

PLAN Pilot Implementation Phase Case Study: Wellsville Secondary School

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“We’re excited about the work. We know this is all good stuff. We realize that this is a leg up... We’re gonna be ahead of the game.” – 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 Wellsville Secondary 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.

Wellsville Secondary School is in focus area B.

School Context

"The school is definitely the hub of the community. So many things go on whether it's sports or extracurricular activities." – District Leader

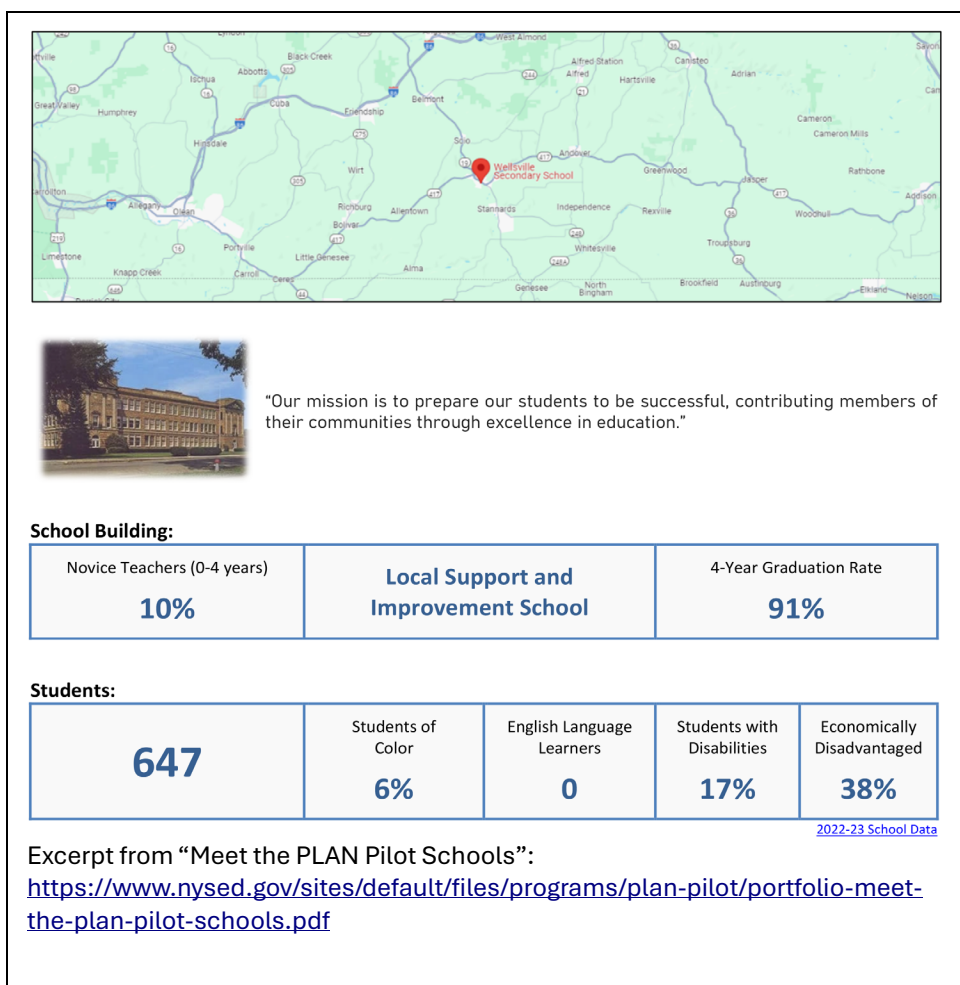
Geographic Location

Wellsville Secondary School is located in a rural area within Allegany County, New York. The district spans approximately 100 square miles, making it the largest in the county.

Community Demographic Description

Wellsville Central School District serves around 1,200 students from pre-kindergarten through 12th grade, with about 550 students in the secondary school building. Wellsville Secondary School is a Title I school, meaning a significant portion of the student body comes from low-income families. Poverty was mentioned by staff members as a significant factor affecting students and their families.

Figure 1: Wellsville Secondary School Description



Educators described the community as tight-knit and supportive, with strong relationships between staff, students, and families. According to participants in this research, the school functions as the hub of the surrounding community and hosts numerous sports and extracurricular activities which attract high levels of involvement from families. The staff includes a mix of veteran educators and newer teachers, creating a dynamic and supportive environment for innovation. Many staff members have personal connections to the district, with some choosing to bring their own children to the school. “[I] couldn’t imagine raising our kids anywhere else,” said a school leader.

