PLAN Pilot Initial Implementation Phase Case Study: Port Chester High School

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"The goal of this [work in the PLAN Pilot] is to achieve our Portrait of a Graduate." – School Leader

"Why not be in on the ground floor of something that is potentially coming down the pike?" - Teacher

"It [PBLA] leads to students owning their education more...and taking more accountability." - Teacher

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Introduction to the Study

This case study[i] reports on the experiences of district and school leaders, teachers, and staff at Port Chester High 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 April 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 supports 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.

Port Chester High School is in focus area C.
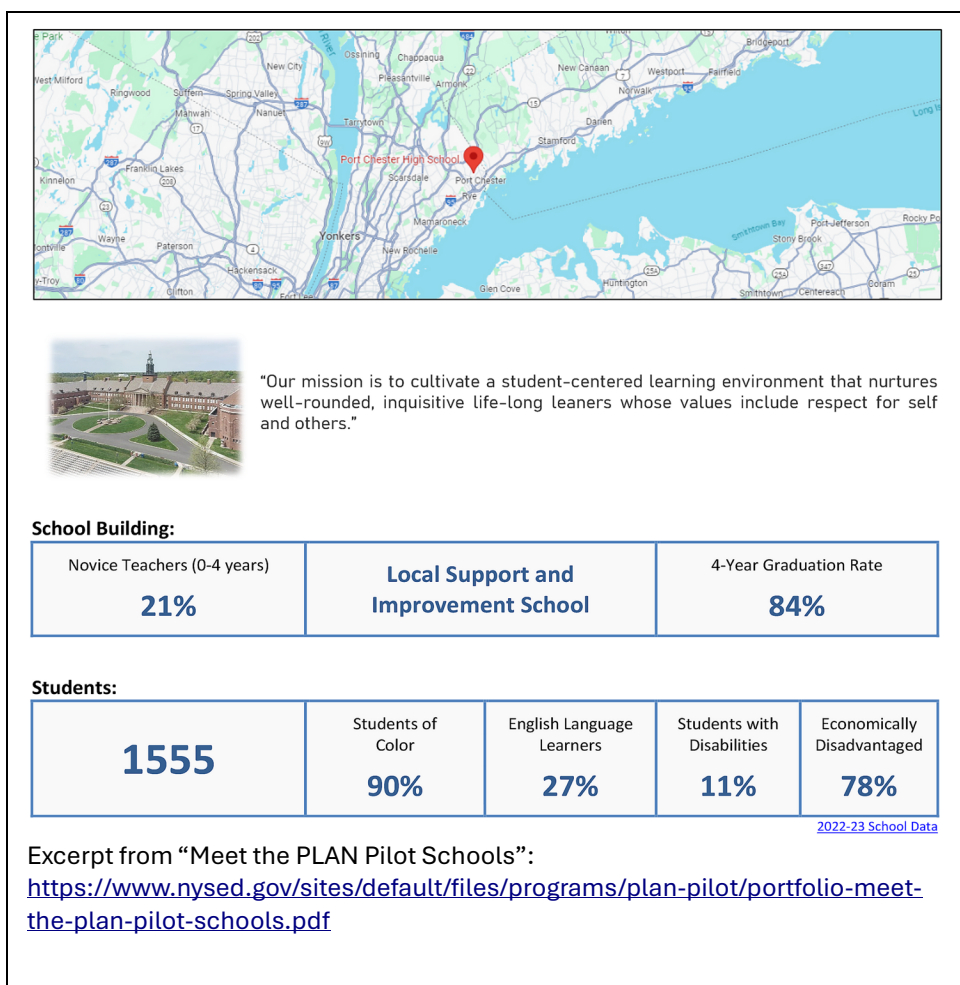
School Context

Geographic Location

The school is located in Port Chester, a suburban community about 40 minutes outside of New York City.

Community Demographic Description

The community is described as small and close-knit, with ongoing urban development downtown. A study participant noted that "The community itself is pretty small... with a lot of hustle and bustle that's now being built downtown." Port

Figure 1: Port Chester High School Description

"Our mission is to cultivate a student–centered learning environment that nurtures well–rounded, inquisitive life-long leaners whose values include respect for self and others."

