

PLAN Pilot Implementation Phase Case Study: Saugerties Senior High School

Published: June 2025

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Interviews Conducted: January–April 2025

“Students get a much more robust educational experience... PBLA lends itself greatly to kids finding what they’re passionate about.” – 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 Saugerties Senior High School as they engaged in the implementation phase of the Performance-Based Learning and Assessment Networks (PLAN) Pilot program.

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.

Saugerties Senior High School is in focus area A.

School Context

“In my opinion, it is an incredible community. We are a quaint town, nestled in the foothills of the Catskills, and also along the Hudson River, which is beautiful.” – District Leader

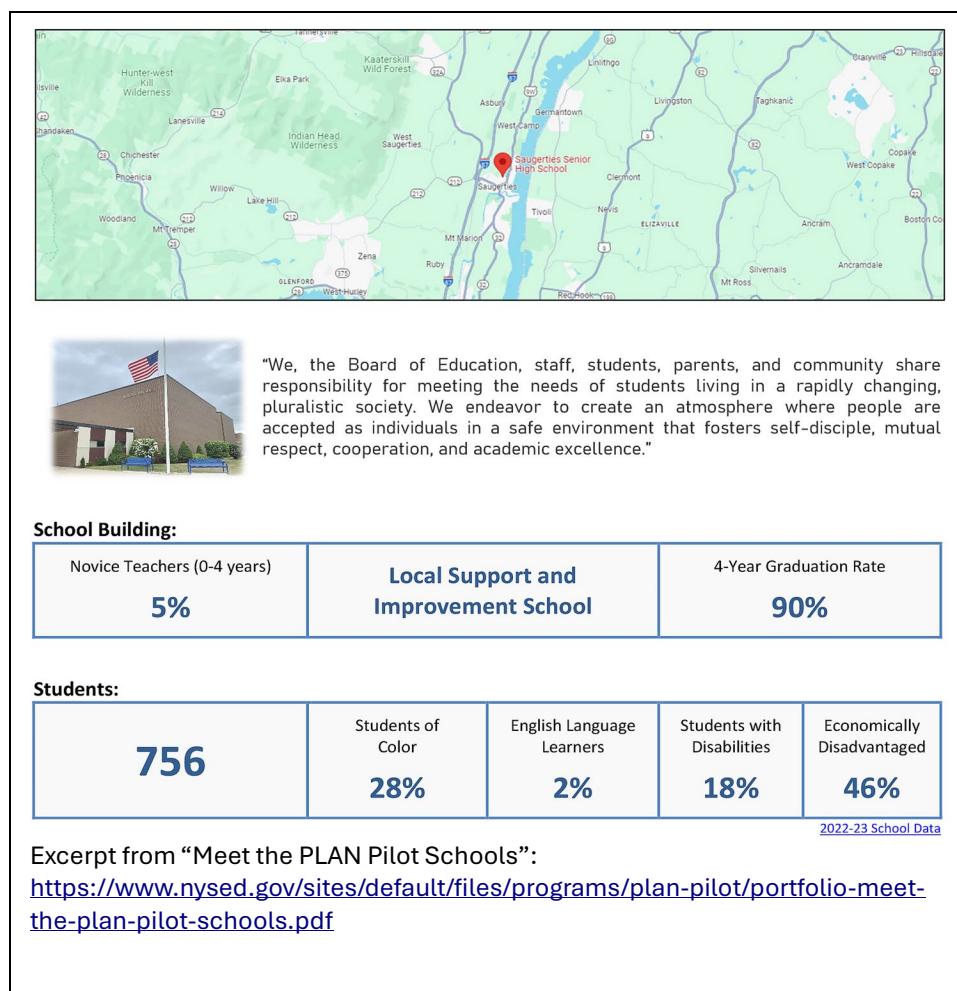
Geographic Location

Saugerties Senior High School is located in a small suburban town situated in the Catskill Mountain range. The school is located in Ulster County, New York approximately 45 miles south of New York's capital, Albany.

Community Demographic Description

Saugerties Senior High School was characterized as having a strong sense of local identity, with many alumni returning to teach in the district. The district serves approximately 2,241 students and employed around 473 staff members in the 2024-25 school year. The student body is predominantly white, with a small but growing population of Central American students. Saugerties educators who participated in interviews and focus groups described the school as having a strong connection

Figure 1: Saugerties Senior High School Description



to the surrounding community. “It’s definitely a grassroots district,” explained a district leader—noting how the school often served as the site for popular community activities such as sporting events.

