

PLAN Pilot Initial Implementation Phase Case Study:

Stanley G. Falk School

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“PLAN Pilot is going to fit really well with what we're already trying to accomplish for our students, which is to help them kind of find their path and see like what their future might look like.” – School leader

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Introduction to the study

This case studyⁱ reports on the experiences of district and school leaders, teachers, and staff at Stanley G. Falk School as they engaged in the implementation phase of the Performance-Based Learning and Assessment Networks (PLAN) Pilot program. Interviews and focus groups for this case study were conducted in December 2024. Research questions informing the PLAN Pilot study are:

1. Under what conditions can performance-based assessment approaches be adapted and implemented in a diverse range of public middle schools, high schools, and districts?
2. In transitioning schools from a test-driven to a performance-driven system of instruction, what support and other factors appear most important to ensure positive student outcomes?
3. What are the transformational shifts (e.g., classroom-based assessments, classroom routines, and instructional practices) made by the pilot schools?
 - a. What are the short- and mid-term outcomes (stakeholder awareness, understanding of and support for PBLA, and changes in professional practices) at the pilot schools?

Each school in the PLAN Pilot is networked with other schools in a focus area to support their performance-based learning and assessment (PBLA) implementation. Each focus area is also supported by a Technical Assistance Center (TAC). The focus areas are: a) Career & Technical Education and Work-Based Learning; b) Inquiry-Based Approaches with Learner Profiles; c) Project-Based Learning and Performance-Based Assessment Tasks. Focus area A is supported by Questar III BOCES and focus areas B and C are supported by Modern Learners.

Stanley G. Falk School is in focus area A.

School Context

"[Falk School] is an extremely diverse population which I think makes the setting really unique. And you're having students and staff interact with people who they probably never would have otherwise." – Principal