School Building:

Novice Teachers (0-4 years)	Local Support and Improvement School	4-Year Graduation Rate
21%		84%

Students:

	Students of Color	English Language Learners	Students with Disabilities	Economically Disadvantaged
1555	90%	27%	11%	78%

2022-23 School Data

Excerpt from "Meet the PLAN Pilot Schools": https://www.nysed.gov/sites/default/files/programs/plan-pilot/portfolio-meet-the-plan-pilot-schools.pdf

Chester is a diverse, working-class community with a wide range of income levels. The school is designated as a Title I school, indicating a high percentage of students from low-income families with 76% of students identified as economically disadvantaged in the 2024-25 school year.

Port Chester High School serves approximately 1,570 students, with a significant Hispanic/Latino population (84%) and a relatively large number of English Language Learners (ELLs) (27.83%). The faculty includes around 140 teachers and support staff. The school is an International Baccalaureate (IB) school and offers a robust Advanced Placement (AP) program, along with a Smart Scholars Early College High School Program offering dual enrollment opportunities for students to earn up to 24 transferrable college credits (entirely for free) while in high school. As one school leader explained, "We offer robust AP course loads for our students… and just started with Smart Scholars to be able to offer dual enrollment programs."

School leaders and teachers who participated in focus groups for this research attested to the school culture being deeply rooted in community continuity, with many staff and students having generational ties to the school. "You'll see teachers who come back to teach, who used to be students here… students whose uncles and parents and grandparents went to school here," as one educator noted.

Reasons for Participating in The PLAN Pilot

"I wanted to be a part of this change." - Teacher

According to participants in this research, the school joined the PLAN Pilot program to proactively adapt to future changes in graduation requirements. One school leader said, "We thought it'd be a good opportunity… to get a little bit of a head start on decisions… from the Blue Ribbon Commission about… adopting these new graduation measures."

The leadership team aims to align the PLAN Pilot with "… achieving our Portrait of a Graduate" vision, emphasizing project-based learning and performance-based assessments over traditional, test-driven instruction and assessment. A teacher reiterated the alignment of PBLA with her own teaching philosophy, "Students have to perform… and show what they've learned, not like, 'do you know this?' But show us what you know." While a philosophical fit to making PBLA shifts was important for inclusion in the initial implementation phase of the work, Port Chester teachers involved in the Pilot work were also carefully selected from core disciplines to try out PBLA shifts in non-Regent's Exam-level classes, allowing for focused experimentation without overlapping with state testing requirements. "We tried to identify teachers from each of our four main core disciplines… in our non-Regents level classes," a school leader noted.

As educators who work with relatively large numbers of ELLs, Port Chester teachers expressed being motivated to innovate their teaching to better support diverse learners, seeing project-based learning and generally supporting student ownership of learning as a good fit to their ELLs' needs. In addition, some teachers saw the PLAN Pilot as a chance to collaborate, experiment, and tailor instruction, especially in elective classes. As one teacher expressed, "I already had electives in my schedule… so this would be a great way to test drive project-based learning."

Highlights

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

PBLA Implementation Challenges

Uncertainties in Teaching Assignments and Implementation Timelines

A recurring theme around PBLA implementation challenges at Port Chester is related to the lack of clarity about year-to-year teaching assignments. Teachers expressed difficulty with planning when they do not know their teaching assignments from one year to the next. One teacher explained, "We don't necessarily know what we're teaching next year yet... we can maybe assume... but we don't really have that yet." Administrators also noted that the implementation timeline seemed to have shifted further out in time, making setting and meeting expectations challenging: "The timeline [for PBLA implementation] has been continuously pushed forward...," one leader reported. These uncertainties affect PBLA-related professional learning and curriculum planning and were identified as key hindrances to implementing PBLA more quickly at Port Chester High School.

