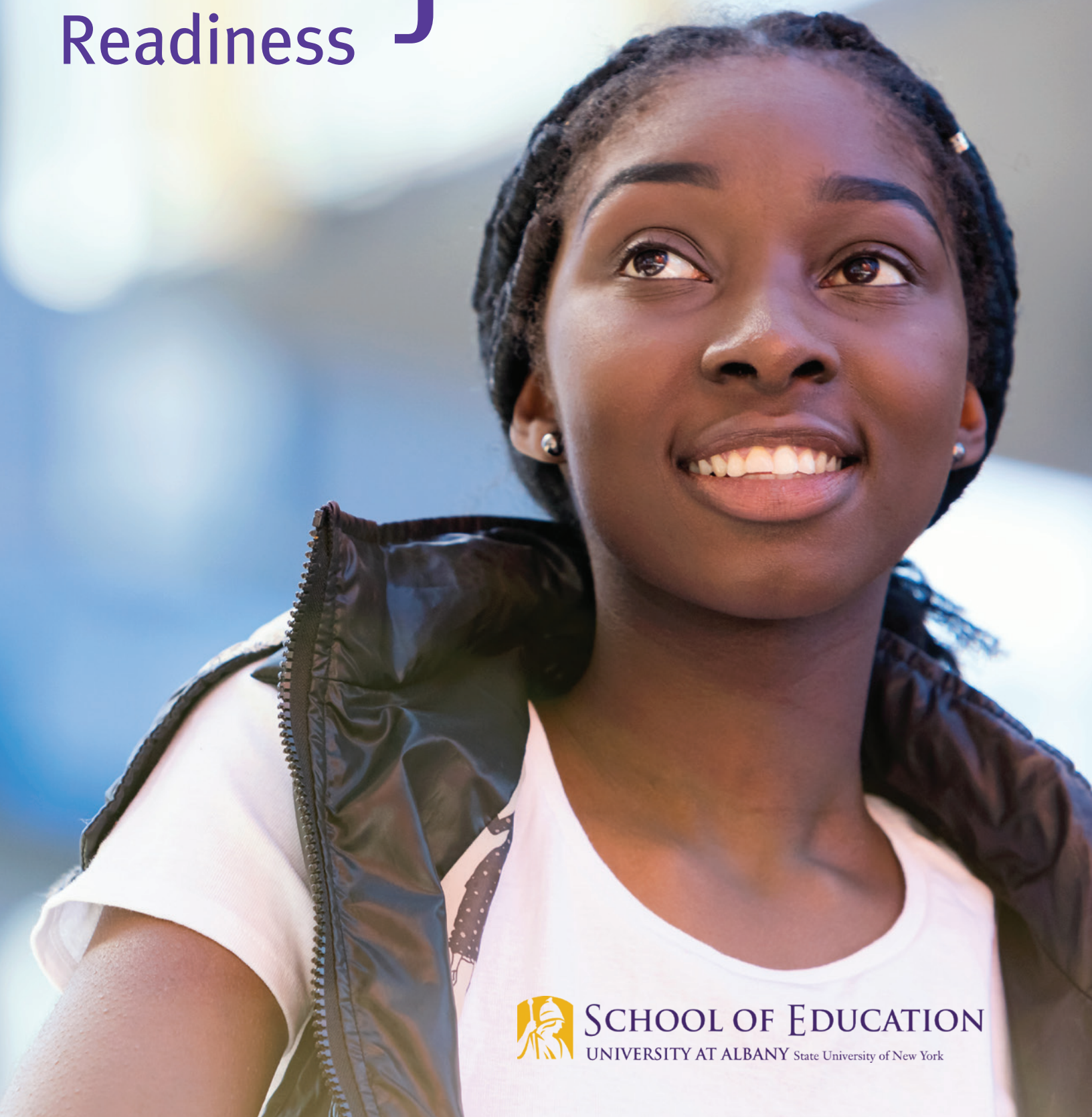# College and Career Readiness

} Students' perspectives on preparing for life beyond high school

**SCHOOL OF EDUCATION**
UNIVERSITY AT ALBANY State University of New York

## About Know Your Schools~for NYKids (NYKids)

Since its inception in 2004, one goal of NYKids has been to help educators learn from other educators whose students consistently perform well. To date the NYKids project has identified promising practices at all levels, elementary, middle, and high school, with special attention to schools with above-predicted performance among socioeconomically, culturally, and linguistically diverse youth. Results of all studies are available in reports, case studies, articles, books, and presentations.

To download a copy of this report and other NYKids resources, or to learn more about the project and earlier studies or to use our searchable database to compare schools' student outcomes go to: www.ny-kids.org

NYKids is a project housed at the University at Albany's School of Education and is a public-private research-practice partnership. Guidance is provided by a statewide advisory board; funding is provided, in part, by the State of New York and the University at Albany.

Kristen C. Wilcox, Associate Professor;
NYKids Principal Investigator and
Research and Development Director

Aaron Leo, NYKids Post-Doctoral Fellow

Lisa (Fang) Yu, NYKids Research Associate

**SCHOOL OF EDUCATION**
UNIVERSITY AT ALBANY State University of New York

# College and Career Readiness

} Students' perspectives on preparing for life beyond high school

**NYKids** 🍎

# Contents

Edited by
Janet I. Angelis

Timeline graphics by
Jessie Tobin

# The Positive Outlier Schools

Outlier: a person or thing that is atypical within a particular group, class, or category *(Merriam-Webster)*

This report is based on case studies from two schools we identified as positive outliers in our College and Career Readiness Phase I study. These schools qualify as positive outliers because they are "atypical" in the sense that they have achieved a trend of above-predicted graduation rates among different populations of students consistently over time. Each complete case study is available at ny-kids.org, and highlights from them appear throughout this report. Introductory details about our sample selection and study methods can be found on page 32. A separate methods and procedures report provides more detail about the conduct of this study and is available at ny-kids.org.

## **Crown Point Central School**,
Crown Point Central School District

Crown Point Central School is located in New York's Essex County—in the "North Country." This region of the state is primarily rural, dotted with small villages and towns, with a few cities like Plattsburgh and Albany within an hour or two drive away. The school district is home to a single PK-12 building in the center of town that functions as a hub for community events and activities.

Crown Point High School met the criteria of a positive outlier in Phase I of our College and Career Readiness Study because the difference between expected graduation rates for students entering 9th grade in 2010, 2011 and 2012 who are disadvantaged economically exceeded the average performance for New York schools with similar demographics.

For this study (Phase II), we chose to revisit Crown Point because it is a small rural school with slightly above-average percentages of children growing up in poverty, and its positive outlier trend continues (see Figure 1).

## **Malverne Senior High School**,
Malverne Union Free School District

Malverne Senior High is located in Nassau County on Long Island about twenty miles from Manhattan. It is located in the Village of Malverne, which is comprised of a number of small businesses, private homes, and housing complexes. The school district also serves several surrounding communities and includes a primary (K-2), intermediate (3-5), middle (6-8), and senior high school (9-12).

Malverne Senior High School met the criteria of a positive outlier in Phase I of our College and Career Readiness Study because the difference between expected graduation rates for students entering 9th grade in 2010, 2011 and 2012 who are disadvantaged economically exceeded the average performance for New York schools with similar demographics.

For this study (Phase II), we chose to revisit Malverne because it is a more ethnically diverse suburban school than other schools in the state, and its positive outlier trend continues (see Figure 2).
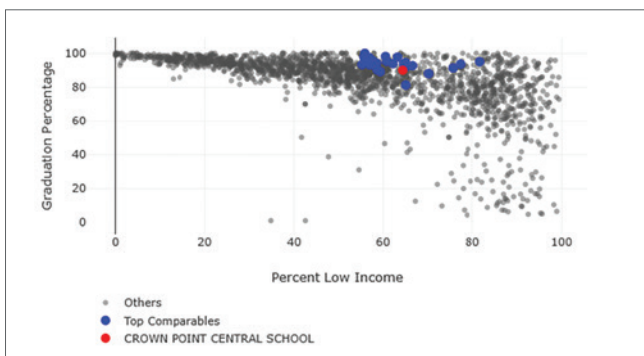
Figure 1. A Scatter Plot of Crown Point Central School's Graduation Rate (in red) plotted by percentage of low-income students (2017-18) from NYKids' Performance Tracker (https://knowyourschoolsny.org/newsite/schoolist.php)
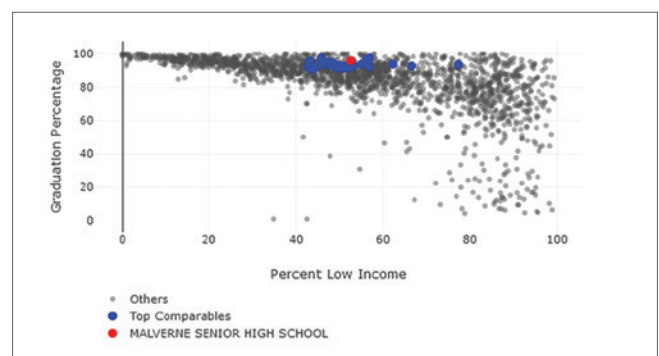
Figure 2. A Scatter Plot of Malverne Senior High School's Graduation Rate (in red) Plotted by Percentage of Low-income Students (2017-18) from NYKids' Performance Tracker (https://knowyourschoolsny.org/newsite/schoolist.php)