Reasons for Participating in PLAN Pilot

Saugerties educators noted several reasons for participating in PLAN Pilot, including the hope that performance-based learning and assessment would help educators move away from the more traditional model of education and towards student-centered instruction. A district leader, for instance, noted the tendency for the district to maintain the “status quo” and explained that PLAN Pilot is part of a larger shift in the school’s culture that entails making learning experiences more authentic. These changes also coincide with professional learning opportunities and partnerships with organizations like High Tech High School and Ulster County BOCES as well as the addition of new staff members who have experience in project-based learning. “We have some new teachers who are really doing amazing work and come with different experiences,” explained a school leader.

Highlights

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

PBLA Implementation Challenges

“We see kids who are listening to the directions of their teachers and sitting quietly. But we really want to see more of the kids taking ownership, talking to each other, really driving the learning.” – School Leader

Overcoming Resistance to Change

One of the most persistent challenges to implementing PBLA in Saugerties is shifting away from teacher-centered instruction that has been the mainstay of many veteran teachers. While Saugerties’ veteran teachers have spent their entire careers in the district, which fosters a sense of stability, such an environment can also contribute to resistance to pedagogical changes. “We are a district that’s really okay with being okay,” explained a district leader. While acknowledging these difficulties, a teacher elaborated on the steps they are taking to foster buy-in among teachers who might be skeptical of the shift towards PBLA:

Look, anytime there's change... not everybody is always on board right away.... I think a lot of times people in a school tend to think that something is just a new initiative, and then it's going to be over. I think that would be part of the message that I think we're trying to get across. It's not necessarily just a new initiative, and we're waiting for leadership to change and then it falls by the wayside. This is really something that we're truly trying to embed and truly trying to take over and move forward with, and not just something that we're doing for this school year.

Managing Constraints on Resources

Participants in interviews and focus groups listed time as a resource that was both too limited and necessary to continue working towards full implementation of PBLA. Although leaders expressed sincere commitment to the shift to PBLA, they also recognized that teachers needed additional time for planning, collaboration, and feedback. Such time is difficult to find given teaching loads

and the additional demands of Regents Exams. One teacher explained, for instance, that she and her colleagues teach five classes with 120 students, making it difficult to find the time to develop PBLA-related content. Another teacher felt that, despite their enthusiasm for PBLA, the 42-minute periods sometimes pose challenges for teachers seeking to utilize more student-centered pedagogies. “If we haven’t gotten to the big idea, you have to decide: revisit or just tell them,” she explained. The district’s financial constraints also pose challenges. A district leader explained that Saugerties receives significantly less foundation aid from the state than neighboring districts, limiting its ability to provide additional resources to further the work on PBLA.

Clarity about When and How to Use PBLA

Interviewees also described the need to give more clarity to teachers about what PBLA may look like in classroom settings and how it could be incorporated in different content areas. As the principal explained, one misconception held by some staff was that PBLA meant teachers could not use any forms of direct instruction:

Our students do need explicit and direct instruction for some things, and there's some things where it's just not appropriate. It's not appropriate for all day long when you're trying to teach a child phonics. Phonics instruction needs to be explicit and direct for most of our students. So it's about knowing the right time and doing it [PBLA] with fidelity, using rubrics and also having students self-assess.

Another significant issue raised by participants in this study is the tension between implementing PBLA and meeting the demands of standardized testing, particularly the Regents Exams, simultaneously. One teacher, for instance, explained the conflict between preparing students for the exams while also trying to foster critical thinking and inquiry through PBLA. “We’re trying so much to be like ‘Your thinking matters’... and then we still have to prepare them for Regents [Exams] where they’re right or they’re wrong.”

PBLA Implementation Supports

I feel like the leaders at our school, across elementary, and through the high school have a really, really strong vision for what academic excellence and moving the needle looks like and creating student-centered classrooms. – School Leader

Leading with a Vision

Although participants explained that the school is only in the initial stages of implementing PBLA, the district has developed a strong foundation from which they work. For instance, key members of their PLAN leadership team have extensive experience with PBLA and project-based inquiry gained through prior positions. To push the work forward, the district has assembled a diverse pilot team of teachers, including new hires with prior PBLA experience and veteran educators undergoing pedagogical shifts. As a district leader put it, “We have been trying to push the needle to really create a culture of learning.”

