

School Improvement Case Study

ODYSSEY COMMUNITY SCHOOL

Odyssey Community School was founded in 1997 in Manchester under the first charter granted by the Connecticut State Department of Education. By 2019, the school had expanded to grades K–8 and served a diverse population of more than 330 students. Over the years, Odyssey students consistently demonstrated proficiency percentages above district averages but also frequently ranked below the state average in some subject areas and grade levels. In 2020, Odyssey was invited to apply for a “Getting to Great” improvement grant from a private funding organization to support a structured school improvement process. School stakeholders selected SchoolWorks as a comprehensive improvement partner.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As an improvement partner, SchoolWorks was tasked with the objective of demonstrating measurable improvement in student outcomes at Odyssey Community School within the defined contract period. Upon the close of the three-year engagement in December 2022, Odyssey was distinguished as one of only four charter schools in Connecticut to outperform the state average in both ELA and Math on the 2021–22 state assessment. Significant instructional gains were also exhibited in NWEA MAP Growth assessment data from fall 2021 to spring 2022. Notably, this school improvement took place between January 2020 and December 2023, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

INITIAL NEEDS ASSESSMENT (JANUARY 2020)

SchoolWorks’ partnership with Odyssey Community School began in January 2020 with an objective, third-party school quality review. Framed by SchoolWorks’ School Quality Review Protocol¹, the needs assessment focused on four domains: Instruction, Students’ Opportunities to Learn, Educators’ Opportunities to Learn, and Leadership and Governance. A team of two trained SchoolWorks reviewers visited the school over a period of two days to collect evidence via interviews and focus groups, classroom observations, and the review of documents. A written report documented the findings.

One of the major findings surfaced by the initial needs assessment regarded Educators’ Opportunities to Learn. While the school provided routine professional development and had established collaborative structures, professional development for teachers was not consistently aligned to school improvement goals. Leaders and teachers reported that collaboration time was inconsistent and that its value was not wholly maximized. And while cycles of classroom observation and feedback were regularly facilitated, teachers were unclear about instructional expectations and did not feel that instructional feedback was aligned to formative growth.

ODYSSEY COMMUNITY SCHOOL PROFILE

- Established in 1997
- Manchester, CT (urban)
- Serves grades K–8
- 328 students
- 30 teachers

IMPROVEMENT OBJECTIVE

Demonstrate measurable improvement in student outcomes within three years.

“It was an **eye-opening experience** of learning how to action plan, look for trends, and complete observations.”

– Lisa Kimyachi, Special Education Program Coordinator

¹ SchoolWorks’ School Quality Review protocol and associated consultative supports are aligned to *SchoolWorks’ School Quality Criteria* (SQC), a foundational set of standards that define effective school practices across the domains of Instruction, Students’ Opportunities to Learn, Educators’ Opportunities to Learn, and Leadership and Governance. The SQC identifies indicators of effective practice linked to positive student outcomes through a comprehensive body of well-designed and well-implemented randomized control experimental studies. The fully cited research base is available upon request.

YEAR ONE IMPROVEMENT PLAN (SCHOOL YEAR 2020–2021)

In February 2020, SchoolWorks facilitated a strategic planning session with the Odyssey school team to create a School Improvement Plan aligned to the strengths and areas of need surfaced by review findings. The planning team consisted of the principal, assistant principal, and several teachers. With the shift to distance learning in March 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, strategic planning efforts were temporarily paused and resumed in the summer of 2020 to focus on the 2020–2021 school year.

SY20–21 Improvement Plan Objectives

1. Introduce a cycle of observation and feedback of classroom instruction by school leaders.
2. Provide professional development aligned to data-informed areas of need.
3. Build and maximize consistent teacher collaboration focused on improving instruction.

To ensure follow-through on the implementation of the School Improvement Plan, SchoolWorks coaches led a bi-weekly leadership team meeting with school stakeholders to assess follow-through and support the implementation of the plan.

YEAR ONE INTERVENTIONS (SCHOOL YEAR 2020–2021)

Observation and Feedback: To develop the instructional skills of school administrators and instructional leaders, SchoolWorks facilitated a targeted training in the evidence-based practices of high-quality instruction and introduced a data-driven framework for the advancement of instructional skills. The workshop explored the evidence-based principles of high-quality instruction through collaborative observation. Using the SchoolWorks Classroom Visit Tool (CVT), participants viewed videos of actual classroom instruction, rated the effectiveness of instructional indicators in accordance with the tool, and set norms about ratings. Participants also learned how analyze classroom observation ratings in aggregate to reveal data-informed areas of need across a multitude of indicators.