# Demographics of the Positive Outlier Schools

| School | Enrollment[1] | Grade Span | Urbanicity | % Economically Disadvantaged | % ELL | % Hispanic Latino | % Black/ African-American | PPE |
|--------|------------|-----------|-----------|------------------------------|-------|-------------------|---------------------------|-----|
| Crown Point | 75 | K-12 | Rural | 61 | 0 | 0 | 0 | $22,622 |
| Malverne | 548 | 9-12 | Suburban | 51 | 2 | 24 | 54 | $30,708 |
| NYS | NA | NA | NA | 57 | 9 | 27 | 17 | $24,040 |

[1] All data in this table are retrieved from https://data.nysed.gov/downloads.php

# Student Participants

In this study, 22 juniors and seniors from Crown Point and Malverne Senior High engaged in interviews and focus groups with NYKids researchers. To ensure a diverse sample of participants, we included students of different genders and ethnicities and those pursuing different pathways and goals, including technical/vocational, college, or those bound for the military or some other pursuit. Since we promised all participants anonymity, we have used pseudonyms in the following participant table as well as throughout this report.

| | Student pseudonym | Gender | Grade | Ethnicity |
|---|-------------------|--------|-------|-----------|
| **CROWN POINT** | Elliot | Male | 12th | White |
| | Mark | Male | 11th | Asian American |
| | Jessica | Female | 11th | White |
| | Harold | Male | 11th | White |
| | Jake | Male | 12th | White |
| | Lucas | Male | 11th | White |
| | Janelle | Female | 11th | Hispanic/White |
| | Cristy | Female | 12th | White |
| | Mackenzie | Female | 12th | White |
| | Alex | Female | 12th | White/African American/ Native American/Cuban |
| | Kyle | Male | 11th | White |
| **MALVERNE** | Tina | Female | 12th | Guyanese |
| | Erin | Female | 12th | Hispanic/Latina/White |
| | Robyn | Female | 12th | White |
| | Steven | Male | 12th | White |
| | Sean | Male | 12th | White |
| | Elizabeth | Female | 12th | Guyanese |
| | Nick | Male | 12th | Latino |
| | Mary | Female | 12th | African American |
| | Elena | Female | 11th | Not Identified |
| | Olivia | Female | 11th | African American |
| | Henry | Male | 12th | African American |

# Background and Overview of Findings

For years, educators, policymakers, and scholars have called attention to the paucity of students' voices in efforts to improve schools (Cook-Sather, 2006). As key stakeholders in their own educational experiences, students' perspectives, it can be argued, are crucial in addressing contemporary issues of equity and social justice (Levin, 2000). Gathering a diversity of students' perspectives can offer important insights for those seeking to address long-standing opportunity gaps for children and youth most marginalized in U.S. society and attain aims that go beyond academic preparation for college or career to social and emotional well-being and preparation for civic life (Mehta & Fine, 2019; Trilling & Fadel, 2009).

Previous research, including several studies conducted by our NYKids team, offers insights into what leaders and educators in schools in different community contexts and with different student outcomes do and why. With a concern specifically for how college and career readiness is understood and approached, our Phase I College and Career Readiness study included school visits; interviews and focus groups with district and school leaders, teachers, and support staff; and document collection in two sets of schools. One set qualified as positive outliers because of their consistent trends of better-than-predicted high school graduation rates, taking into account demographics. These positive outliers were then compared with a second set of schools with as-expected (i.e., "typical") graduation rates.

In the Phase I study (Wilcox, Leo, & Kramer, 2018) we identified four common elements in the positive outlier schools that differentiated them from their typically performing counterparts. These were leaders' and educators' focus on and efforts in 1) Co-Constructing a Humanizing School Community; 2) Collaborating to Define and Achieve Success; 3) Cultivating Culturally Responsive, Inclusive, and Facilitative Leadership; and 4) Customizing Innovative Policies, Programs, and Practices.

We designed this Phase II study to build on the findings of Phase I by exploring positive outlier school students' perspectives on their high school experiences. Our research team designed Phase II to be not just a follow-up study, but to yield new knowledge from students' perspectives, relating new findings to Phase I findings as well as extant research on adolescence and adolescent development in relation to in- and out-of-school learning. Lines of inquiry that were particularly influential in the design and implementation of this study were:

- Student voice, choice, and leadership
- Culturally responsive pedagogy
- School culture, climate, and management
- Relationships between peers, school personnel, parents/ families, community agency representatives
- Skills, competencies, and knowledge development in and outside of school

## Building on Prior Research

A growing body of literature has identified agency (i.e., one's will and capacity to act) as related to an individual's development and that development as being related to opportunities for voice, choice, and leadership (Anderson et al., 2019; Baroutsis et al., 2016; Cook-Sather, 2006; Goodman & Eren, 2013; Klemenčič, 2015; Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011; Mameli et al., 2019; Robinson & Taylor, 2007; Rudduck & Fielding, 2006; York & Kirshner, 2015). For example, some researchers have found that

promoting student agency can have positive effects on academic performance, as adolescents are more likely to engage in learning when, as active players, they have more ownership and control of their in- and out-of-school experiences (Anderson et al., 2019; Rudduck, 2007). Moreover, student agency has been found to be closely related to social and emotional well-being and is a foundation for the development of "21st century skills" and civic competencies that include interpersonal communication and teamwork/collaboration skills, time management/self-regulation skills, and critical thinking (Mitchell et al., 2010; Laskey & Hetzel, 2010).

Over the past several decades, policymakers, educational researchers, and practitioners have recognized the value of culturally responsive education to address disparities in opportunities among youth of color in U.S. schools (Howard & Rodriguez-Scheel, 2017). Culturally responsive education emphasizes the import of drawing on the cultural resources of students, their families, and communities while refuting deficit perspectives (Gay, 2013). In practice, teachers taking a culturally responsive approach seek to incorporate learners' cultural knowledge, dispositions, and affinities as a resource for curriculum and instructional adaptations. Such adaptations empower students by highlighting their cultural knowledge and backgrounds as "funds of knowledge" not obstacles to overcome (Gay, 2013; González et al., 1993).

It has been widely accepted that positive school climate is linked with improved academic achievement and reduced discipline problems, and thus is often a target of school improvement initiatives to close opportunity gaps (Cohen, 2009; Gase et al., 2017; Haynes et al., 1997; White et al., 2014). A caring and responsive school climate provides an optimal foundation for students' social, emotional, and academic learning and eventually leads to students' constructive participation in school activities and reduction of behavior problems such as bullying and violence (Cohen, 2009). At the secondary level, school climate has been found to be especially important as it relates to youth engagement in school (e.g., Thapa et al., 2013).

Previous studies have found that positive interpersonal relationships including teacher-student, peer-peer, and family member/legal guardian-school staff relationships are associated with adolescents' sense of school belonging (Christenson & Havsy, 2004; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Uslu & Gizir, 2017). With a strong sense of belonging, adolescents are more likely to engage in positive school behaviors and avoid high-risk behaviors or be absent from school. The closeness of teacher and peer relationships can not only enhance adolescents' engagement in school, but also promote academic, social, and emotional adjustment as they transition into post-secondary pursuits, including the workplace or college (Swenson et al., 2008; Yu et al., 2018).

Educators and scholars have noted that the needs of today's complex and dynamic economic and social environments will require young people to be able to do more than recite facts and respond to teacher-led discussions and prompts (Trilling & Fadel, 2012). Instead, preparing students for the 21st century must involve opportunities for them to develop "soft" skills through teamwork, communication, and critical thinking — characteristics of what Mehta and Fine (2019) call "deeper learning." From this view, learning takes on a broader meaning as young people are encouraged to become engaged in classroom settings as well as in extracurricular and community-based activities (Lawson & Lawson, 2013). Such pedagogies also strive to engage students from diverse backgrounds by connecting out-of-school contexts to classroom learning. Social-emotional learning also complements the focus on academic pursuits as students' mental health and well-being are prioritized by educators alongside academic performance (Devaney & Moroney, 2017).

# Findings

This study offers insight into students' perspectives on their high school experiences and what value they place on these experiences with regard to their preparation for life beyond high school. As detailed in the Methods section (p. 32), the research team's methodology included the use of semi-structured interview and focus group protocols and student-crafted artifacts such as ecological maps (i.e., displays of important places in and outside of school) and timelines indicating key events.