Two innovations were developed by the Saugerties leadership team which have helped guide the district’s work on PBLA. The first is a “philosophy of literacy” (See Figure 2 below) which, according to a district leader, serves as a “north star” to guide teachers’ approach to literacy in the district. The second is a “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) belief statement” which anchors the mission and vision of the district and features the voices and perspectives of students.

Figure 2: Saugerties Central School District's Philosophy of Literacy

SCSD PHILOSOPHY OF LITERACY

The Saugerties Central School District believes that literacy is a human right. Our students will engage in multiple literacies to explore the world and themselves, to connect with others and to solve problems within and beyond our community. Literacy instruction in Saugerties embraces research and standards-based instruction. We are committed to providing diverse, innovative, and joyful literacy experiences that prepare each student to be globally literate and reach 21st-century success.

A visit to High Tech High in San Diego, California in 2022 was also mentioned by several participants as instrumental in guiding the work on PBLA which followed. Leaders explained that their own version of PBLA was inspired by the visit and tailored to meet the needs of their student population. “We took High Tech High’s formula of PBLA but …‘Sawyer-ized’ [the school’s mascot] it to make it more approachable,” explained a district leader.

Learning through Professional Development

The primary way that PLAN team leaders have been driving the work forward is through localized professional development. At Saugerties, teachers receive intensive, structured professional development, including monthly half-day sessions and full-day workshops during Superintendent’s Conference Days. Rather than asking teachers to stay after class or come in on holidays, the district pulls teachers out of their classrooms to provide them with extended time. “They’re already here to teach, so we get everybody in the building that way, and they really need time in a room together to talk about their struggles,” said a district leader.

The leadership team also emphasizes modeling effective instructional practices during faculty meetings, transforming them into “teaching and learning meetings,” as a school leader put it. These sessions are thus not only designed to help teachers learn to implement PBLA but also to help foster buy-in through collaboration and by sharing control over the learning process. Participants, overall, felt that professional learning materials and opportunities delivered by the New York State Education Department and through their professional learning provider were not sufficient and instead felt more comfortable relying on internal guidance. Nonetheless, educators at Saugerties were eager to develop more meaningful collaboration with peer districts and mentor schools through the PLAN Pilot program.

PBLA Adaptations and Promising Practices

[PBLA is] really about releasing power and control and giving students the opportunity for voice and choice and really exploration, wonder, joy, and curiosity. – District Leader

Creating a Culture of Trust

Recognizing the challenges of implementing PBLA, the leadership team at Saugerties sought to create a culture of trust and experimentation in their school. “It’s really about creating a culture and space where our teachers feel safe enough to take a risk and make a mistake... It’s okay if the students fail and it’s okay if the teachers fail, too, because that’s part of the process,” explained the principal.

In these early stages of implementation, leaders felt the need to move slowly and encourage buy-in rather than impose PBLA as a top-down mandate. One teacher commented on the support they felt from leaders in their district:

They're really, really supportive of this work. They really believe in what we're doing and want to give us the space and freedom to figure this out, and they trust us, which I think isn't always something that's present in schools. I do feel like they're treating us as experts, which, I mean, it's a really fulfilling feeling to know that we're being recognized for the work that we put in, and they are here to help us grow and continue that growth.

As described above, some veteran staff members felt skeptical about PBLA changes or hesitant to reduce reliance on some of their traditional instructional practices. Leaders included the voices of these teachers on their team and welcomed their input. Even while some struggled to initiate the changes, leaders felt that learning was valuable. “And it's okay if they don't do exactly what you expect them to do, they're still going to learn something from the process,” said a district leader as they recounted a situation in which a staff member had been struggling with adapting to PBLA.

Fostering Real-World Learning and Community Connections

The shift towards PBLA, according to participants, helped foster real-world learning opportunities and build stronger connections between the school and community. Many felt that PBLA helps deepen student engagement particularly when students are encouraged to explore their interests, collaborate, and present their learning to classmates. “They know they're going to share [their work]... that makes a big difference,” explained a teacher. A district leader felt similarly about the importance of students sharing their projects, complimenting the presentations given by students in a Science Research Symposium (see Figure 3) held on campus. “[S]ome of these students were giving better defenses than my cohort in my Doctorate program. They were unbelievable—just unbelievable.”

