

PLAN Pilot Initial Implementation Phase Case Study: Johnson City High School

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Authors: Kate Jarrard & Kristen C. Wilcox

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“I think that there is a fear always of changing how you teach or what you do. But I think that we’re changing it... and I think... the consensus here... is towards something that’s going to be better.”

- Principal

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Introduction to the Study

This case studyⁱ reports on the experiences of district and school leaders, teachers, and staff at Johnson City High School as they engaged in the implementation phase of the Performance-Based Learning and Assessment Networks (PLAN) Pilot program. Interviews and focus groups were conducted in January 2025.

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 TAC – Questar III BOCES and focus areas B and C are supported by Modern Learners.

Johnson City High School is in focus area A.

School Context

“[Post-COVID,] we’re definitely at a point now where...we’re having better attendance, better discipline referrals...everything’s going more in the direction towards learning.” - Principal

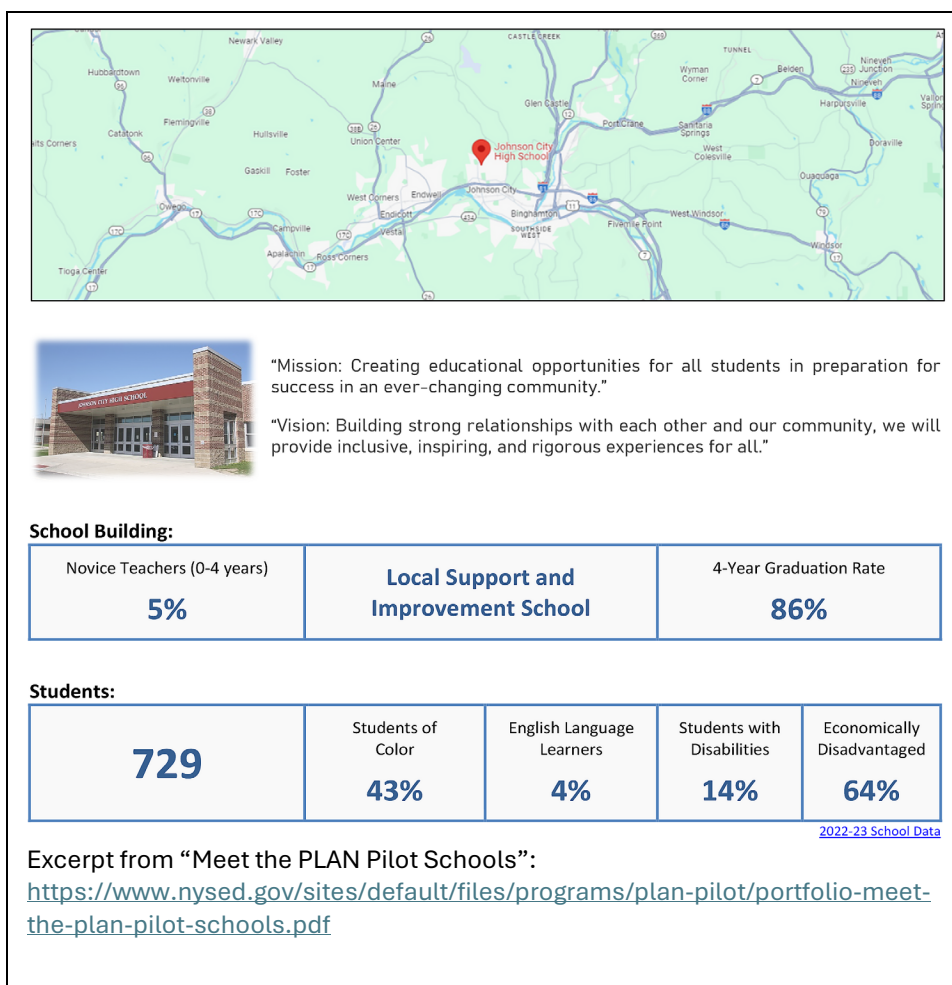
Geographic Location

Johnson City High School is a small city public school located in the Southern Tier of New York, just outside Binghamton, and serves grades 9-12.