Like our Phase I study, we designed this study to take into account the ways experiences in different parts of a system (e.g., classrooms, schools, districts, and communities) inter-relate, with special interest in how the several parts of these inter-related systems interact to influence student experiences, both intended-desirable ones and unintended-sub-optimal ones (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

As a complementary lens, Holland et al.'s (1998) concept of "figured worlds" provided a useful framework to explore how young people make sense of their experiences in and out of school and how these experiences shape their emerging identities. From this perspective, identities are not located within individuals, but are constructed through social practice (Gee, 2015). Schools, which provide a prominent space where young people interact with others, can be seen as "figured worlds." Through this lens, the ways in which students come to see themselves in school settings influences the extent to which and how academic learning and social and emotional development occurs (Wortham, 2006).

Progressive theories of education such as Critical Pedagogy further complement this analytic framework as they highlight the ways hegemonic structures in and outside of schools can position young people as passive recipients of knowledge or active agents in knowledge generation and transformation.

Critical educators call for culturally responsive pedagogies that reflect and leverage students' lived experiences and empower them to use school-based knowledge to effect change in their own and others' lives (Hooks, 2014; Freire, 1970).

Finally, considering that youth's identities are not static and are influenced by and through connections with others, this study also draws upon positive youth development (PYD)—a strengths-based framework that emphasizes four domains: 1) assets: youth have capabilities; 2) agency: youth can use their capabilities to set goals and achieve them; 3) contribution: youth are resources for change; and 4) enabling environment: to achieve their potential, youth need environments that support the development of their social, emotional, and cognitive selves (YouthPower, n.d.).

As in our Phase I study, we discovered that Crown Point and Malverne were unique in the ways they approached preparing young people for life beyond high school. Differences in school context as well as student body size and composition and workforce characteristics helped to account for some differences that we discuss throughout this report. Despite some differences, we discovered four commonalities or "themes" that capture key aspects of Crown Point and Malverne students' experiences in high school—they are:

**Theme 1. Cultivating Student Agency**

**Theme 2. Contributing to a Caring Climate and Meeting High Expectations**

**Theme 3. Forging Harmonious and Supportive Relationships**

**Theme 4. Building Skills and Knowledge for Life after High School**

} Students' perspectives on preparing for life beyond high school

# 1.

# Cultivating Student Agency

> There are going to be a lot of situations where you have more choices. Instead of being told just what to do, you'll have to think out-of-the-box and figure out something, a different way to do something or another way of expressing an idea. I think that having a lot more freedom of how you want to do things kind of helps you prepare for that. — Alex (Crown Point)

> Sometimes I have to go to a different school, and I talk to the kids that are in the school, and whenever I tell them that I'm part of the Marching Band or we have a musical every year and I'm part of that, they're like, "Oh we don't have that." — Mary (Malverne)

Countering the characterization of many high schools as places where discipline and avoidance of problems are the primary focus, student participants from Crown Point and Malverne said instead that they are being invited into growing their unique competencies and are valued as agents for good in their own and others' lives. In our interviews and focus groups with the 22 young people who participated in this study, they spoke to how their experiences and interests are tapped in school, with positive effects on their engagement and performance. They shared a perspective that school leaders, teachers, and other staff play a crucial role in their developing agency.

Important to their developing agency, the students echoed findings from our Phase I study (Wilcox, Leo & Kramer, 2018) of efforts by district and school leaders, teachers, and support staff to prepare young people for life after high school. For example, these students shared the perspective that their teachers go beyond focusing narrowly on meeting state standards and achievement on high stakes exams, and instead look to connect academic learning with students' individual strengths and interests. They shared the impression that adults in their school and community want them to be well-rounded and emotionally healthy young people — not just great test-takers or "human capital" ready for the workforce. We identified three dimensions of their experiences related to cultivating agency:

(1) Exploring Choices and Leadership Opportunities
(2) Being Heard and Hearing Others
(3) Advocating for Self and Others

**Exploring Choices and Leadership Opportunities**

Students at Crown Point and Malverne pointed to many opportunities to make choices, both academic and non-academic, as well as to lead something of interest. They associated these opportunities with helping prepare them for adult life in that they would need to be able to make decisions and follow through with responsibilities in less structured environments of college or the workplace. They also pointed to the importance of choice in developing greater understandings of themselves as learners and as unique individuals, with everyone having something to contribute. They reported that when teachers gave them opportunities to explore their likes and dislikes more deeply, whether in or outside of class, these opportunities accelerated their developing sense of what they can and want to do with their futures.

One of our interview questions was: "Could you tell me about a time you were able to make a choice or lead something important to you, and what value did you place on these experiences?" The most common response regarded products to show evidence of their learning. While in some classroom settings, students are required to present their work in only one format (oftentimes influenced by state exams or other high-stakes tests), students in this study reported having been offered a multitude of options to express what they know and can do in ways that build on their strengths and affinities. For example, Kyle from Crown Point described opportunities to choose journal entries versus chapter notes for homework assignments, or in Alex's case, she decided to make a "playdoh brain" instead of take an anatomy test. In one focus group, Alex, Kyle, and Mackenzie shared how they appreciate being given options to express what they know and can do in different ways, some choosing more hands-on activities versus writing papers or completing on-demand quizzes or tests. Alex explained,

*We had the choice whether we could make them [poster boards] online as a virtual vision board or we could make them by hand. So I liked that choice because I like the more hands-on, like putting paper to paper myself, than picking pictures online and doing it that way.*

When we asked questions about what they valued most in their high school experiences, these young people placed having choices such as those described above at the top of the list.

Kyle's view that being given a choice prepares him for the less-structured environments he is likely to encounter later in life was shared. As he put it, "Yeah, it [being given choices in school] helps you take responsibility for your own actions and make decisions for yourself."

In addition to being offered choices in how they express what they know in terms of academics, student participants in this study pointed to a wide variety of choices and leadership opportunities in extracurriculars and other activities. For example, several Malverne students explained that they could choose from a range of rigorous Advanced Placement (AP) courses as well as more career-oriented coursework offered through their regional BOCES with programs as diverse as Engineering, Healthcare, and Music. As Steven from Malverne commented, "Everybody kind of finds their own niche in a way and the school really does offer something for everyone." As we discuss in more detail in Theme 4, while Crown Point and Malverne students reported being offered a variety of opportunities to make academic and non-academic choices, their options differed, as their communities also differ significantly; we will discuss the issue of cultural responsiveness more in Theme 4 as well.

With regard to leadership opportunities, students reported having a variety of experiences leading something, even if they are not in a traditional leading organization like Student Council or National Honor Society. For example, Crown Point has been a participant in the College For Every Student (CFES) program (open to all students) for several years, and as part of this partnership students work together in teams to take on different projects under the guidance of a teacher. One such example was "Honor Flight." Mark explained that students were in the driver's seat for inviting veterans to visit the school and engage in "a question and answer session and some different activities." Kyle added that "there are a lot of opportunities for everyone in our school [to lead activities or projects], and definitely there are a lot of opportunities with the CFES team."

Alex and Mackenzie from Crown Point interpret their involvement in such organizations as the National Honor Society as coming with the expectation that they act as role models for their peers in what Mackenzie described as an intentional effort on the parts of adults in the school to "start a chain reaction and have good behavior everywhere." As we discuss in more detail in Theme 3, these students are cognizant that they are sharing a leadership role with the adults in their school, and this arrangement is rooted in trust that they can and will act responsibly.

They [adults] use the [student] leaders to help show the younger students or students who haven't experienced certain things how to act in a way. But they know that they can trust us to be that role model. — Alex (Crown Point)

### Being Heard and Hearing Others

In addition to experiencing opportunities to make choices in and outside of the classroom, students in both schools expressed feeling encouraged to raise their voices about issues important to them. Though acknowledging that "not every problem can get fixed," (Olivia, Malverne) or that due to "state regulations for seat time" or some other regulation (Mark, Crown Point) they wouldn't always get what they want, in general they expressed feeling that they were heard by educators and staff. "We've talked to [our school principal] about how we felt . . . he's always trying to fix all the problems in our school," explained Olivia from Malverne.