Figure 3: Science Research Symposium



While still in the early stages of implementation, teachers described several projects which allowed students to demonstrate learning through presentations, portfolios, and exhibitions. One example given by a teacher was a music-themed project which invited groups of students to pick a social or personal issue of their choosing. Group members divvy up responsibilities such as writing lyrics, forming a fake band, taking photos, and designing an album cover with songs. The project also required students to conduct research on the issue to inform the lyrics and post the entire project to a website. The project gave students the opportunity to not only pursue a topic of their own interest but also utilize different skills in their learning.

In addition, educators at Saugerties developed projects which engaged with the wider community. For example, students created a recruitment video for a local manufacturing company, receiving real-time feedback from industry professionals. “The community partners right there in real time are giving feedback to our students... it’s real, and it’s powerful,” said the principal.

PBLA for Authentic Learning

As described above, PBLA allows teachers to see different sides of their students and foster skills that may not often be measured through more traditional assessment methods. As one teacher explained, “[PBLA] is a way for them [students] to show different sides of their personalities... ways to be creative and work together that wouldn’t happen otherwise.”

Teachers also felt that grading practices which align with PBLA such as rubrics, self-assessments, and standards-based grading emphasize growth and understanding over rote correctness. “I’m not assessing if they know how to multiply... I’m assessing what they got from the unit,” explained a teacher. PBLA, many participants felt, also helped paint a more accurate portrait of what students actually know and can do, versus standardized assessments which may only tap into a portion of students’ knowledge and capabilities. Commenting on the authenticity of PBLA, a teacher said, “[It’s] a true representation, you know. I’d rather look at a portfolio of a student any day than read a Regents essay. So I think it’s a true representation of students.”

Summary and Conclusions

“We start, we implement, we move forward, we adapt as needed... and then we just continue to dig deeper and deeper.” – Principal

Developing Buy-in and Shifting the Culture

At Saugerties, study participants expressed genuine enthusiasm and excitement for PBLA and elaborated on the many positives that performance-based approaches have for students and teachers. However, educators and leaders also acknowledged the challenges that shifting instruction from more traditional models presented for many veteran teachers and recognized the need to increase buy-in. To accomplish this, the leadership team at Saugerties cultivated a culture of trust and experimentation where teachers and students alike were encouraged to try PBLA even if they might stumble along the way. With a strong foundation and expertise among members of the core leadership team, Saugerties educators were confident that the shift to PBLA would gradually take hold in their district.

Localized Support and Guidance

Leaders at Saugerties relied on local professional development opportunities to support the implementation of PBLA across their district. Feeling that resources provided by the state and their

professional learning providers were, at times, inadequate, educators relied on staff with PBLA experience to lead the way. In addition, educators felt that their visit with High Tech High helped guide them as they developed their own version of PBLA. “We were positioned really well in terms of knowing what [PBLA] was,” said a district leader in regard to the trip.

Noting their heavy workloads and the time needed to authentically delve into this work, leaders strategically created half-days for professional learning where teachers were relieved of their teaching duties. While the time and resources available to support this work were sometimes limited, educators signified a commitment to PBLA and an eagerness to partner with peer and mentor schools as they moved forward.

Conclusion

In sum, study participants from Saugerties Senior High School articulated positive views of PBLA, noting that it created more authentic learning experiences for students. Although early in the implementation phase, several examples of performance-based approaches were described by participants, some of which connected students to the wider community.

Amid their enthusiasm for PBLA, participants also recognized the challenges that lie ahead. The need for creating buy-in and developing additional clarity on what PBLA entails were seen as two goals that would require time and support. Even with limited resources available, the leadership team at Saugerties felt confident in their transition to PBLA and had already begun to promote a school culture of trust and experimentation without fear of failure. Drawing on the expertise and experience of these leaders – and on strategically-planned professional development – educators at Saugerties hoped to increase the scope of their PBLA implementation in the following school year.

Recommended citation: Leo, A. & Wilcox, K.C. (2025, May 22). *PLAN Pilot Implementation Phase Case Study. Saugerties Senior High School.*

¹ 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 provide aims 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 one of the materials 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