be active citizens, be productive citizens... make good money at something that they like to do.

Voices from the Field

6 Promote Multiple Paths for Post-secondary Success

We use the [employment] Connections program quite a bit...do interest inventories with them.

We do use the ASVAB...to determine some of their interests.

Assessment

We go through the entire process, skills and interest assessment as well as researching jobs, then we create cover letters and we fill out applications. We go through the interviewing process for all of them as well.

Addressing what's needed for college entrance exams.

We'll do some interest inventories, to see what their interested in as far as careers go. They'll do some research with careers. They'll use that to start developing their four year plans. "What's your goal right now after high school?" Then we'll start tailoring their plan according to that goal after high school. They'll actually go over and tour the [career and technical education center].

Post-secondary Goal Setting

Our counselor works very closely with them on a plan for after-graduation, whether it be college or technical school or whatever their interests are.

We ask kids to do their four-year plan when they're getting ready to be a freshman in high school. I think it's important for kids to start understanding how we can help them get where they want to go or take that first step...

We do our personal plans of study that we start working with kids in junior high. Then we go out. We're going to try to plan their high school career based upon a career objective that they want to get into and a career path field.

With my freshmen class... we start out with some kind of activity where they have to set goals. Goals for this year. Goals for your future.

All [students] do four-year plans.

Our guidance counselor has set up meeting times with the junior high students to get them started thinking about... their interests...and what classes they need to take in high school to get them ready for college.

We do their four-year plans and their personal plans of study, but after you get that all on paper, then it's more of just knowing the kids, [their interests and goals].

If they are [interested] in the job market, then [we] stress to them that they need to be attending the career center, which would help to give them training and preparation to get into the job market.

We'll lay out courses they need... to help them get ready for what they want to do when they go on to college or trade/technical center or junior college or military or they're looking to get into the job market.

We're doing everything we can to try to make sure our infrastructure is ready for those kids to understand the marketplace that they're going into.

Our middle school counselor... uses the [employment] Connections program and the interest inventory off of the Explorer Test to give them an awareness of careers.

Curricular Activities for Post-secondary Goal Setting

We've...implemented two ACT prep classes now... We'd always pushed our kids to try to understand what is going to be needed for them to be successful on the ACT, but we never had a class.

The job shadowing and just A+ in general encourages kids to at least seek a two-year education outside of high school, because it's free.

Voices from the Field

6 Promote Multiple Paths for Post-secondary Success

Curricular Activities for Post-secondary Goal Setting

In my science classes... I talk to them about what their career goals are and ask them if they are interested in a science or health-related career. If they are, I try to make them understand that they need to take [certain classes] in science.

In Applied English, we looked at different types of... occupations and requirements, and whether the skills that the job would require were something they were interested in doing or not.

[In Business Communications] we do a unit on career planning... our ag program does the same thing.

In this district, we believe that every kid has their own path, and their path may be college, it may be a technical school, or it may be that they have a career that we help them get into. I think the more options the kids have, the better.

We also will take kids independently on tours (e.g., cosmetology).

We offer a lot of dual credit classes through three different universities.

Informal Activities for Post-secondary Goal Setting

What are the requirements to get into a school that they're interested in?

We're real good with giving kids a nice plan B. When they tell me, I'm going to be a pediatrician, or they're going to be that pro athlete... we like to have a nice plan B. I always give them the "what if," especially the athletes. What if you had a career ending injury? What would be your fall back?

[We help students think about] what they want to do. Because... there's constant questioning... "so what are you going to do next year?" or "you're taking this class, is that what you're interested in?". They're forced into that by having... conversations with us all the time, that they have to think about their futures.

Building Familiarity with Post-secondary Settings

Most of these kids, our kids, haven't seen a college campus before, so it's just to go with someone who's been on a college campus, knows what it looks like. They all go, it doesn't matter if you ever intend to go to a two-year college, or a four-year school, you need to go see what one looks like.

Our kids do go to at least one college fair.

We host it (ACT examination) twice a year.

I also think we all do at the school a good job of not saying that college is the only way to have a successful career. I think that's a huge thing for kids. Not every kid is cut out to make a four-year school.

Every year when they're taking my class, even through the year, I'm like, especially with juniors and seniors, "What do you plan to do when you graduate? What do you plan to do to graduate?"

I'll get them information, a lot of times through [employment] Connections. Where you can go for training, what your options are for schools. What are the costs? How are you going to pay for it? How are you going to get there? Scholarships, obviously, other options for finance, military, National Guard. A+ program can help with some of those things.