In Crown Point, students described being invited to voice their preferences for what drinks were offered in the vending machines, to what menu items were offered in the school cafeteria, to how they wanted their bathrooms painted. Harold and Jessica discussed these opportunities:

*Harold: In student council we're trying to bring athletic drinks to the vending machine down by the gym and to the teachers' room, actually.*

*Jessica: And, um, student council also did this thing – for a while we had pizza every Friday for lunch and they worked on it, and we got that changed to something else on Fridays, so we didn't have the same thing every Friday and. . . we could paint the bathroom, the girls' and boys' bathroom over again.*

Students in both schools reported how school staff also urged them to speak up about difficult and sensitive issues ranging from sexual assault to mental health. Being treated like "adults" – as Robyn from Malverne put it – made her not only feel more comfortable and open with teachers, but also well prepared to engage in dialogue with those who don't share the same views. As Elena (Malverne) put it, "I voice my opinions a lot." And Sean (Malverne) described the value of having "heated" political discussions between peers in a Government class:

*But it [the heated discussion] always ends the same way in that at the end of class, everyone is still . . . somehow it all dials back down and everyone just goes back to being normal because having this opportunity to voice our opinions and not be afraid of that is – we learn to respect each other's way, and I wish more people did that.*

Several students also brought up examples of student-led initiatives in school such as a Malverne walkout that students planned in response to the school shootings in Parkland, Florida. School and district leaders, wanting to ensure the walk-out could be done safely, met with students to create a plan on which they could all agree. "We sat in the conference room [and] talked about what we wanted to do, how we wanted to do it," explained Erin. This planning eventually developed into an event where the entire student body walked to the field behind the school and organized themselves into a human peace sign in honor of the victims of the shooting. "That was really nice that they were able to listen to us," she said.

### Advocating for Self and Others

A finding we did not expect in this study relates to students' experience of being explicitly encouraged to advocate for themselves and others. Several students pointed to ways their teachers encouraged them to stand up for themselves and how they saw this as important in helping them navigate their futures whether in college or the workplace or civic life. Alex provided an example:

*One thing I always hear over and over from my drama director is the importance of confidence and advocating for yourself— being able to speak up for yourself and make sure you're getting what you need. And having an open line of communication with your professors and into the workforce with your boss. Always being able to advocate or network for yourself.*

Alex explained that this advice helped her get a job and feel prepared for potential college interviews. "Without [the drama director] teaching me how to dress for this interview, I probably wouldn't have gotten [the job]," she said.

Malverne students explained how pivotal teachers are in learning to advocate for themselves, be good role models for others, and plan for their futures. When asked what teachers do to encourage this, Olivia described how teachers kept students engaged and motivated to work hard through "love" and guidance in how to manage their time and plan, as we discuss more in Theme 4.

At Left - Crown Point High School students designed and then painted their own school bathrooms. This is one of several opportunities for them to make changes in the school, and such opportunities were not limited to in-school improvements.

At Right – Crown Point High School students have opportunities to contribute their ideas and efforts outside of the school such as designing and building flower boxes for the town's post office.



## Implications for Practice

| Theme 1: Key Implications | How to do it |
|---|---|
| Students receive multiplier benefits from opportunities to voice their concerns and being offered options to make choices in their learning experiences and plan for their futures. | Make voice and choice opportunities top priorities alongside academics.<br><br>Provide information about and encourage students to apply to special programs to broaden their horizons and allow them to try out different identities and pursue different paths. |
| Students reap many benefits by being engaged as "adults" in problem solving and decision making. While these roles and responsibilities are sometimes offered to the students who show natural leadership qualiites, every young person profits by being offered opportunities to lead in some activity or effort of interest to them. | Ensure every child has an opportunity to lead some activity or effort in or outside of school. |
| Student agency is linked with academic performance, and students pick up on messages about their importance as agents in their own and others' lives rather than being seen as a "good" or "bad" student based on academic performance alone. | Encourage everyone to value their own and others' unique contributions to their school, community, and the world. |

# Jessica (Crown Point)

*I love our guidance counselor—she's wonderful and I can always go to talk to her about anything that I need to talk about. Sometimes, it's just nice if you're in study hall, and it's kind of loud there; you can go in there [guidance office]. It's quiet there, and you do your work there. Or you and your friends can go there and just talk to her, since she's easy to talk to. I've really learned a lot, like how to cope with certain situations through her, like dealing with things that are happening in school or outside the school. She's just been really great.*

Sixteen-year-old Jessica was in eleventh grade when we met with her. Like many of her classmates we interviewed at Crown Point, she was involved in many different clubs and extracurriculars as well as activities outside of school. After the school day, her busy schedule includes going to music lessons and sports team practices as well as getting ready for any special upcoming deadlines or events like preparing materials to compete for a "Distinguished Young Women" scholarship, doing chores at home, and taking care of her younger siblings.
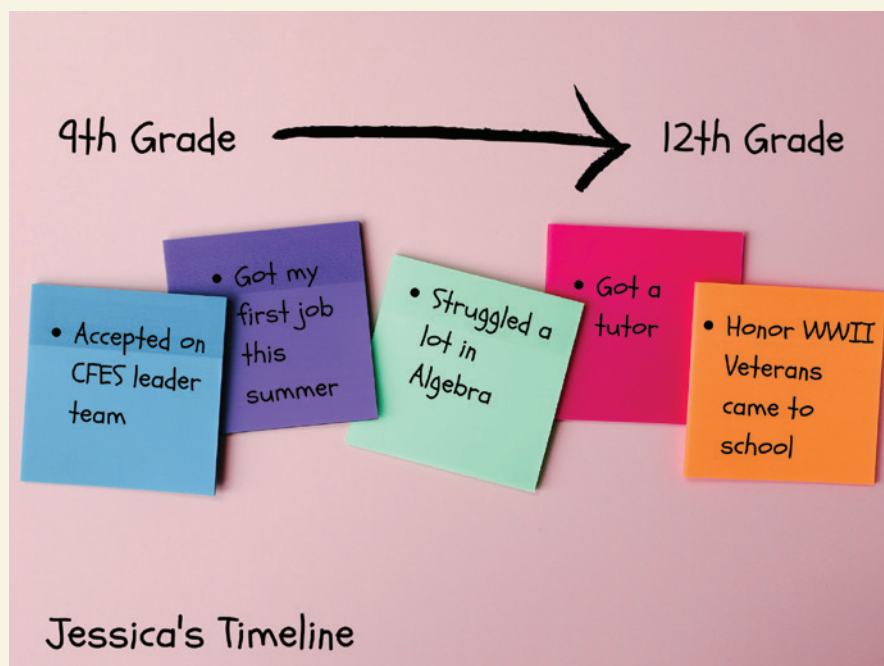
Jessica pointed to a number of people who have kept her motivated to do well in her classes and cope with life's challenges. She explained that several of her teachers, her guidance counselor, and drama club coach provided a potent combination of "fun" and safe places for her to hang out and talk through things of importance to her.

Jessica also described several key experiences and events along her path in high school that she attributed to helping her explore her talents, work with others, plan for her future, and voice her concerns about issues of import to her. Referencing a timeline (see Jessica's timeline below) we prompted her to draw, Jessica pointed to her involvement in the College For Every Student program beginning in 9th grade as a pivotal event. CFES, as Jessica explained, is open to all students in Crown Point and in addition to a number of other activities described in more detail in the Crown Point case study, it facilitates opportunities to visit a number of colleges. She described her experiences with CFES as providing her valuable insight into college options and in the excerpt below, how this program offered her opportunities to learn how to interact with adults in formal settings by engaging in activities like etiquette lessons in a CFES-sponsored "summit."

*We all dressed fancy, and we have lunch there, and we were taught like when you have company over, how you set up a table, and what appropriate etiquette is when you eat in a fancy restaurant. Just all that stuff.*

Through these interactions and experiences, Jessica attests to having developed a perspective that she has something of value to offer to others and can assert her voice and use her unique talents to effect positive changes in her own life and the lives of others. Jessica, like other young people in this study, while facing some constraints to their assertion of agency, report having had an experience in high school that had opened up options and has prepared them well for adult life.



9th Grade → 12th Grade

- Accepted on CFES leader team
- Got my first job this summer
- Struggled a lot in Algebra
- Got a tutor
- Honor WWII Veterans came to school

Jessica's Timeline

# 2.
# Contributing to a Caring Climate and Meeting High Expectations

> **Really it's a blessing to come here because even though it's a small town and school, you get to know everyone and it's kind of nice just being able to know everyone.**
>
> – Cristy (Crown Point)

> **Everyone, all the teachers here really are open to the students. They want to make sure everyone is comfortable, and everyone is doing their best like even outside of school how they're feeling.** – Sean (Malverne)

Previous scholarship has indicated that school culture includes a range of aspects, including norms, values, and beliefs that are exhibited in how the school is managed through leaders' policies as well as school processes, and educators' practices in and outside of the classroom (Thapa et al., 2013). School climate refers to how the school feels: for instance, it can refer to the extent the school feels comfortable, welcoming, and friendly. School culture and climate can have dramatic effects on students' experiences, and they have been linked to academic achievement and social-emotional well-being (Cohen, 2009).