Teacher Concerns about Implementation Challenges

Educators at Port Chester are generally supportive of PBLA in theory, but express concerns about practical implementation strategies, especially in their high-stakes testing environment. One administrator noted the risk involved in, and delicate balance between, innovation and student achievement: "If done well [PBLA], the kids learn much more... but if done just a little less than well... they learn way less." Meanwhile, teachers expressed worry about the potential for a dual-track system: "We're going to end up having two different courses, ... one for the kids who do not want to take the Regents Exam, and one for the kids who do." On a related note, teachers expressed concern about students' ability to transfer skills from project-based learning tasks to standardized tests: "Unless the instruction is so specific, they're not transferring some of those skills... to a specific question [on a test]."

Collaboration, Support, and Professional Development Needs

The interviews and focus groups highlight the need for structured collaboration time, real-world examples, and financial support for PBLA curriculum development. Port Chester teachers emphasize the lack of built-in collaboration time, with one teacher noting, "Collaboration not being built into the schedule." In addition, teachers described a desire for more concrete models rather than theoretical discussions. As a school leader explained, "Teachers always like models and examples... the more real examples or models of this stuff in action, the better." Another practical concern around more wide-scale PBLA implementation related to financial incentives being necessary to encourage participation in curriculum writing. One leader said, "Teachers aren't going to want to do after-school planning or summer planning for free." Finally, leaders acknowledge early anxiety due to vague directives around PBLA implementation. One leader described the scenario as: "We were just told that this was coming... people started to get very anxious." However, once a

smaller pilot group was formed, a school leader described that the rollout became more manageable: "Now that we have this small set... we have a much better method of how we're going to roll it out."

Overall, while there is broad philosophical support for PBLA, logistical hurdles, assessment alignment issues, and lack of clarity about timelines and expectations have created significant barriers to more attention being paid to PBLA implementation. Teachers and administrators alike call for clearer guidance, more practical examples, and structured support systems to ensure successful implementation.

PBLA Implementation Supports

Strategic Foundations and Pre-Existing Initiatives

The district benefited from existing structures and early adopters, which created a foundation for smoothing initial PBLA implementation in Port Chester. For example, the Seal of Biliteracy initiative, already in place before the PLAN Pilot, created alignment and momentum for the shift to PBLA. A school leader recounted that, "Having a Seal of [Bi]literacy in place prior to becoming part of the Pilot brought synergy to the work." As mentioned above, administrators strategically selected teachers already engaged in project-based practices. "We selected individuals that already have started and done this work in their classroom in pockets to try to bring them together to do a more holistic approach to it," a leader explained. These early adopters included teachers who had previously been using portfolios, metacognitive journals, and long-term projects.

Mentor Schools and Technical Assistance Center Support

A key support structure for PBLA implementation in Port Chester has been the connection with mentor schools and PLAN Program professional learning provider Modern Learners. Mentor schools have offered valuable models and, though differences in scale and context are noted (a school leader explained "Many of these mentor schools have 400 students... we have over 1,500 students"), teachers and administrators expressed valuing having mentor schools to turn to as well as having Modern Learners' modules and resources. Monthly collaboration meetings with Modern Learners are seen as helpful, though not always as differentiated as desired, as a school leader pointed out, "Some [schools] are a lot further along... some are a lot further in the beginning stages... it's hard to see where you fit."

Professional Development and Internal Structures

While some teachers feel PBLA-related professional development (PD) has been too limited, others appreciate the structured meeting times and collaborative planning that has been offered: "They [school leaders] embed those times into our day, you know, on a weekly basis." Despite this, some teachers expressed feelings that PD has not been sufficiently targeted: "I can't necessarily say that the PDs have been so... supportive of this program in general."

In sum, PBLA implementation in Port Chester has been aided by a multi-layered support system including:

- Pre-existing initiatives like the Seal of Biliteracy
- Strategic teacher selection and internal champions
- Mentorship from other schools
- Resources and frameworks from Modern Learners
- Structured collaboration time

While some gaps remain—particularly in differentiated PD and broader teacher engagement—the district is leveraging a thoughtful combination of internal and external supports to build capacity and foster sustainable changes in teaching and assessment practices.