Following training, Odyssey’s principal, assistant principal, and two teacher leaders were certified to conduct classroom observations using the CVT. (The intentional addition of the two teacher leaders as observers allowed the team of four to be normed on high-quality instruction and share the work of supporting Odyssey’s 28 teachers.)

To help Odyssey’s teachers understand the instructional expectations measured by the tool and elevate their practices accordingly, SchoolWorks facilitated a separate workshop for teachers. During teacher training, SchoolWorks coaches provided an overview of the tool and then engaged in a deep dive into higher-order thinking, an area of focus selected in conjunction with the school leadership team and data from the school quality review. For the selected indicator of higher-order thinking, SchoolWorks explained the component criteria of the ratings and then showed demonstrative video footage of effective instruction (a Level 4 rating). This session allowed teachers to become active participants in their own learning and increased their investment in improving their instructional practice.

Professional Development: With the support of SchoolWorks, Odyssey’s leadership team intentionally planned and facilitated targeted professional development sessions that aligned directly to the School Improvement Plan. Topics included introduction to common planning, classroom observation training and higher-order thinking strategies.

PROGRESS UPDATE: By February, two Odyssey administrators and six teachers were trained to observe instruction and provide formative feedback to teachers. Between March 2021 and May 2021, Odyssey observers conducted 77 classroom observations.

In addition, weekly time allocated to instructional support was increased to:

- Classroom Observations: 3 hours
- Professional Development: 2 hours
- Common Planning: 6 hours

“The CVT has been beneficial because **everyone knows** what contributes to effective instruction.”
– Sarah Billings, Teacher

Collaboration: In conjunction with SchoolWorks' leadership coaches, the school's staff also organized and executed common planning meetings across grade levels that focused on building teachers' instructional capacity. Specifically, each grade level created an agenda and facilitated a meeting with either the principal or assistant principal each week. (Meeting topics ranged from ways to support students in a remote learning environment to creating a more viable scope and sequence to be completed during the school year.) Teachers also built in time to focus on specific instructional strategies to be implemented during the delivery of instruction for in-person and virtual learning.

INTERIM NEEDS ASSESSMENT (JUNE 2021)

SchoolWorks conducted an interim needs assessment (school quality review) in June of 2021. During the review, leaders and teachers described the importance of prioritizing the well-being of students and families during the pandemic. The site visit team found that despite the physical and socio-emotional challenges, most classrooms demonstrated a warm, welcoming culture. In addition, educators' mindsets and beliefs reflected a shared commitment to students' learning.

YEAR TWO IMPROVEMENT PLAN (SCHOOL YEAR 2021–2022)

In July of 2021, SchoolWorks facilitated the second action planning session with the school team, which included the executive director, principal, assistant principal, and teachers. The team reflected on the implementation of the 2020–2021 Improvement Plan and drafted a refined plan for the upcoming school year. This plan prioritized three key areas:

SY21–22 Improvement Plan Objectives	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ensure that teachers deliver high-quality instruction via cycles of observation and feedback. 2. Improve instruction by requiring all students to use and develop higher-order thinking skills. 3. Strengthen teacher collaboration focused on using data to evaluate student progress.
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SchoolWorks coaches continued to lead bi-weekly leadership team meetings to provide accountability for implementation.

YEAR TWO INTERVENTIONS (SCHOOL YEAR 2021–2022)

Like most schools, Odyssey faced unprecedented staffing challenges as a result of the pandemic. (For example, one administrator assumed a classroom teacher role in March.) As a result, 2021–2022 interventions were continually shifted to accommodate changing priorities. Despite these challenges, the school team continued to work toward plan objectives.

Observation and Feedback: With a total of eight trained observers in school year 2021–2022, Odyssey's leadership team established a definitive schedule of monthly classroom observations. Certified teachers engaged in norming exercises by observing three classrooms as a team and calibrating their ratings by discussing the criteria and evidence. This process allowed newly trained teachers to become familiar with the criteria and provided them with the opportunity to practice rating observations with the support of certified administrators.

Higher-Order Thinking: Odyssey's leadership team organized and facilitated professional development for teachers targeting higher-order thinking. Teachers received feedback on these practices from classroom observers. (The average rating for higher-

“We have become more effective as teachers due to the CVT process and understanding how to raise the level of student engagement and the level of higher-order questions and activities. Administration has become more effective and productive with our meetings [by establishing] a clear and effective structure along with providing us professional growth opportunities.”
 – Kelly Quinn, Odyssey Teacher

2021	PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SESSIONS
APR	Higher-Order Thinking Strategies (in-person and virtual)
AUG	Introduction to Higher-Order Thinking
	Revisiting High-Impact Higher-Order Thinking Strategies

order thinking as measured by the CVT during SchoolWorks-led classroom observations at Odyssey increased from 1.98 in January 2020 to 2.32 in June 2022.)