Community Demographic Description

Johnson City High School serves approximately 700 students with a broad curriculum, including numerous Advanced Placement and dual credit courses, as well as access to Career and Technical Education (CTE) through BOCES. Located in an urban-suburban area, educators described their school as “high needs” in that approximately 64% of its students are identified as economically disadvantaged. The

Figure 1: Johnson City High School Description



student population is diverse and includes an increasing number of English language learners (ELLs) and students requiring additional support. A teacher explained, “We’ve always had a relatively significant population of [English language learners]...but much larger [in] our population than we used to have, which the district is struggling a little bit to accommodate.”

The school culture is described as collaborative and supportive, with a strong recovery from the disruptions caused by COVID-19. As one teacher noted, “There’s a culture of collaboration and support that...in my field work and student teaching in other districts I didn’t see as much.”

Reasons for Participating in the PLAN Pilot

According to educators interviewed at the school, the school’s participation in the PLAN Pilot appears to be driven by a desire to better serve its diverse student body and adapt instructional practices to meet evolving needs. However, a teacher raised concerns about how well new instructional models will serve ELLs and students with special needs, in their words, “because they really do best with direct instruction.” Despite these concerns, the school’s leadership and teaching staff expressed a commitment to innovation and continuous improvement, supported by a strong focus on student academic outcomes.

Highlights

This section of this case study highlights findings from data collected in focus groups and interviews with Johnson City High School leaders and educators and PBLA-related documents they shared.

PBLA Implementation Challenges

Necessary Coordination and Support

One of the central challenges to implementing PBLA in Johnson City has been in providing the coordination and support required to make instructional and assessment shifts. The leadership team has made efforts to provide structured support through professional development (PD), external consultants, and internal leadership, including district- and building-level staff. In particular, the assistant principal was recognized as a key figure in finding, evaluating, and organizing resources while guiding staff through the PBLA shift process. Staff have stayed after school for meetings related to this work, and PD days have been designated to PLAN Pilot initiatives. The principal explained all of this aims to “try pushing [the teachers] in that direction to get to the point where they’re trying something this year, and they’re able to share it out at the end of this year.”

Digital Literacy Gaps

A significant concern raised by teachers is the lack of digital literacy among students, which poses a barrier to implementing project-based and problem-based learning models. Contrary to common assumptions about “digital natives,” Johnson City High School teachers are finding many students struggle with basic computer skills and critical digital literacy competencies. One teacher explained that, “The students that we are teaching currently have almost no digital literacy...they

really struggle to use a computer, a laptop, or a desktop.” This gap further includes difficulties in evaluating the reliability of sources, navigating digital platforms, and using technology for learning. Teachers expressed concern that these foundational skills are essential for the success of their PLAN Pilot work, and that, without them, students may be at a disadvantage. “If we’re going to move in this direction of project-based and problem-based [learning]... all the kids need more of that [digital literacy support],” one teacher explained.

Chronic Absenteeism

Student chronic absenteeism is yet another challenge in implementing PBLA. Teachers reported that some students attend school only sporadically, making it difficult to maintain momentum in long-term, collaborative projects. “We do have a pocket of population here that are chronically absent...,” one teacher explained, “some students that come maybe once a week, maybe a couple of times every two weeks.” A teacher reported this inconsistency creates anxiety for teachers who invest significant time in designing and scaffolding project-based units. When students miss key instructional days, it becomes difficult to catch them up without derailing the flow of the project for others. “If I do put my small steps together, if someone missed the first three days—yikes, that’s just a lot to balance,” a teacher explained. “Little anxiety overload there.” Chronic absenteeism disrupts instructional continuity and undermines the effectiveness of project-based learning, hindering successful implementation of PBLA shifts.

PBLA Implementation Supports

Leadership Structure

The implementation of the PLAN Pilot at Johnson City High School is supported by a distributed leadership model, with clear roles at both the district and building levels. The assistant superintendent initiated the PLAN Pilot application and rollout, but current leadership responsibilities were intentionally delegated to a building-level assistant principal. As explained by a district leader:

I worked with our superintendent in really kind of pitching this to one of the assistant principals at our high school as an opportunity for her to take over the leadership of this initiative. And so, at this point my role has become more support and advisement. I still attend all of the meetings with the State. I attend the building-level meetings, but I don’t run them. I help to plan them, and I’m available to help with any level of implementation that’s necessary. But the leadership has really been given to one of our assistant principals...so I’m kind of more of the district liaison at this point.