Reasons for Participating in PLAN Pilot

Educators felt the PLAN Pilot program has provided valuable opportunities to enhance their focus on project-based and inquiry-based learning. For example, one participant explained that PLAN Pilot supports foster collaboration among teachers to share best practices and learn new instructional strategies. Participation in the program also helps educators stay “informed about the changes in State Ed” and the possibility for graduation requirements to change, as a school leader explained. The initiative for participating in the pilot program was also driven by the district’s commitment to providing innovative and hands-on learning opportunities for students. For instance, educators described a state-approved Career and Technical Education (CTE) program as well as other technology and engineering programs for which, according to district leader, the “enrollment just keeps on increasing.”

Highlights

PBLA Implementation Challenges

“What are some of the end goals?... I think [we need] just a little more. You know, the list, the bullet points, you know, the model. Some things to work toward that are a little bit more specific. And if it means that we have that and we change it to fit us, that’s great.” – Teacher

Time Constraints

While Wellsville educators were excited about participating in the PLAN Pilot, many felt daunted by the amount of work which was required and the paucity of time they were allotted to complete the work. PLAN Pilot leaders in the school reported that they initially applied for the project-based learning focus area C but were assigned to inquiry-based learning focus area B instead, which was a shift that required some adjustment.

Educators spoke highly of the professional learning providers (PLPs) who have been assisting them but noted that the modules provided to them about PBLA required extensive time to digest and implement. In one educator’s estimate, staff members had only completed two modules out of the six provided to them. As a school leader explained, “We need to literally pause time to be able to do the learning. And everything... takes so much time to digest.” These additional responsibilities seemed unmanageable to some educators who already have a full workload. Underlying these concerns was the desire to have the time needed to learn PBLA in a deeper sense and apply it with fidelity.

Communication and Clarity Issues

Several educators expressed the desire for better communication regarding the implementation of PBLA. An educator felt that there were sometimes inconsistencies between what was being asked of them by NYSED and their Technical Assistance Center (TAC). One leader, for instance, felt that they and their colleagues would have been further along in the implementation process if there was more clarity given to them at the outset (September, 2024). The need for clear, concise instructions and realistic expectations was also an emphasis among several educators. As mentioned above, the amount of reading and the technical language used in their TAC's module's assigned readings, were mentioned as another challenge by educators.

Balancing Inquiry-Based Learning with Standardized Testing

Some educators expressed concerns about balancing the new inquiry-based learning approach with the demands of standardized testing and the existing curriculum. "The two don't match," said one educator in regard to the demands of the Regents Exams and the aims of PBLA. Recognizing the challenge of integrating new instructional and assessment strategies through PLAN Pilot work, leaders looked to support students and teachers by "meeting them where they're at." "We do not want to shake the boat too much and make them panic," said a district leader.

Teacher and Student Buy-In

Lastly, some educators worried about the level of buy-in among students and teachers regarding PBLA. Although Wellsville educators overall felt that PBLA provides more engaging learning opportunities than some more traditional approaches, some worried that students and their families might not take PBLA work as seriously as instruction focused on and assessed via state-mandated tests. "I think there are some kids that are happy in traditional education. They thrive in traditional education, so pulling them out of their comfort zone is always a little bit of a struggle," explained one teacher. Another teacher similarly noted that there is a need to "convey to families that [PBLA] is a legitimate and valid form of assessment."

Leaders also described the need to support teachers and foster buy-in. As the principal noted, the shift to PBLA could be challenging for educators who are comfortable with more traditional forms of instruction. "The biggest thing that I think scares people is they're letting go. And that's the hurdle for a lot of folks," he said.