Collaboration: The Odyssey instructional leadership team also continued to increase the total time spent on key instructional priorities. On average, the team now spent approximately 15 hours per week on classroom observations, professional development, and common planning (as compared to 11 hours during the previous year). According to focus group data from the June 2022 review, teachers reported that they were now more intentional about using data to inform their collaborative planning meetings and WIN blocks. In addition, school leaders reported an increased use of academic data for intervention planning, coaching, and feedback.



Odyssey Community School, Manchester, CT

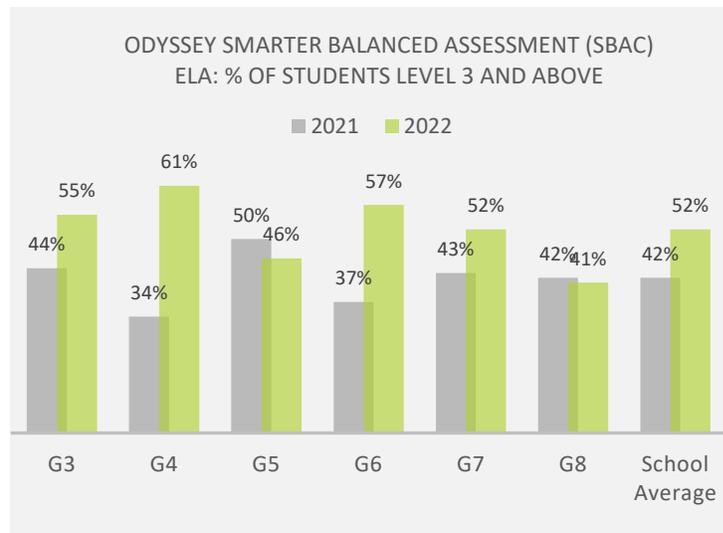
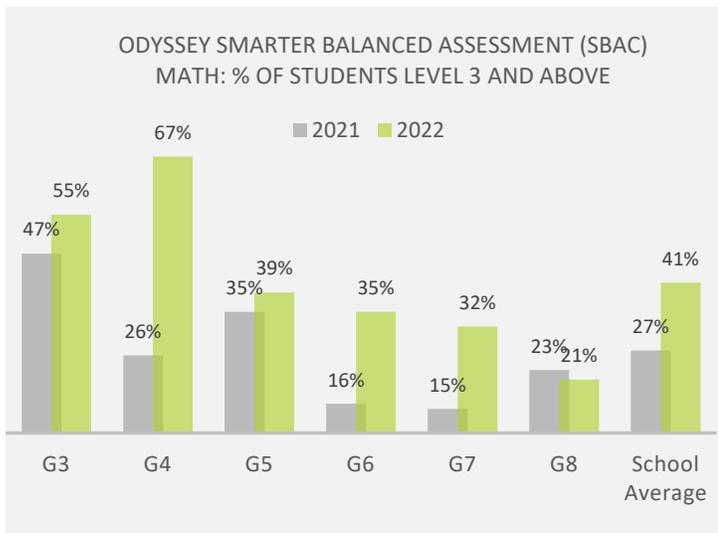
PROGRAM END: SchoolWorks conducted a third and final school quality review in June 2022. As part of the “Getting to Great” grant initiative, SchoolWorks continued to coach and support the Odyssey team through December 2022.

PROGRAM RESULTS

As a result of the three-year engagement with SchoolWorks, Odyssey Community School achieved significant gains in student outcomes, as reflected in both SBAC state assessment data and NWEA MAP Growth assessment data.

SMARTER BALANCED ASSESSMENT (SBAC)