The county hospital in [a nearby town] started a health career fair that's specific to any type of healthcare field.

We promoted this year sending our kids out on field trips and sending them different places. [College] just offered a field trip actually for elementary students... to expose them to college and what college life is like.

[State college] also does... a college transition program where they can go and learn about the different majors.

Voices from the Field

7 Develop Students' Career Awareness & Decision Strategies

I try to focus and talk to the kids about doing the most they can to leave all their options open. Not preparing them for entering the workforce, we're preparing you to do whatever you want to do.

[If the outlook for a specific career isn't very good], you've got to take that into consideration ... A lot of times I tell them, "Here are the careers and the jobs that there is high demand for."

Their success means everything to you... You develop that understanding of each individual kid and have a good idea of what they're probably going to be able to do when they graduate, and... help guide them into a successful occupation or education.

As teachers, we try to find the student's interest, and then try to help them understand what classes they need to take in high school before they go to college.

I go through a career unit with my freshmen, to help them plan. "What do you want to do? Do you want to go straight to work? Do you want to go to vo-tech, or do you want to go to college?"

A+ Program

I can have conversations... [about] the trade school or going to a community college where they have the opportunity... to go there and get [some or all of] their tuition paid. That's opened up a new realm for us... [Students] have to have 50 hours of tutoring when they're in high school.

[In the] A+ program in the state, the school gets certified to be an A+ program, and the kids are required to keep a certain attendance rate for four years, GPA, citizenship, and participate in 50 hours of volunteer tutoring. If they accomplish all that, and... appropriate paperwork, [the state] reimburses their first two years tuition. That's either to a four-year school, or a two-year state school.

We've just become an A+ school so students [going to] technical school or junior college can get their tuition paid for two years.

...90 to 95 percent of the class would be involved in the A+ program. Through that program, they get an opportunity to job shadow as a junior and as a senior. That gives them an opportunity to see if that's something that they are truly something interested in.

In-class Real-life Activities

Real life kids, try to use real life examples. If I was doing a heavy math problem, why would I not use, how many bales are you going to get out of this acre? Why wouldn't you use that kind of terminology with them? Most of our people really get that.

With the [smaller] Applied Math [class]... I'm able to tailor the learning to their interests. I make up a lot, too, that have to do with what they're going to be majoring in in their postsecondary education school.

All these parts of the body... if you're going to be in nursing school or ... something like that, these are things that you need to focus on. Or if I'm teaching biology, I work for the State and Federal Natural Resource Agency, so if I'm studying something about ecology... I try to point out if you're a forester, you'll be doing studies like this.

We do a career unit in [Business Tech]. Even if [they have] Business Tech two, I have them again redo that same career unit because their goals may have changed.

In the vocational math, there is such a variety of problems in the book that gear for vocational fields.

We do have a personal finance course, which allows a lot of real-life connection that they'll really need in the outside world.

Our Ag ed program does a really good job of keeping those students that are geared towards agriculture.... They...do real life projects.

Voices from the Field

7 Develop Students' Career Awareness & Decision Strategies

Integrating Class Post-Secondary and Work Experience

We have some kids that are part of the FLEX program ... [They are] already in a job and they spend part of the afternoon fulfilling requirements. ... [They are required to check] out a tech school that relates to their program.

Through our business and ... Ag program...we reinforce everything they do. ... We have SAE (supervised agricultural experiences), where students have to go out and have a job or have some sort of...project.

[Our school has] a board policy which allows for a work-study program. [Students] can be gone the last two hours of the day.

Family and Consumer Science have competitions generated by job shadowing, career education.

We have a school farm that we have, it's eight acres that... the junior class and ...seniors farm and they get to use that money for their senior trip.

All of our juniors have [the] opportunity [to job shadow]. They do it as a junior, and then they can do it again if they want.

We have a young man that's going through firefighting. He's going to take EMT next year. He's also in my Ag program, too, and will use it for his SAE, doing his firefighting stuff.

We also have a couple of kids that leave early during the day to go to actual work.

Students have the option of going their senior year to do different vocation programs, [including] health occupations, auto mechanics, auto body, welding, etc.

We take kids to the area vocational school. [A student] rode our vocational bus and went to the university and took classes on campus when he was a freshman and sophomore.