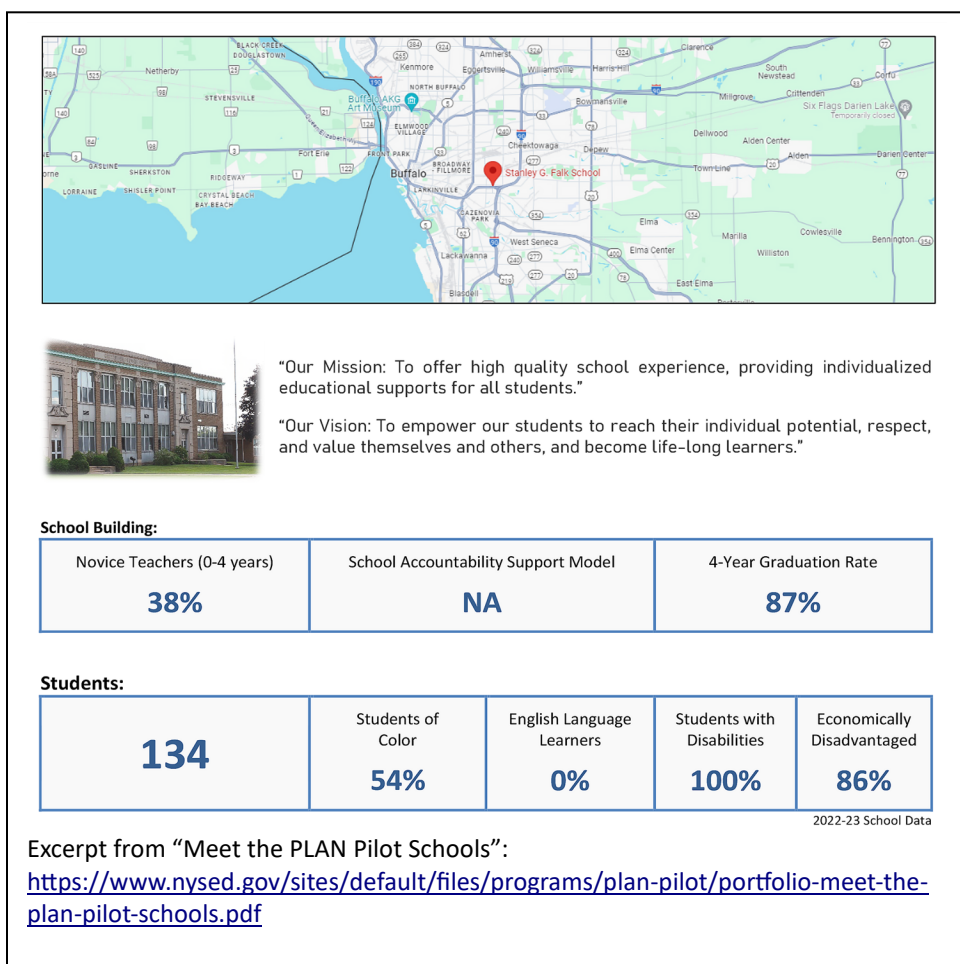
Geographic Location

The Stanley G. Falk School is located in Cheektowaga, New York, and serves students in grades 7-12 from over 30 local school districts including urban areas like Buffalo, suburbs such as West Seneca and Orchard Park, and rural regions like Albion and Fillmore.

Community Demographic Description

The Falk School is the largest special education day school in New York State, with a capacity for 630 students. Although all students have Individual Education Plans (IEPs), the student body is highly diverse, including students classified as emotionally disabled or having Other Health Impairments (OHI). The school provides a structured environment with a

Figure 1: Stanley G. Falk School Description



6:1:1 student-to-teacher-to-aide ratio, focusing on behavioral and emotional support. The staff is close-knit, with many teachers starting as aides and progressing to teaching roles. The school emphasizes therapeutic crisis intervention (TCI) and has a strong focus on social-emotional learning.

Reasons for Participating in PLAN Pilot

"We are excited to have a seat at the table because our population is often not part of the conversation." - Principal

The leadership team who took part in this study viewed PLAN Pilot as part of their overall goal to better prepare students for employment and adult life. To this end, the school aims to develop more community partnerships and provide students with real-life experiences and career exploration opportunities. Many also explained how PLAN Pilot aligns with the school's goals of helping students find their paths and demonstrating proficiency in various ways beyond traditional exams. As a school leader explained, "it's been a really exciting ride for us since we were accepted [to the Pilot], and the teachers are really excited... about the possibilities that exist for students to demonstrate proficiency in other ways." As the principal's quote above suggests, several educators believed that participating in the PLAN Pilot provided a valuable opportunity for the voices of students with special needs to be heard by policymakers.

Highlights

PBLA Implementation Challenges

Hesitancy towards Change

One challenge related to PBLA raised by participants is the potential reluctance to change among both teachers and students. Some expressed concern that teachers may feel pressured to implement new PBLA methods without the proper training and were more comfortable relying on pedagogies and curricula they had already utilized. A school leader felt that veteran teachers may struggle more with the changes since they were accustomed to preparing their students to pass the Regents Exams. Some educators also worried that students may resist the change to PBLA even if the content was more relevant to their lives. A school leader observed that students are used to the style of learning which is tied to tests: "[T]hey value the right answer more than... understanding how to get a right answer."

Balancing Multiple Responsibilities

Educators at the Falk School felt that the shift towards PBLA – and away from solely relying on the Regents Exams to measure students' progress – was a beneficial change for their student population. Teachers, however, articulated concerns about balancing implementing PBLA alongside their other demands. One explained the difficulty of "tackling the PBLA focus while keeping that content and conceptual rigor that you need for the kids who want that Regents level." "It feels like two ships sailing," she said, referring to implementing PBLA in the context of Regents exams still being in use.

Navigating Logistics and Distributing Resources

Logistical challenges such as providing sufficient staffing of substitute teachers during PBLA professional development sessions as well as the time and resources needed to plan for and implement PBLA shifts in

practice were mentioned by educators. The principal explained, "Staffing is the largest challenge to facilitating professional development... we don't have traditional substitute teachers." Although many acknowledged that professional development was crucial for the successful implementation of PBLA, the principal noted the need to incentivize teachers to participate. "You pay them for their time, or you compensate them if they're doing something over and beyond their peers," she explained.

Ambiguity and the Need for Examples

Despite their enthusiasm for PBLA, educators expressed feelings of uncertainty and the desire for more resources and clear guidelines on how PBLA implementation should look. The principal explained, "I feel like the lack of... a more detailed roadmap has been challenging." Teachers also echoed this sentiment, seeking more examples and frameworks to guide their implementation of PBLA. One explained how additional resources would help guide her: "...giving lots of examples ... I think that's what I would most want— like more of an idea bank." Accurately assessing students' work in performance-based tasks was viewed as another challenge. In particular, several educators described difficulties creating consistent scoring methods across various content areas.