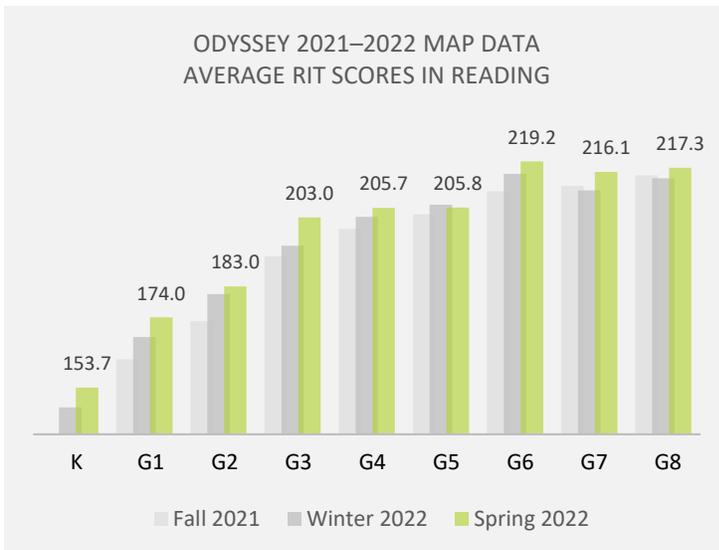
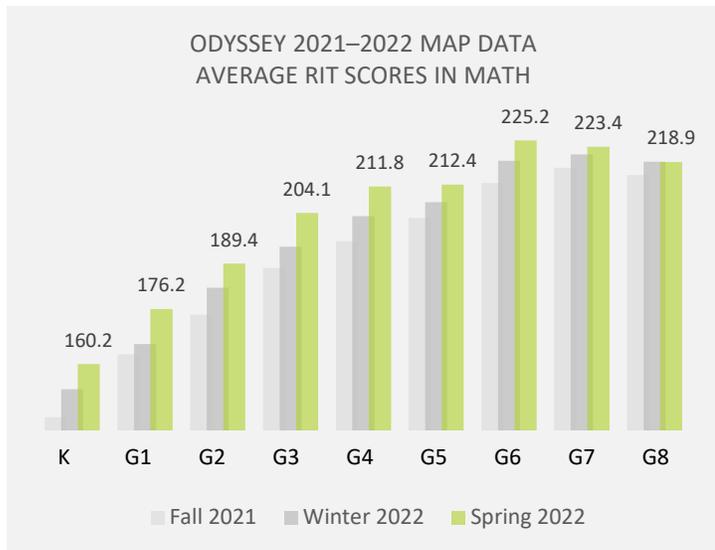
Odyssey Community School was distinguished as one of only four charter schools in Connecticut to outperform the state average in both ELA and math on the Smarter Balanced Assessment (SBAC) for 2021–2022. Not surprisingly, the most significant gains in student outcomes were evident in 2022 SBAC scores, when in-person classroom instruction had fully resumed at the school. In math, the average schoolwide percentage of students exhibiting a proficiency of Level 3 and above increased from 27% in 2021 to 41% in 2022. In English language arts, the percentage grew from 42% to 52%. Significant gains were also evident in both math and ELA across almost all grade levels.



NWEA MAP GROWTH ASSESSMENT

Throughout the effort, academic progress was also measured using the NWEA MAP Growth assessment. This assessment measures academic achievement and growth with greater frequency and provides comparative, normed data of students across the country. With MAP Growth, the Rasch Unit (RIT) score measures levels of academic difficulty in equal intervals.

According to data reports measuring progress from fall 2021 to spring 2022, Odyssey students exhibited a progressive increase in average RIT scores in both math and reading across almost all grade levels.



Data from the spring 2022 administration period also show that Odyssey students exceeded MAP’s national growth norms in math in grades 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 and exceeded them in reading in grades 3 and 6. In the same period, Odyssey students exceeded MAP’s national achievement norms in math in grades K, 3, 4, and 6 and in reading in grades K, 1, 3, 4, and 6.

QUALITATIVE RESULTS

Beyond the academic progress evident in SBAC scores and NWEA MAP data, the Odyssey school team established fundamental systems and processes to ensure an ongoing trajectory of improved instructional outcomes. These included a unified understanding of effective instructional practices among teachers and administrators, an effective process for regular cycles of observation and feedback, and maximized use of data-centric collaborative planning time.

In January 2023, SchoolWorks administered a post-engagement survey to Odyssey administrators and teachers. A full 100% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that as a result of the partnership with SchoolWorks, “Our administrators and coaches are now trained to give high-quality feedback to teachers,” and that “Our team collaboration time is now more productive.” In addition, 92% agreed or strongly agreed, “We have established a clear instructional vision,” and 83% agreed or strongly agreed, “We have elevated our capacity to use data to confirm and support instructional strategies.”

“We have grown in our ability to identify areas of need and identify potential root causes. With this, we have been able to come up with more successful action plans. We have also been more effective at streamlining our goals, so it doesn't feel like we are trying to accomplish a million things at once.”
– Jenn Renkiewicz, Odyssey Teacher

FIND OUT MORE

For more information on SchoolWorks’ partnership with Odyssey Community School or on the company’s other comprehensive school improvement partnerships, contact SchoolWorks at info@schoolworks.org.