As we found in the first phase of this study, which focused on the perspectives of leaders and educators, positive outlier schools are characterized by relatively high levels of collaboration and cooperation among teachers as well as between teachers and administrators. Their norms and practices contrast with schools organized with a "top-down" (Mehta & Fine, 2019) approach where school and district leaders maintain tight control over teachers – offering little autonomy – and such practices are often mirrored in classrooms where teachers restrict students' voice, choice, and leadership opportunities. Instead, and as presented next, students in this study attest to a collaborative and collegial culture among and between students and with adults. We identified three dimensions of this theme:

(1) Co-Constructing a Caring School Climate
(2) Meeting High Expectations
(3) Utilizing Academic and Social-Emotional Support

**Co-Constructing a Caring School Climate**
Students in this study described their schools and the wider community as "close-knit" and "small." In both contexts, students felt that everybody both knew and was comfortable with each other, and that these close connections helped foster a

caring school climate. During a focus group at Crown Point, for instance, students were asked to describe their school in a few words and write those down on a post-it note. Alex, a senior, wrote "small, close-knit group, family, comfortable" (see next page) and explained why she had chosen those words:

*Because it's such a small community around here that in the school, it is another small community within itself. So, like almost everybody knows almost everyone, and for the most part we all get along. No one ever really believes me when I say how small my school is, so it's very personal. You get personal relationships with the teachers, and you have really good relationships with them. And when you leave, you always come – people always tend to come back and revisit the school and talk to their previous teachers.*

Though in a different demographic context, Malverne students responded similarly about their school community. A senior named Elizabeth, for instance, elaborated on the ways in which a "close-knit" school fosters connections between teachers and students and among peers:

*Malverne is a small school, so I mean – especially if you're here for four years, you basically know a lot of people here and you have connections. . . . Everyone is like supportive of each other. I mean, once you know everyone here it's like they're kind of just your family.*

Robyn, a senior, echoed Elizabeth's sentiment regarding the school climate at Malverne: "I think it's like a great thing because everyone does know everybody [in the high school]." Students felt that the caring climate manifested itself in a lack of hierarchy among peer groups and relative absence of bullying. Jessica, a Crown Point junior, summed it up: "Everybody [at Crown Point] is in one big peer group." Mackenzie, a Crown Point senior, reiterated her message:

*Like in big schools there is bullying, but in our school, a lot of us are just friends with everyone. Yeah, I would describe our school as friendly. And we're welcoming to new people in our school.*

A cooperative and friendly atmosphere among peers was evident in Malverne as well. Students also explained that educators encouraged them to work together frequently on projects, form study groups, and serve as leaders in extracurriculars and clubs, further cementing connections. Sean, a senior at Malverne, said in an interview that "this school really doesn't have bullying," and even with "outside pressures" there were "many different opportunities for students who are dealing with stuff," including support staff, counseling programs, and clubs. In a focus group with two other peers, Steven, a senior from Malverne, explained how the school offered a place for students from different backgrounds to come together and learn with each other: "I think when we do all come to school and we all interact with each other we are able to break through [any cultural barriers]."

Encouraged by educators to model good behavior for peers and younger students, students took great pride in contributing to the positive climate in their schools and extending
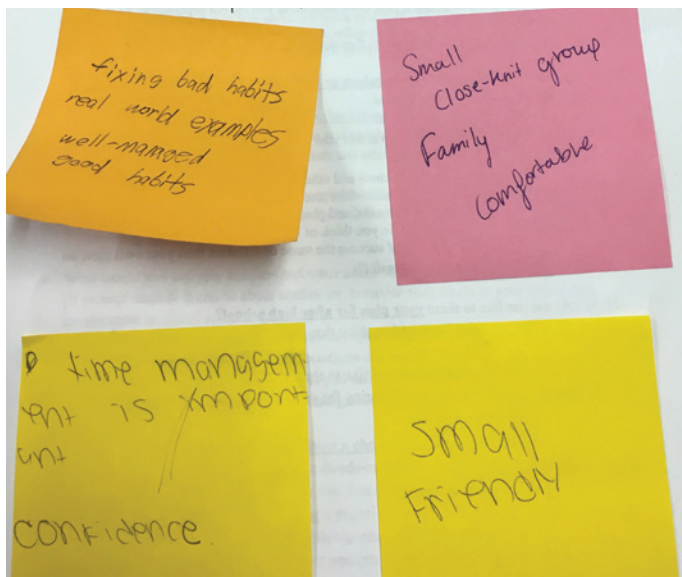


Student Descriptions of Crown Point

that care to their communities. For instance, at Crown Point, a program called Panther Partners brought together teachers and students to work on community-based projects and discuss anything going on in students' lives.

**Meeting High Expectations**

In general, students in Crown Point and Malverne felt that their teachers held them to high standards and that their classes were often challenging and rigorous – a feature that they felt would prepare them well for college and career. They linked these high expectations to building up their resilience to adversity and challenge and developing their time-management and self-regulation skills, discussed in more detail in Theme 4. In Malverne, for example, several students recounted times where their teachers encouraged them to work hard in their classes.

Olivia explained how her teachers motivated students to put forth their best efforts:

*The teachers here are dedicated; they want you to pass. They want you to keep going. And I love that about teachers here because I feel like kids need that extra push. . . . They show so much love, they want you to do good. And I feel like that's just better, because if you have a teacher that's like, "Do whatever you want, I don't really care if you pass or fail," then students are going to be like, "Okay I guess I'm going to go on my phone." But if teachers are going to be like, "We have a test next week, and you're going to study," [students] will be like, "Oh I have a test." They will want to do well; they want to do better more often.*

Nick, a senior at Malverne, explained how students admired teachers and wanted to ensure that they met their expectations: "That's what also can push students to do better because you don't want to disappoint . . . you like this teacher, they're really cool, you don't want to disappoint this teacher. You want to do better."

Students also connected their teachers' support and encouragement with strengthening their motivation to overcome both academic and personal challenges. For instance, Henry, a senior at Malverne, explained how a teacher used a personal narrative to motivate him to work harder in school. "He told me that he came from nothing and he had to work his way up to become a teacher," explained Henry, continuing,

*Mr. [name] was someone I talked to – I still talk to him every day. And he was talking about me being very bright, taking my future seriously, and I just remembered that to this day because he told me if I waste it, there's no coming back.*

When asked to recount an important moment in her education at Malverne, Robyn recounted a time when her teachers used past work she had completed as exemplars for current students. She explained how this moment helped instill a sense of confidence in her own abilities:

*Since I have so much respect and admiration for these teachers and my own work . . . it just made me more confident in my abilities. The fact that these teachers that I think are so intelligent, that I have so much respect for think that what I've done is good enough to show to their students in order to help them succeed. That made me just like confirmed in me that I can succeed on my own because they believe in me basically.*

At Crown Point, students were also encouraged to work hard and develop respectful attitudes. Jessica summed up the behavioral expectations that she felt educators held for Crown Point students:
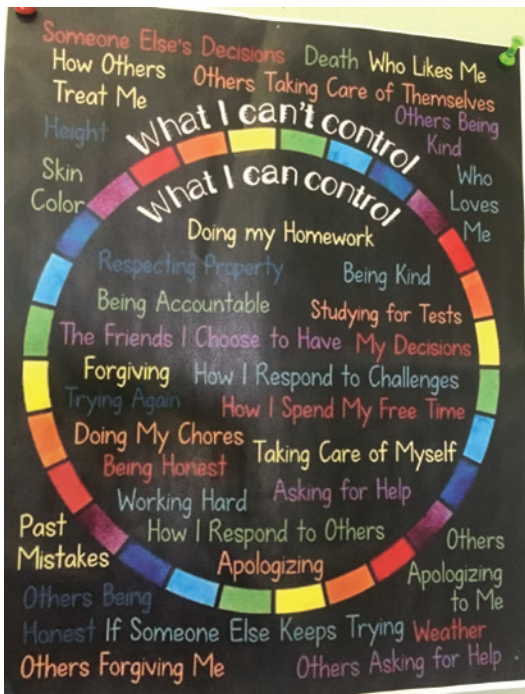
Poster Hung in Crown Point Classroom

*I would say all the adults and teachers in the school expect that you do your best when you come to school. And in life. They expect that when you leave this school, . . . that you take what they've taught you and bring it out of the school — and you are a good person. And you do what you wanted to do and you always do what you can to be your best self.*

Elliot, a Crown Point senior who admitted that he "hated school," described how his technology teacher helped him engage with schoolwork:

*I never really did much, so now that I'm actually trying. I guess he [technology teacher] holds me to a higher standard just because he knows what I can do in that aspect because I've had him for so long and I've done so much with him and for him.*

When asked what characteristics their teachers felt were important for success in life, Lucas responded "hard work." As he put it, "Nobody gets anywhere without hard work no matter where you are in life." Answering the same question, Jake added, "And mindset – you want to have a positive mindset in school when you're doing things so you're going to get everything done."