PBLA Implementation Supports

Team Meetings and Continuous Collaboration

Falk educators highlighted the importance of regular meetings and teamwork in implementing the new skills required for PBLA. One educator described how consistent communication with staff members allowed for them to collaboratively develop capacity to implement PBLA: "We've had quite a few meetings set up... we definitely will continue to keep meeting until we figure out what the rubrics might look like of how to assess the students' skills." Falk educators have made use of "lead learners" and specialized training sessions. A school leader explained, "We have lead learners in each of our buildings [who are] able to provide the chair side assistance... and help them be able to apply strategies that are high leverage and highly impactful."

Leveraging Feedback Mechanisms

Educators also utilized feedback mechanisms to provide guidance on PBLA implementation. The principal highlighted a shift in "focusing on evaluative feedback rather than growth-based feedback." One way that leaders provided feedback and guidance to teachers was through observations. The principal, for instance, explained how she conducted regular "informal 10-15-minute observations" in classrooms, after which she would debrief with teachers. A school leader noted the benefit of these observations is the "feedback, and that leads to a conversation about what do they know, and what strategies are they employing versus what are some new things that they could be focusing in on to help the students own more of the learning instead of the teacher doing all of the work."

Relying on Internal and External Support

Educators at the Falk School emphasized the collaborative nature of their staff and overall felt that this would help them implement PBLA effectively. A school leader elaborated on how their students' unique needs necessitated collegiality:

We have a very, very close-knit group here... because of the population we teach, and the necessity for us is to be a very close-knit group, and really take a united front here. And I think that makes a huge difference in our ability to reach our students and to help our students go beyond some of the limitations that public schools experience.

In addition to the resources available within their school, Falk educators relied on regional resources for support. A teacher explained, "We have... our representative from the Questar BOCES over in Albany who... is a resource that we can check in with." (Questar III BOCES supports focus area A's TAC.) She continued, "Locally within the district, we do have an instructional administrator that is kind of like on-call to help us implement." Overall, educators hoped to make more use of resources provided by the state and one staff member noted that they were "aware of certain contact people that we can reach out to [at the state level]" for assistance. Educators also were eager to connect with their mentor school. "We're really interested to see what they're already implementing and really like to get their advice on the things that we want to try," explained a school leader.

PBLA Adaptations and Promising Practices

Real-World Application of Skills

Educators at the Falk School believed that PBLA coincided with their goal of preparing students for post-secondary success, whether in higher education or the workforce. Many educators, for example, described efforts to develop personalized learning experiences and job skills. The principal stated, "I hope to see students who know where their talents lie and have possible career pathways available to them as well as more personalized learning experiences available rather than just classwork." A staff member described one example of their approach as, "Can they look at like a work memo, comprehend it, and see how they're going to need to apply that to whatever task they're being sat down with?"

Developing Career Pathways with PBLA

Falk educators commented on their intent to further integrate their career and technical education (CTE) programming with PBLA. Noting the specific needs of their students, a priority of staff has been to build curricula from students' interests and skills in school to better prepare them for their life after graduation. To this end, teachers have sought to adapt their lessons to emphasize critical thinking over rote memorization. One teacher shared, "This last year is really dialed up like application to student lives... there's a lot more like bringing your own voice and thought." Another educator explained how she was "brainstorming what possible career assessments we could use and how the performance-based experiences in school can relate and assist the students now to help them later on when they're out of school." In addition, several educators described the efforts to connect Falk with local businesses to develop real-world, job training programs for their students.

Providing Student Choice and Voice

Another valued pedagogical approach conducive to PBLA described by Falk educators was increasing attention to students' voice and choice over their own learning. One example described by Falk educators was the "gradual release of responsibility model" which involves four phases designed to make instruction more student-centered. As a school leader explained, teachers utilizing this model

found it “pretty powerful in remembering that learning is a process.” Similarly, educators highlighted the need to provide students with more choices, especially as they transition to postsecondary contexts or the workforce. As a school leader explained:

You know, it's usually like, “Here's your schedule, here's what you're taking this year.” But you know, when you go to college, you're like, “Alright, well, what do you want to take, and what do you want to sign up for? And what do you want as your major?” You know they have to... be trusted to be able to make decisions for themselves.