PBLA Implementation Supports

"The best driver of this [PBLA implementation], hopefully, would be staff who really have to buy in. We can stand up there and talk about it. When a colleague talks about it... it hits a lot harder." – Principal

Professional Development for Collaboration

As part of their efforts to implement PBLA, educators at Wellsville utilized professional development opportunities to spur on collaboration among colleagues. Acknowledging that they were still in the nascent stages of this process, educators explained how useful these meetings

were to allow teachers to work together and take ownership over the process. A district leader explained the value of these meetings and their approach to leading the team:

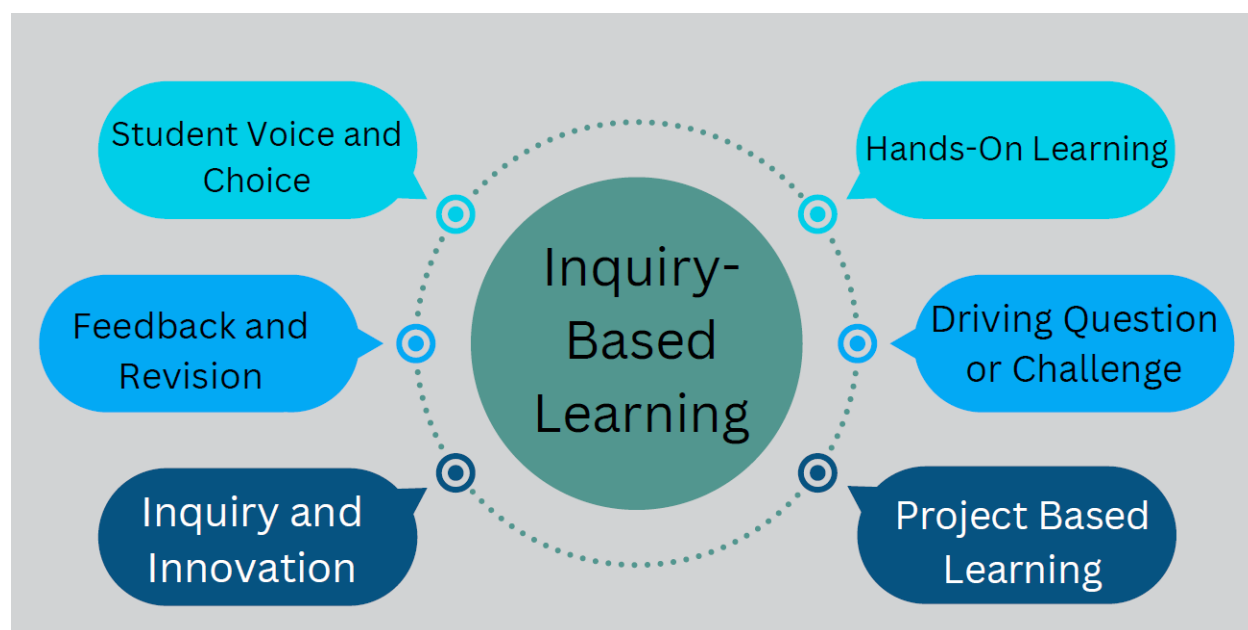
[A professional development meeting] was worthwhile, because, you know, some of the teachers were saying, “Oh, my gosh! We never knew that this was happening in another room.” So,... in a conference day in November we did that— having teachers volunteer to talk about what they're doing: it makes a whole lot more sense. And then we're not saying “you must do,” it's happening a little bit more naturally with, we call it “facipulation” like facilitated manipulation of the situation... how can we do these things so it starts the conversation?

Another idea to support teachers in shifting to PBLA has been to create a newsletter to send teachers and “kind of keep them informed of what's going on with our team,” as the principal explained. The newsletter could also feature a promising practice shared by a teacher within the school. “That's a work in progress. But I think that would be pretty powerful,” he continued.

Drawing on External Support

Although the primary sources of support for PBLA shifts came from within the school district (see Figure 2), the Wellsville leadership team also utilized support from their TAC in their effort to implement PBLA. Notwithstanding the difficulties in completing the modules assigned to them, educators felt that the PLPs were helpful in moving the process forward. “We are basically setting the agenda after we learn what we're doing in the modules or the meetings we have with the PLAN Pilot folk,” said a district leader. Another useful tool which has guided participants’ thinking about PBLA is New York State’s Portrait of a Graduate. Educators felt that more support was needed, however, in using it more fully. Additional examples of PBLA, for one, were mentioned as potential sources of assistance. “I would like to see models from other teachers around the state,” said a teacher.

Figure 2: A chart from a Professional Development meeting held by Wellsville leaders



PBLA Adaptations and Promising Practices

“It’s just kind of getting a deeper meaning around informative texts, or, you know, primary or secondary sources, and how those texts link to ... things in real life... and things in their [students’] life.” – Teacher

Shift towards Student-Centered Instruction

Wellsville educators explained that PBLA and inquiry-based learning complemented a broader emphasis on student-centered instruction. PBLA, educators felt, aided in this process as it supported students with various learning styles and interests. As one teacher put it, “[It’s] putting more back on the kids instead of me answering questions. It’s ‘Well, where can you find the answer to that? How do you find the answer to that?’” Another teacher described how student-led presentations have been helpful in fostering peer collaboration, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, during which these sorts of projects were not possible to complete.