> I feel like everyone here acts their own way. We're all different. We all express ourselves differently so it's like they don't really label us to be someone. The school really makes ourselves come out more – who we are, instead of putting a label on us or what we should do in life.
>
> — Mark (Crown Point)

## Utilizing Academic and Social-Emotional Support

A significant theme mentioned by students was the additional supports that were available to them to meet high expectations in terms of academics and behavior. At Malverne, for example, students reported a range of opportunities for academic support. These options included "Homework Center," a program where students could receive tutoring from teachers after school. Students were also given the option of serving a detention in Homework Center so that they could catch up on schoolwork rather than be punished for an infraction. Students also explained that their teachers made themselves available before and after school for extra help. As Olivia explained, "Teachers . . . literally won't stop until you learn, until you get it. And I feel like that's what we have that most schools don't, which is the passion and the dedication."

The high expectations and rigorous academic climate of Malverne described above was also complemented by educators' genuine concern about students' emotional and social well-being. Programs such as Meditation and Mindful Mondays gave students an important release from the pressure of academics, and guidance counselors were mentioned by students as a significant source of emotional support. This caring and supportive climate at Malverne provided an important source of support for students who recognized that their teachers – as Erin put it – were "tuned into" how they were feeling. Robyn, for instance, recounted a time when her teacher explicitly told her that her "well-being" was more important than her grades. "It's not like a teacher or any of them are going to judge you on whether you're doing really well in the class," she said.

Like the students in Malverne, Crown Point interviewees also described the numerous ways in which educators at their school supported their academic success and social-emotional health. In many cases, the close connections that students developed with their teachers provided a sense of ease when they needed to seek teachers for extra help. As 11th grade student Harold explained,

*They like, always help you. If you don't know what to do with say, a question from homework, or something . . . if we don't understand, it's always like "Hey, what's up?" You get to know [them] a little bit. Eventually they become really good friends. Friendly . . . accepting and friendly kind of go together.*

Students explained that in many cases their teachers supported their growth and development as individuals with unique skills, knowledge, and personalities.

## Implications for Practice

| Theme 2: Key Implications | How to do it |
| --- | --- |
| A caring and connected school climate fostered by opportunities for mentorship and leadership keeps students engaged. | Encourage students to work together frequently on projects, form study groups, and serve as leaders in extracurriculars and clubs, further cementing connections. |
| Setting high expectations for all students in both academic and behavioral senses while recognizing their individual affinities and aptitudes builds resilience and enhances motivation. | Provide students with varied opportunities to excel in school that play to their strengths.<br><br>Reiterate constantly the core need for students to be seen and feel cared for and about. |
| Providing social and emotional supports in formal and informal ways cements relationships and encourages attention to overall well-being, with reciprocal effects on academic performance. | Use an "open door" policy providing welcoming spaces where students feel comfortable just "hanging out."<br><br>Let students know that their social-emotional well-being is more important than their grades.<br><br>Establish events that allows students to focus on mindfulness and/or meditation. |

# Robyn (Malverne)

Our team met Robyn as she was midway through completing her senior year at Malverne High School. A gregarious and hardworking student who professed deep interests in history and politics and was an active member of numerous extracurriculars, Robyn spoke at length of the supportive and caring climate at Malverne High School. Like several other students, Robyn referred to the school community as "small" and "close-knit." "We're so interconnected, we're almost like a second family. Everyone knows each other," she explained.

During a focus group. Robyn and several peers were asked to describe their school in a few words. Robyn chose the words "diverse" and "challenging" and "small". In explaining each term, she first referred to the diversity of Malverne's student population, explaining, "You go to a classroom and you'll see people of so many different cultures and different backgrounds." Appreciative of the opportunities that a diverse school presented, Robyn described making friends with peers from many different backgrounds and seeking out chances to have conversations in Spanish with native speakers in the library. She elaborated on the value of going to school with a diverse student population:

*Going to this school, I know so much about people of different races, religions, backgrounds than someone else would. So I think that it causes me to be maybe a more empathetic person, or maybe a more culturally understanding person, than another person would be.*

Like many of her peers we interviewed, Robyn felt that educators at Malverne High School had very high expectations for her. Stating that "the rigor we have [at Malverne High School] is

unparalleled to anything I've seen in the area," Robyn recounted the ways in which teachers challenged her academically. In many cases, she explained, teachers not only push students to work hard, but help guide them towards a deep understanding of the subject. For example, she explained how her interest in politics and history was encouraged and honed by her teachers:

*I'm very much like interested in the comparative politics and international politics, mostly because of what I've learned in Malverne High School, from both my history classes. My teachers kind of like fostering in me this deep understanding of how the world works socially, politically, and economically.*

While she appreciated the rigorous tone and high expectations at Malverne, Robyn admitted that it was often challenging for students. She explained how she felt supported by adults in the school to succeed in her academic endeavors and beyond, mentioning guidance counselors as one important source of social and emotional support. For instance, while mapping out the important places in school, Robyn explained how she could "hang out" at the guidance office and talk about "literally anything:"

*I know I can interact with other guidance counselors, even if they don't handle me. I still go to them for advice. It's just a great place to study, because I do use my free periods to work on homework and stuff. So it's a very chill place to hang out and it's like comfy.*

Robyn also described teachers as an important source of assistance – both academic and social-emotional. "They make us feel comfortable," she said. "I know I can go to them if I have a problem or I need to talk." In particular, she recounted a particularly challenging time during her junior year when a teacher took her aside and explicitly told her that he cared more about her well-being than her grades. "But they were still so helpful, and they would like check up on me and check up on other people feeling struggling. I wouldn't have been able to do this if I didn't have these teachers," she said.



Robyn's Timeline

# 3.
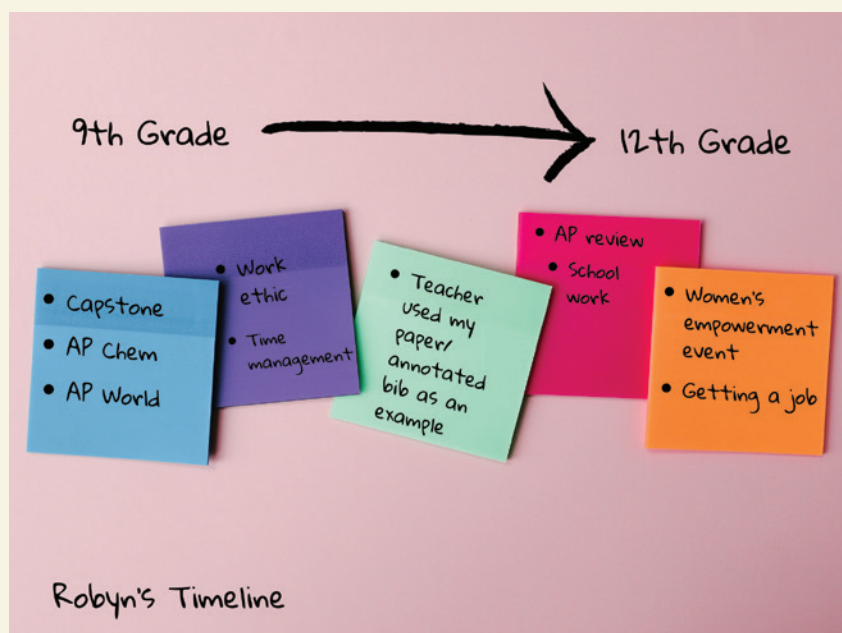
## Forging Harmonious and Supportive Relationships

> I feel that the teachers do a really good job of understanding each student. I think that's what really comes down to the success is that each teacher can successfully resonate with a student. For me, every teacher, they know your individual needs, they know what you struggle with, they know your personality and how to interact with you.
>
> – Robyn (Malverne)

> [On the transition from middle to high school] My parents were pushing me to still do my best and my teachers were helping me in my classes when I was overstressed and couldn't process things and then I had friends helping me with more trivial stuff like opening the locker and learning to do all that. – Mark (Crown Point)

Adolescence has been identified as a uniquely mutable period of life characterized by keen attention to social cues and power dynamics among peers and with adults (Eccles et al., 1996). Prior research on adolescent development has highlighted the important roles peers and adult mentors, as well as school experiences (within classrooms and extracurricular activities) and experiences outside of school (within the family and through hobbies and workplaces), have on adolescents' social and emotional well-being, sense of agency, and their emerging identities (Nelson & DeBacker, 2008).