Career Awareness Building Experiences

In Ag ed, every kid in the program has to be involved in some type of work experience beyond school...part of the grade [for the class includes keeping] financial records.

Last year... we really focused on job shadowing. It was amazing to see [what students] gained from that.

Our school's not limited, they allow them to go their senior year, so we let them tour the vocational school and then try to find work release or other things to work with our students.

For the SAE program, which we have multiple students doing right now where one doesn't come to school until 10:00 in the morning...working at the mechanic shop.

They were going to take nursing as a junior and then take the EMT as a senior.

[We have] a three-component model for Ag education. We have classroom instruction, ... Supervised Ag Experience,... and the FFA leadership component.

The SAE part is supposed to be ... outside of class time, the summer, after-school hours. They have to do that on their own. What we do is we come back together as a group, and it teaches them personal finance skills. They have to keep their own record book, the money they make and the money they spend.

You can do work study and that's valuable, but you could also take two more classes here and work after school, or work on the weekend or when you graduate.

We take a field trip to [City] (e.g., Harley Davidson plant, Federal Reserve).

Sophomores all go to a My Success event that's put on by the Chamber of Commerce.

In the special ed department, we work closely with our counseling. They set up visits to vo-tech or the technical school.

Voices from the Field

7 Develop Students' Career Awareness & Decision Strategies

Career Awareness Building Experiences

We use the [employment] Connections program quite a bit with our students to do interest inventories with them.

We have several special education students that are doing school-to-work as well, which has been nice.

We have some of our special ed students that are enrolled in the tech school. They take morning classes. Come back and finish the day here.

We're...now getting vocational rehab involved where they can provide some resources.

Almost all of our IEP students attend [Vo-Tech] in their sophomore year.

Our Career Center...allows special ed to come in for their vo-tech prep ... We have a really good relationship with them.

Big emphasis in counseling the last couple of years to try to help students find work-related experiences.

Participate in WIA, Youth Workforce Investment Act.

Learning opportunities helps them find jobs. There's a whole process for that. It's not like they just come in and say, "We're going to go find you a job." They do all these things called exploration where they come in and interview them, they observe them and watch what skills they're good at, they go to the job site and monitor to see if that job fits them.

Voices from the Field

8 Strengthen Teachers' Instructional Practices

We still have after school tutoring and my teachers are required to tutor at least once during the week. They have to tutor either before school or after school on some day of the week for 30 minutes. We have a schedule made out.

With the common core... we've integrated at the high school level the A+ online program, which has given us a ton of flexibility for kids whether it's credit recovery or the ability to stay in a choir class.

They're still classes of 20 and 23, but there are times when teachers are here at five or six o'clock at night. There's plenty of opportunity for the student to come in. We have mandatory tutoring for students who have Ds and Fs.

For the technical side, there's a three-hour block for vo-tech every day, daily. There's seven hours of Ag that are offered. There's seven hours of business that are offered, 7 through 12 for the business side, between the computer app all the way up to business management and business math.

There are a lot of skills, even writing a letter or basic math facts that we feel sometimes are lost during those different grade levels. [We're] making sure kids know all those basic things.

In our current schedule we have 13 built-in college course opportunities.

The cooperative learning piece has helped us ... teach kids to work together more effectively, and it's really led to instructional practices that have kept the engagement level way higher.

By being able to individualize those things, we can keep them engaged. Engagement is about instructional strategies.

In my government classes, they take the end-of-course exam. They do set a goal, and then we actually write it down. Then we review midway through.

I always found the 45 minutes I would get [students'] best focus, my best focus, and that was about the right time frame.

The cooperative learning. It really has helped over the last probably few years. Probably the fact that their getting so much of that at a young age, that the idea of working together carries over in through the middle school, high school.

We try to make accommodations not only for the kids who are struggling, but the kids we can see are way above. If we have a student who is excelling at something, we let them go ahead, and then we accommodate them, and offer them maybe an individualized plan of what they can do or achieve at a higher level. Or we put them up in a class where they can be with people that are more up on their intellectual level.

It just goes back to being effective with your instruction, being relevant with your instruction, where it's relevant to the students.

I'd say probably one of the biggest things that I see different would be the positive approach to everything. Even if a kid doesn't turn something in or they don't do a real good job on it [we try to approach everything positively]. The positive spin on "why is this important, why are we doing this", rather than lecturing them about not having it done, [we identify] the real reason as to why it's important.