PBLA Adaptations and Promising Practices

Gradually Shifting Instructional Practices

Port Chester educators involved in the PLAN Pilot initial implementation work are gradually moving from traditional models to more student-centered, process-oriented approaches. One administrator describes the evolution of the English language arts (ELA) curriculum as an example:

> "We used to be very traditional… We then switched over to voice and choice… but it's become fragmented… Our goal is… not getting so distracted by test prep."

Educators reported that there is a growing emphasis on valuing the learning process, not just the final product: "Being able for students to be collaborative in the process… and understand why it [a problem-solving process or task] is being done," explained one leader. While teachers express a desire to deepen student understanding, they still feel constrained by testing demands. A teacher recounted this tension in describing one of her recent lessons: "There were like four different opportunities that I could have paused… but I just zoomed right through them because I have got to get through the material."

Work-in-Progress Mindsets

The data collected in this study reflects a work-in-progress mindset around PBLA implementation, with educators still in the exploratory and planning phases. A teacher echoed her colleagues' experiences so far in advancing PBLA implementation: "We've kind of been in the exploratory phase… we've brought our experiences of what we already are doing [to the PLAN Pilot work]." While collaboration among these teachers is happening, time remains a challenge: "We all have full schedules… we've met maybe four or five times." Overall, Port Chester educators are taking a thoughtful and evolving approach to PBLA implementation.

Key promising practices evolving in Port Chester are:

- Rubric development as a tool for clarity, consistency, and reflection
- Shifts toward student-centered learning, emphasizing process and understanding
- Early-stage implementation marked by collaboration, experimentation, and a desire for deeper learning

Summary and Conclusions

Bridging the Theory vs. Practice Gap

The primary outcome of the initial implementation phase in Port Chester points to a disconnect between theoretical and practical classroom application of PBLA. While educators appreciate the support from Technical Assistance Centers, they have found some of these learning opportunities too abstract. A school leader noted, "Teachers always like models and examples of this being applied in real practice... And then teachers all say, you know, okay, what am I doing tomorrow?" This quote underscores the need for tangible, classroom-ready strategies rather than broad conceptual discussions around PBLA.

An important take-away from the interviews and focus groups with Port Chester educators is the need to clear up confusion around the definition of PBLA and its relationship to project-based learning specifically. Administrators described the State's broad and inclusive definition: "It includes, like multiple choice tests all the way to... writing a song about photosynthesis." Yet, they note this breadth creates ambiguity: "The definition seems... extremely broad... I think they're [NYSED] doing that strategically... to learn from us." To address this issue, Port Chester educators are turning to tools like the EQ (Emotional Intelligence) rubric provided to them by their TAC – Modern Learners – to "ground us," as a school leader indicated, in quality elements of PBLA.

Future Directions

Teachers propose making PBLA more relevant and engaging by connecting it to students' lives and communities. A social studies teacher envisioned civic engagement projects as "Maybe bringing community members into the classroom... someone from the local government... run a voter registration drive... collaborate in a mock trial." A science teacher described the potential of building out more hands-on forensic projects like this one: "We just dusted for fingerprints... and at the end of the year they create their own crime scene scenario." These examples highlight the potential of PBLA to foster authentic, interdisciplinary learning experiences.

Conclusion

Port Chester educators emphasize the need for more time, visibility into successful models, and peer collaboration. Importantly, teachers want to see PBLA in action: "Even if it's not a visit... maybe a video of a school... or a Zoom with a teacher in another school." They also seek classroom-specific examples: "I would love to see it in a classroom that is like identical to mine." These suggestions point to the importance of contextualized professional development and peer-to-peer learning opportunities. Together, the data collected from Port Chester educators reveal a clear path forward for advancing PBLA implementation:

- Bridge the theory-practice gap with concrete examples and classroom-ready tools.
- Clarify PBLA's scope using shared frameworks like the EQ rubric.
- Design projects with real-world relevance, especially through community partnerships.
- Support teachers with time, money, visibility, and collaboration opportunities, including virtual exchanges and virtual access to model classrooms.

An unexpected finding from this case study relates to classroom assignments from year to year, inhibiting interdisciplinary PBLA planning. This requires a more distal view of PBLA implementation over more than single school years.

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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.