In order to gain a rich and deep understanding of young people's experiences in high school, we looked to their interactions with people and what sense they have made of them (Carnevale, 2020; Gee, 2015). To this end, we probed how Crown Point and Malverne student participants characterized their relationships with their peers, school staff, their families, and community members and asked what value they ascribed to these relationships as they navigated high school and prepared for life beyond high school. We identified three dimensions of this theme:

(1) Mixing, Mingling, and Mentoring from Peer to Peer
(2) Breaking Down the Barriers between Teacher and Student
(3) Making Links and Opening Possibilities with Families and Community Members

**Mixing, Mingling, and Mentoring from Peer to Peer**

As we discussed in Themes 1 and 2, Crown Point and Malverne students reported similar assessments of the qualities of each school's culture and climate despite differences between their schools and communities. These attributes set the stage for forging what they characterized as generally harmonious and supportive relationships. Although the ways relationships develop differ somewhat because of the differences in size and diversity in each of the schools, they also shared a number of characteristics. First, students in both schools pointed to the many opportunities they were offered to interact with their peers from different backgrounds or with different interests. This mixing and mingling generated and sustained fluid peer relationships devoid of bullying and hierarchies. On this point, Robyn explained her experience in Malverne, where in her assessment, peer hierarchies are generally absent:

*We don't have this popular hierarchy, like social hierarchy here. There aren't cliques; you just hang out with this group of people, and sometimes you hang out with this person, and maybe you're friends and maybe you're not.*

In both Malverne and Crown Point, student participants also indicated that their peers helped them navigate academic and non-academic challenges alike. With regard to academics, they described instances where they spontaneously help each other as needs arise and also other instances where school staff created opportunities for them to help each other. Lucas from Crown Point, for instance, was called upon to help one of his peers in math:

*Well actually last year, we had geometry for math class, and going into the Regents [Exams], there was a girl in the class who didn't know what she was doing on her homework, and she was asking for help, so I went and sat with her in study hall and helped her figure out her math problems and showed her the different steps to complete them. I helped her through her math assignments so she got to the point of it, so she wasn't just trying to throw something onto a piece of paper and get a bad grade. I wanted her to understand it for the Regents.*

Kyle described a program in which older students present on colleges to their younger peers.

*We did a program last year . . . adopt a college — where we were given a college, and then we talked about it with a younger, elementary grade. And we just talked about the college with them and created a short video to present to the entire elementary school.*

Like several of his peers, Kyle understood that they are expected to "start a chain reaction to have good behavior everywhere," and as Tina from Malverne reported, taking on mentoring roles for younger kids as they progress through high school is the norm. In particular, she explained how becoming section leader in Band provided her with a valuable opportunity to mentor her younger peers:
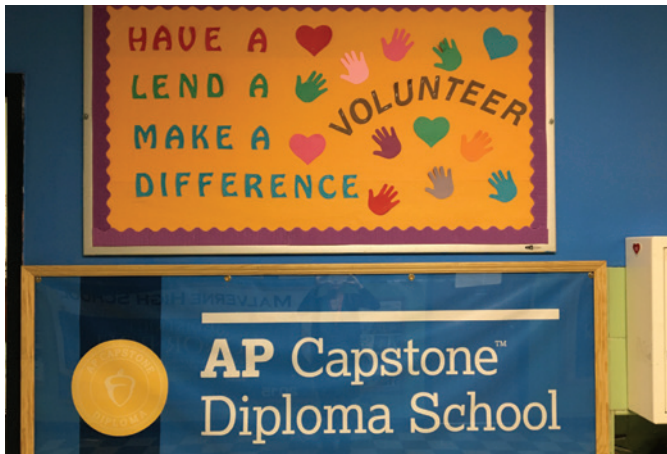


A Poster Hung in Malverne's Hallway Encouraging Students to Help Others

*I always looked up to my section leaders from like 9th to 11th grade. And they always seemed so much older than me and they had so much experience. And when I got to 12th grade I was like, "Oh that's my role now."*

These experiences reinforce peer relationships while expanding them. They also reinforce the value of responsibility for oneself as well as others. At Crown Point, while some students described a few cliques in the school, most noted that their peers generally helped them find their way to connect with others with shared interests and encouraged them to be themselves. For instance, even though Crown Point is predominately white, one Crown Point student who self-identified as coming from a mixed ethnicity background explained that she was made to "feel like I was included and was one of them. They never made me feel like I was out of place."

Beyond "near-peer" relationships, several Crown Point students also described the importance of alumni/ae in providing insight into what comes after graduation. Mark from Crown Point, for example, spoke to the value of getting an alum peer's

perspective on college versus an adult's view when asked about what is helping prepare him for college:

*A lot of my friends graduated last year, so talking to them about college and seeing what it's like from like an unprofessional perspective – not talking to a professional from the college, but someone who's at college talking about what it's really like.*

While Mark's conversations with alumni came from his established friendships, Cristy explained that Crown Point leaders and staff help make this alum-current student connection happen through a yearly alumni assembly where "past kids who have graduated who are either in college, graduated college, or are in the workforce talk about what to expect, and if we have questions for them they'll answer them."

In addition to helping them navigate academic challenges, all student participants spoke to the importance of extracurricular activities in helping them develop relationships with a diverse group of other students and adults. During a Malverne focus group, for instance, Steven explained how extracurricular activities helped create unity among their peers and allowed them to build relationships with people they might not have otherwise had a chance to get to know:

*I'm a part of the Robotics Club at our school, and we have students at the top of their class and we have students at the bottom of their class. It almost evens it out in a way. When students join Robotics, most of them don't know anything about it. And they come there and they learn. And everybody learns the same thing and everybody ends up learning at the same rate. So in a way, it kind of humanizes everybody. You don't see the kid at the top of the class as that really smart kid that's better than everyone else. You see him as the kid that doesn't know how to tighten a screw. It almost gives us all a new perspective on each other. It goes back to the whole interconnected part of us where we can all come together.*

**Breaking Down the Barriers between Teacher and Student**
Students in both schools described having close relationships with teachers and felt comfortable discussing a range of topics with them outside of whatever they were studying in terms of academic content. They characterized their teachers as "friends" and "mentors" often and some went so far as to call them another set of parents. On this dimension of our study, we found in Phase I (Wilcox, Leo & Kramer, 2018) that many of the adults working in the positive outlier schools referred to students as "kids" and emphasized the importance of authentically connecting with each individual rather than relating to them solely as the objects of their teaching (i.e., "students"). Clearly, from these young people's perspectives, this message has come through to them and they respond to this attention with respect for their teachers and a valuing of their opinions.
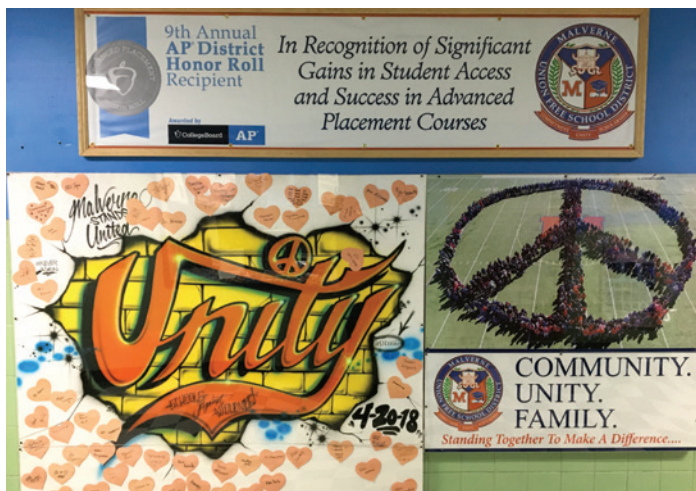
"Unity" Signs Posted in Malverne

These teacher-student relationships also serve as an important source of motivation for students to succeed in their coursework and extracurricular activities, especially through the most challenging of times.

As described earlier, teachers, counselors, and mentors reinforced the import of responsibility and mutual respect, and students affirmed that their relationships with adults are built on that foundation. Almost all students identified a few specific adults in school that they were close to and felt played a significant role in supporting them to explore their interests. Alex (Crown Point) described these student-teacher (or other school staff members like guidance counselors, coaches, etc.) relationships as "definitely different from bigger schools." She went on to explain:

*My friends who go to different schools don' t have as good relationships as we do with our teachers. Because most of these teachers we' ve spent time with outside of school. We' ve gone on five-hour bus rides with them to see shows and stuff — and sports. We just spend a lot of time with them, and they start to become really close. Not on a friend basis, because there' s still that level of respect for teachers.*

While Crown Point students' relationships with teachers are encouraged by the smallness of the community and school population, Malverne participants indicated that teachers' availability and willingness to talk to them about classwork as well as a range of everyday topics in their lives was key to building relationships there, as well. As Robyn put it, "I know I can go to them [teachers] if I have a problem or I need to talk because we've forged these special relationships." Steven added, "I think it's really important that . . . we do have that level of comfort where we can go to a teacher if we have a problem, and we can actually talk to them."

Other students described how their close relationships with teachers provided them with sources of casual and comfortable interactions that made them stay engaged with school.