Our main focus has probably been common core this year and implementing that. Along with instructional practices, we worked on student motivation and also level of engagement.

Voices from the Field

9 Communicate Clear Expectations for Appropriate Behavior

We stay on them, and their classmates stay on them. Their classmates have an investment.

We have a set of rules and we all abide by them.

From the discipline aspect it's always a conversation [with a parent] that you need to understand that your child cannot continue to behave this way. This will not work in a job situation. This won't work anywhere in the world and we can't let it happen here.

You do have to get to know people. You do have to try and get them as involved as you can. You do have to shake hands with kids, ...but you may not necessarily be their friends. You can let them know that... by giving them the ISS (in-school suspension), or making them sit through D and F tutoring, they're going to be a better student. They're going to be a better person from it. Being positive is very important, by telling a kid that they can do it, not that they can't.

If [students] know they're getting rewarded for handing all of their homework in on time, they're going to make the extra effort to hand all their homework in on time. If they're being rewarded for not being tardy to class, then they're going to make the effort to get to class on time... We have seen a change in their attitude toward some of those smaller things.

We've tightened down; kids don't leave the room for this and that.

The more your faculty [are out in the hallway] during a passing period... just to be out there, not because there's anything going on, just because it's preventative.

We don't let them [students] make excuses.

We did a Saturday school for some middle school kids that had some excessive absences, ... to help make up time and [help] them to understand that it's not elementary anymore.

No Fs is our policy for eligibility. If you come up with an F, they don't even ask "Am I going to be able to play in the next ball game?" They already know the answer.

Education is important here. Time on task is important here. Not disturbing and distracting the students is important here.

I think we model it, responsible behavior, so often.

Each teacher chooses one kid that they're responsible for that may be at-risk as a kind of check-in/check-out point of the day.

Follow through... If the kids are failing class, they're not eligible to go to dance, to play in the ball game.

We have [a teacher who works specifically with students who are at-risk]. I don't know if many schools have that... Basically, if a kid is having trouble, he'll get him out and tutor him more one on one. He'll work with the classroom teacher.

3 What structures are important to graduation and post-school success?

All instructional staff from the five high-performing rural high schools were asked to complete the online survey, *Indicators of College and Career Readiness – School Scale*. Educators identified a variety of structures that supported the success of their students. Reported here are the items that were identified as ‘fully in place’ (average ratings above 4.0 on a 5-point scale from 1: not in place to 5: fully in place).

Effective Collaboration

My school has a **positive school climate** that is safe and respectful to all students.

Administrators are committed to implementing **evidence-based instructional practices** that support college and career readiness.

Educators at my school regularly participate in professional development to continuously build their skills in **engaging all students** and **teaching in their content areas**.

Partnerships are in place between the school and postsecondary institutions (e.g., college, vocational-technical schools) to **enhance opportunities for students**.

All families are provided with resources/information to support college and career planning.

Multi-tiered Instruction and Intervention

Supports (e.g., tutoring, intensive/remedial courses, mentoring) are matched to students' needs to **keep all students on track for graduation**.

Career-specific training (e.g., courses, career and technical education) is provided based on students' career interests.

Students are supported in **navigating the admissions process** at the higher education institution of their choice.

For more information on the *Indicators of College and Career Readiness – School Scale*, analysis and results, contact Research Collaboration at researchcollab@ku.edu.

In addition to school structure, teachers identified classroom practices that they implemented on a daily basis. The following practices were identified as being used daily by nearly every teacher.

Multi-tiered Instruction and Intervention

I teach my students **effective learning strategies** that they can apply across content areas.

Within my courses/instruction, options are provided for students to **demonstrate their learning in a variety of ways**.

I support students to **reflect on the quality of their work** and ways in which they could improve.

Data-based Decision Making

My classroom assessments/projects **evaluate students' creative problem-solving and critical thinking** skills in real-world contexts.

I **collect information on my students' social/interpersonal skills** (e.g., teamwork, collaboration, conflict resolution).

I use information on students' interpersonal, problem-solving, and self-regulation skills to **meet their unique needs**.

Finally, all students participated in college and career readiness activities. These practices were identified as part of the high school experience for all students.

Student Impact

Students **identify their goals** for after high school (e.g., college and career goals).

With support, students **develop their courses of study** based on their post-school goals.

Students are aware of their **career interests and skills**.

Students participate in **formal college and career guidance counseling** (e.g., review college and career assessment data, plan courses/experiences related to college and career preferences).