This structure allows for localized decision-making while maintaining district-level support and oversight. The assistant principal has taken a proactive role in organizing resources, planning meetings, and maintaining communication through a dedicated section on the school’s website. The assistant superintendent touted the assistant principal’s work, explaining, “She set up a new section of the [website] just for PLAN Pilot... so that not only the team members would be able to get information and resources there, but anyone on the staff...could see minutes from the meetings...and additional resources.”

Creative Use of Time and Resources

One of the major challenges in implementing new initiatives is finding time for collaboration and training. The leadership team addressed this by creatively using substitutes, after-school time, and PD funds to support teacher participation. A school leader explained, “We’ve had subs come in...we’ve been able to provide some of our collaboration of teaming time...we did allocate some of our professional development funds and resources to be able to pay teachers for an hour of their time.” This flexibility has allowed for more inclusive participation and has helped build momentum.

The school is also planning to embed collaboration time into future daily schedules to sustain the work. A school leader stated, “If there are teams that want to collaborate, we’ll try to look at making schedules that have embedded collaboration time for those staff members.”

In addition to the regular meetings and dedicated professional development time built into the school calendar to support the initiative, the team plans to continue the work over the summer, demonstrating a continued commitment to the initiative.

Targeted Professional Development and Teacher Buy-In

While there is strong administrative support for professional development, the quality and relevance of PD offerings have been mixed. Teachers appreciate the opportunity to attend external PD sessions, especially when they take the initiative themselves. However, some expressed frustration with generic, motivational-style PD sessions brought in for the whole staff. One teacher expressed “I don’t need to be told...to find my motivation to be a teacher... I think that we need to trim the fat and get down to brass tacks and bring in PD...for PBLA.”

While teachers emphasized the need for targeted, content-specific PD, particularly related to PBLA, there is also a recognition that some teachers may be reluctant to engage with PD unless it is directly relevant and brought into the building. The teacher explained “If a lot of teachers have been teaching to the test for a very long time... they may not necessarily want to go of their own accord to PD... I think that it does need to be brought to the building.”

A school leader shared free online PD resources and webinars from the New York State Education Department’s PLAN Pilot website but recognized uptake has been uneven by teachers. “There’s definitely a lot of resources there,” they explained, adding, “I’ve shared that with our team. I know some have explored it, but some are still in that, ‘What exactly is this part?’”

PBLA Adaptations and Promising Practices

Embracing Change

The leadership team at Johnson City emphasized a proactive and collaborative approach to educational change, particularly in response to new graduation measures and implementation of performance-based learning. The administrators expressed a strong desire to be at the forefront of educational reform. The principal explained, “We want to be at the front of that change. We want to be someone that can pilot this, that can work through things, and be in a good place when we do make those changes, that we have a great opportunity for our students and our staff here at the building.”

New initiatives and change can cause concern among those implementing them. However, the Johnson City administrators encouraged experimentation and risk-taking, reassuring staff that failure is part of the learning process. One of the building leaders disclosed, “We’re okay if it fumbles and if it doesn’t go well the first time, because we’re going to learn and grow together.”

Voluntary Participation and Ownership

Teachers joined the school’s PLAN Pilot committee voluntarily, motivated by a desire to be involved in shaping the process rather than having it imposed upon them. In a focus group, teachers expressed overall similar reasons to join the committee: “Why I jumped on here to see, let’s shape it instead of being told what to do. Let’s kind of shape it together, was my thought.” “I joined because I did the master teacher program through New York State, and I had a lot of training...and I kind of saw that fitting with this... I also kind of wanted to give my brain time to process changes versus just being told, and then having a limited amount of time and kind of be a part of that along the way.” “I also didn’t want to just have it sort of handed to me like ‘this is what we’re doing.’ I wanted to kind of see how the sausage is made and be a part of it if I could.”