Planful Implementation

The PBLA implementation team at Falk crafted clear plans for PBLA rollout. First, they prioritized literacy. School leaders explained this was carefully chosen as it builds “equal responsibility of the whole instructional team at the high school level” since “you're reading and writing and speaking in every classroom.” Further, it [literacy] will be “used all the time even after the students will graduate.” One leader expressed the belief that selecting highly impactful literacy competencies that are used in every classroom was an important strategy to bring faculty together for the Pilot in their building. The teachers seemed enthusiastic about the focus on literacy as a “need because our kids really struggle with reading [at grade] level.” They also explained that teachers have been learning about a literacy protocol to be used across all content areas and have focused on reading comprehension with the help of their literacy specialist and literacy lead learners. While a formal needs assessment does not seem to have contributed to this school’s selection of literacy as a focus, the teachers explained that the literacy committee members have helped determine where students are in their learning so teachers can target interventions.

Second, they are beginning PBLA implementation with the 9th grade class and then rolling it up as the students progress through each higher grade. This allows PBLA training and support to be aimed at a smaller cohort of teachers at the beginning. The teachers reported that they will be serving as support for the next group of (10th grade) teachers as PBLA is rolled up to their courses in the fall. Additionally, these teachers expect to be tasked with supporting staff in other buildings, should PBLA be expanded in the future.

Summary and Conclusions

Using PBLA to Make Learning Relevant for Diverse Learners

At Falk, educators emphasized the benefits of PBLA. In particular, those who participated in interviews and focus groups commented on the potential for PBLA to provide valuable learning opportunities for their diverse student population. A staff member explained the benefits of PBLA as compared with traditional exams: “I think performance-based is actually going to help our population here rather than having them sit down and take a Regents Exam.”

Educators also viewed PBLA as a way to further the goals of providing hands-on learning opportunities which were engaging and relevant to students’ lives. A staff member explained how these approaches could help keep the “attention” of students. She continued, “Doing something more PBLA compared to

sitting down and writing something or sitting down and taking the test, I think that it's truly going to... help students become more successful.”

Making Resources Count

A recurring challenge mentioned by participants at the Falk School was the need for more resources to support their implementation of PBLA. On one hand, leaders explained the logistical obstacles to delivering PD to staff due to the lack of available and qualified substitute teachers. Others described the need for more examples of lessons or assessment rubrics which could help provide clear guidance on PBLA implementation. For instance, the principal described “struggling a little bit” with the “lack of clarity” about how PBLA should be implemented. Despite these reported challenges, educators utilized a range of resources at their school and drew on the collaborative culture which characterized their school to support their learning. In addition, educators at Falk partnered with their PLAN TAC operated by Questar III BOCES for additional support and discussed their intentions to utilize more resources provided by New York State including their mentor school.

Conclusion

At Falk School, educators strive to make the learning experiences for their students authentic, engaging, and relevant. Their primary goal, as articulated by staff members, is to ensure that their students are prepared for their lives after high school. Through additional job training, community partnerships, and a growing CTE program, Falk School offers their diverse student population rich opportunities to develop their skills and interests.

As many educators explained, the implementation of PBLA offered a unique way to further these goals. Educators also commented positively on the potential for PBLA to offer their students an alternative to the Regents Exams and hoped that their participation in PLAN Pilot would allow the voices of their students to meaningfully contribute to discussions about education in New York State.

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ⁱ This case study is one of a series of qualitative case studies conducted by the PLAN Pilot research team. Since the PLAN Program is designed around building understanding of what’s needed to change the paradigm of teaching and learning in New York State, these case studies are crafted to help New York explore the conditions and supports schools and educators need to shift instructional practices. The PLAN Program’s goals include: 1. Establishing a field-informed set of recommendations for transitioning to a statewide assessment strategy that incorporates multiple measures of student learning, with a focus on PBLA. These recommendations will: (a) address key principles of equity, transparency, validity, and reliability; (b) identify key supports and conditions for schools to transition to assessment systems that use multiple measures; and (c) present possible solutions for addressing barriers to implementation at the school, district, and state level; 2. Establishing field-informed road maps for transitioning to PBLA that support schools and districts to shift to a multiple measures system built around a culture of PBLA. These road maps will be developed from the experiences of the PLAN Pilot Schools and will focus on the shifts schools and districts need to make in order for PBLA to be successfully implemented. This case study comprises of materials that are envisioned to address information and guidance needs ranging from assessment design and development to curriculum and instruction, family/caregiver engagement and communication, professional development and support, and budgeting and resource allocation.