Fostering Student Voice and Choice

In alignment with inquiry-based learning approaches, several educators described instructional practices that fostered student agency. One teacher, for instance, mentioned, “When I do projects, I try to give multiple options to try to embrace, like, the different learning styles of kids.” Another teacher explained how they considered students’ strengths as they developed projects:

And that’s kind of the same for me anytime we do any kind of project or anything that’s inquiry based. It’s very voice oriented around what ... works best to their [students’] strengths, and then really assessing what their strengths are, and choosing a modality that works best for them.

One example of this inquiry-based approach is a project for 7th graders on the American Revolution. In this project, students read through the Declaration of Independence and learned about the “different grievances that [American colonists] had with Parliament and the British King,” as one teacher put it. She explained the options built into this project:

I had three choices of songs so that they could do a Mad Lib, and they were all breakup songs. So, they had to take text from the Declaration of Independence that made sense within that Mad Lib as a breakup song, but it was kind of a breakup song with England. And then the other option was that they took a piece of text, and they created a comic strip on Canva around that piece of text, explaining what it meant either in the context of the American Revolution, or what it meant to them, and how it affects their life.

Making Content Relevant to Students

As mentioned above, a salient component of the performance-based approaches taken at Wellsville is making curricula applicable to students’ lives and relevant to their interests. One teacher, for instance, described the importance of engaging students by connecting curricula to “real world scenarios.” She continued, “So, they kind of are used to looking at things and determining why it’s important, why it’s relevant. What skills am I gaining?” One teacher echoed this focus, stating “If there are times where I can give students the opportunity to explore something that’s of interest to them, I do that. Then I’m also really big on... going beyond the walls of the

classroom.” An example described by a teacher was a project on the Industrial Revolution which connected this historical period to current trends while fostering student choice:

I tried to take the Industrial Revolution in England and compare that to kind of globalization today and how interconnected we are. My students had a list of project options to choose from... They could do mock trials, debating on... environmental issues of the past versus environmental issues today.

Summary and Conclusions

“To get kids more engaged in things that interest them... And to kind of pull away from that sit-and-get...is the biggest positive.” – Principal

Fostering Collaboration to Drive PBLA Implementation

Although Wellsville leaders drew on some outside support from their TAC and NYSED resources, the main driver for PBLA implementation has been through collaboration among educators within the school and district. Professional development opportunities have also served as valuable spaces for educators to share promising practices and raise questions and concerns about the shift to PBLA. As leaders explained, these collaborations within the school and with PLPs served not only to make teachers aware of interesting and useful projects that their colleagues had developed but also fostered buy-in among teachers.

The Need for More Time and Guidance

Despite their positive views towards PBLA, educators at Wellsville felt that additional time was needed for them to fully understand and implement these PBLA shifts. The materials provided to them, while helpful, required more time and attention than many educators felt they could devote at the current moment. Educators also felt that more explicit guidance about PBLA, including examples from other schools, sample lessons and rubrics, and details about how PBLA might be assessed, would be valuable assets. As one school leader put it, “[We] are perfectionists and we want to do what’s best for our teachers and students.”

Conclusion

Overall, educators and staff at Wellsville expressed a positive view towards PBLA and were excited for the shift towards instructional practices which they felt would be more engaging and useful for their students. Educators at Wellsville also felt that PBLA was conducive to approaches that they have sought to include in their teaching practices prior to becoming part of the Pilot program. These included an emphasis on student-centered instruction where students took ownership of their learning and had choice about the details of different projects. Educators also felt that PBLA would complement their efforts to make learning relevant to students’ interests and lives outside of school.

Many, however, expressed concern over the need for more time and direct guidance regarding the shift to PBLA. As mentioned above, specific examples from schools implementing PBLA were seen as a useful way to support their work. Leaders at Wellsville utilized intra-school collaboration time, including professional development meetings, as ways to drive this work and have on the horizon

plans for a newsletter, in hopes of increasing buy-in and empowering teachers to lead transformational shifts in their instruction and assessment.

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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 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.