Promoting Collaboration

A recurring theme related to promising practices for PBLA implementation was the emphasis on collaboration across classrooms and content areas. A building leader expressed that “our teams have had lots of opportunities to collaborate with one another, and through that work they’re seeing the value in collaborating, and they’re actually very eager to collaborate across content areas.” A teacher agreed, stating “another thing that I find really exciting about PBL is the interdisciplinary possibilities. I think that there’s endless opportunity for collaboration with other departments... I could think of something great for every single other class that’s being taught in this school... If done well and correctly, this could really make the students able to have that long-term learning, that deeper understanding where it lasts, and we are graduating more scientifically literate citizens.”

Gradual and Supported Implementation

Both leaders and teachers acknowledge the challenges of implementing PBLA and the need for ongoing support and professional development. The leadership has intentionally set modest goals for the first year, focusing on exploration and shared learning rather than immediate large-scale implementation. One building leader described this year’s implementation plan:

“We have to be willing to identify what each of the teachers’ goals are and how to support them individually on those goals, because...not everyone learns and grows at the same pace. And so, if we want to be authentic in how you would do performance-based learning and assessment with a class...we have to anticipate that our staff is going to go in different directions. Some are going to have a lot more of it happening, some might have less. Some might want to dive deep into rubrics, and some might want to be focusing more on ‘how can I get internships embedded within some of my current content?’ So we haven’t really solidified all of those goals. And I think that’s okay, because we’ve really just committed ‘let’s make it through this year on the learning and growing process and let’s try one thing out.’ So the hope is that at the end of the school year everybody will have something to

share out that they've done, and by sharing that out with the whole staff, maybe more staff will buy into the work.”

The teachers' request for targeted PD matches the building leader's plan, especially in areas like rubric development and aligning with new state standards. One teacher expressed, “If we're coming up with rubrics, that's not something I'm super familiar with.” The dedicated PD time built into the school calendar and plans to continue the work over the summer are intended to support the school's gradual implementation—including implementation of rubrics.

Summary and Conclusions

A recurring theme among Johnson City High School educators was the uncertainty surrounding the PBLA implementation expectations and the need for clearer guidance from the state. Stakeholders expressed a desire for a roadmap that outlines expectations and outcomes, as well as reassurance that adopting PBLA will not negatively impact the school in light of the existing state and federal accountability system. An administrator stated, “There will have to be some sort of explanation from the State in terms of how can schools move in this direction and not feel that there will be negative consequences when it comes to either teacher evaluation, student results and their transcripts, or school accountability.”

Additionally, the rollout of PBLA at Johnson City High School has been slower than anticipated, and, while the state is beginning to respond with more resources, the initial guidance has left schools in a holding pattern. One of the leaders explained, “We should be given more direction in terms of specifically like a roadmap for outcomes... the rollout has been a little bit, maybe slower than anticipated.”

Future Directions

Still, Johnson City school leaders emphasized a proactive stance toward change, highlighting a culture of collaboration and experimentation. They aim to be at the forefront of educational transformation, preparing both staff and students for new graduation measures and instructional strategies. Classroom practices are shifting toward student-centered learning, with teachers acting more as facilitators of learning than sages on their stages. There is a visible increase in student engagement, peer collaboration, and integration of community resources. One of the leaders shared their vision: “I see kids collaborating... the teacher more of a facilitator.... More... ‘what do you guys want to learn today?’”

However, there is also a noted gap in collaboration with mentor schools, which could be a valuable source of inspiration and shared learning. An administrator noted, “We haven't really had a connection with our mentor schools... it'd be really great to see all of those mentor schools... come up with some sort of professional video clip of like, what is their ‘wow’ like?”

Conclusion

In summary, Johnson City High School serves an increasingly diverse student population with varying needs and abilities. The PLAN Pilot team of leaders and teachers is taking proactive and collaborative steps to implement PBLA successfully. The school staff highlight setting modest goals and providing targeted professional development as assets towards supporting each teacher in integrating PBLA in their classrooms.

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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. These materials are envisioned to provide information and guidance ranging from assessment design and development to curriculum and instruction, family/caregiver engagement and communication, professional development and support, and budgeting and resource allocation.