"They're always willing to joke with us and have fun in class. They're not rigid," said Robyn. Erin described how she liked to catch up with her favorite teacher every day: "I'm here in the morning because I come a little early and [my teacher and I] just talk about everything like TV shows, sports, college." As Robyn put it, "I just like to talk to [my teacher] about my life and my academic endeavors, literally anything."

Students also felt that their teachers cared about each student regardless of their academic ability, position in the class, or any other personal characteristics. For instance, several students explained that teachers at Malverne developed close relationships not only with the most popular or highest performing kids, but also sought to cultivate close relationships with all students. As Robyn said, "Usually when that happens [close relationships develop], a person is like a genius in the class, teacher's pet, but you don't have to be the best to be good friends with your teacher or feel comfortable with your teacher."

### Making Links to and Opening Possibilities with Families and Community Members

Students in both schools also described how their families and other community members acted as a mutually reinforcing support system along with school staff. Parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and others served as role models and guides in planning for and pursuing different paths. For Crown Point student Kyle, "My dad, he's my role model . . . and my grandma – she's basically a mother figure, a role model"; for Mark, "My parents just keep me on task – even if they were the ones applying some of the stress, they were also applying it so it would be relieved"; and Cristy, whose mom "works in a hospital" was encouraged to pursue that avenue by her guidance counselor:

*I went to her [guidance counselor] because I was like, "I like hands-on work, I' m not the strongest in English, but I' m really good at that [hands-on work]." She' s like, "Well, have you ever thought about going into the medical field?" So then that kind of showed me, and then I actually went with my mom because she works in a hospital and I shadowed in the O.R. my 10th-grade year.*

While school-family connections were not necessarily formal or frequent, students reported that they were an outgrowth of the close-knit nature of the community ("Everyone knows each other," said Elliott) and were reinforced through school sports events, performances, and other events.

Likewise, in Malverne, students explained the "very close connection" – as Robyn put it – between parents and educators. In particular, students at Malverne described heavy involvement of parents in school activities such as the PTA and Board of Education meetings and attendance at concerts and sporting events, as well as high levels of communication with teachers.

# Implications for Practice

| Theme 3: Key Implications | How to do it |
|---|---|
| Peer-to-peer, including alum-peer, relationships provide key social-emotional supports and practical guidance and break down barriers between young people of different backgrounds and affinities. | Plan for and make systematic, alumni/ae opportunities to interact with current high school and middle school students.<br><br>Create opportunities for students to mentor or tutor their peers or younger students. |
| Every adult has an opportunity to play an important role in relating to every young person. | Nominate or announce (if open to all) unique opportunities or share resources about an area of shared interest. |
| Parents, family members and others in the community and far from the community play key roles in supporting school learning as well as opening up possibilities and options for life beyond high school. | Make available opportunities for students to meet people from different walks of life to give them insight into different life and professional paths. |

# Mark (Crown Point)

Mark was a junior at the time of our interview with him and self-identified as of a mixed ethnic background. Like several of his peers, he described a number of experiences with his teachers and peers that fostered relationships that in turn opened up new opportunities and networks and built his confidence about going to college after graduation.

Mark's journey into high school, not unlike others, did not start off easily. He described feeling stressed during the transition from middle school. From the challenges of learning to open a locker to struggling in algebra, Mark felt what he described as "a rough patch." As can be seen in his timeline, Mark indicated a number of "social interactions" starting in 9th grade that helped him "learn to deal with stress better." His science teacher, for instance, invited him to go to a science conference on climate change, which Mark reported was his "first experience with a scientific conference and meeting with both professionals and other interested students." From this experience, he explained he gained insights into the professional lives of scientists, and his teacher reached out with resources to keep him engaged in this area of interest.

*I learned a lot about what the scientific community is like, what it's like to be out doing research and different things you could do. That also brought to mind when he [science teacher] kept recommending me different books about science because I was interested and it just wasn't something that there was a lot of around the school. So he kept recommending me different books about science and scientists that I wouldn't have found otherwise.*

In tenth grade Mark was tapped by his guidance counselor to start working as a teaching assistant in Algebra 2. He explained,

*I think my teachers, when I expressed an interest in teaching at a college, like with [my guidance counselor] she recommended that I could be a teacher's assistant in Algebra 2 for half the year.*

With this experience Mark learned new things about himself. For instance, he said he learned "that I could explain things to people in ways that they understood if I took the time and was patient."

Beyond teacher and peer relationships, mainly fostered through school-based activities, Mark also engaged in a summer camp program with younger peers and through this learned how to review applications for different projects. And like other peers from Crown Point, he participated in the CFES Leadership Team starting in tenth grade, which focused on college and career planning.

Overall, Mark exemplifies other students' experiences at both Crown Point and Malverne with regard to the role of forging harmonious and supportive relationships with others. These relationships buffer the stresses he and others need to navigate as they transition from middle school to high school and prepare to engage with adults in academic or workplace environments after graduation. In Mark's case as well as others of his peers, family members, guidance counselors, teachers, and other adults from the community played pivotal roles in opening up possibilities and developing talents and skills. Likewise, early high school opportunities for peers to mentor and support their fellow peers helped them develop confidence and social skills that carried them through the bumps they encountered along the way to graduation.



**9th Grade → 12th Grade**

- Not doing well in Algebra 2 - learned to study and do classwork outside of school
- Took computer programming classes
- Various social interactions
- Started hunting - woods skills
- College and career planning
- Science teacher invited me to climate change conference
- Took AP Physics 1
- Guidance counselor recommnded being a teacher's assistant in Algebra 2

*Mark's Timeline*

# 4.
# Building Skills and Knowledge for Life after High School

> I think they [Crown Point school staff] helped me a lot. Like, they've helped me keep interest in school while making it fun— providing amazing opportunities for a small school – where other schools like this wouldn't get half the opportunities we did. They do a really good job; they motivate you and keep you interested. They're always on you to do stuff and do better. It may be annoying, but in the long run it will help you. – Kyle (Crown Point)

> So for every class, the school meets your needs. If you want to be a doctor, if you want to be a lawyer or a professional swimmer – it doesn't matter. The school right now has so many activities and stuff that, even if you don't have a specific class that suits your needs, you have clubs and activities and events that just spark your interest. And then it gets you prepared for other things that you might do outside of high school. – Elizabeth (Malverne)

To prepare young people for an ever-changing and increasingly complex social and economic landscape, scholars have argued that students must experience school differently than past generations. Instead of a focus on rote memorization and the targeting of instruction for on-demand tests (Trilling & Fadel, 2012), some have pointed to the imperative for a reorientation to "deeper learning" with "real world" opportunities to apply learning to new and complex problems and tasks (Mehta & Fine, 2019).

This conceptualization prioritizes critical thinking (discussed in more detail in Theme 1) and "soft skills" such as interpersonal communication and teamwork/collaboration skills and time management/self-regulation skills (Heller et al., 2017; Ottmar, 2019). Alongside these priorities, decades of research as well as the findings of Phase I of this study (Leo & Wilcox, 2020) has pointed to the import of school leaders, educators, and staff relating to their diverse students and their families in asset-based ways and engaging young people in building skills and new knowledge through culturally responsive curriculum and instructional practices (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Leo, Wilcox, & Lawson, 2019). We found three salient dimensions of this theme:

(1) Developing "Soft" Skills
(2) Building from Individual and Others' Cultural Backgrounds and Knowledge
(3) Applying Skills and Connecting Knowledge to Real World and Practical Problems

**Developing "Soft" Skills**

At Malverne, students explained that both academic classes and extracurricular activities assisted them in developing an array of soft skills (i.e., interpersonal communication and teamwork/collaboration skills and time management/self-regulation) that they felt would prepare them well for their lives after high school. They emphasized the import of the skills of time management and communication as two strengths in their high school experience. "[Teachers] set a good standard so that you know how to be ready for college," said Nick. And Tina explained that classes were often run like "'college' courses with no late assignments accepted. You're treated like an adult."

Students at Crown Point echoed a similar sentiment in describing the ways in which their experiences in school would set them up for success in college. Jessica, a senior, saw a clear link between opportunities to engage in programs at her school with gaining interpersonal communication skills needed to prepare for college because she was able to both talk with college graduates and students and also visit campuses. In another example, she shared how in a College For Every Student (CFES) summit she was offered guidance on how to interact with adults in a professional setting.

For all Crown Point students, knowing how to interact and collaborate with others was seen as a top priority and key to a successful life. Becoming comfortable communicating with adults and others outside of the Crown Point community and knowing how to behave in different situations, including in interviews, were skills and competencies explored in different classes and through different out-of-school activities. For example, Alex described how the HOBY (Hugh O'Brian Youth) NY East Leadership Summit gave her opportunities to learn new things about herself outside of her family and community environment, how to interact with others, and what she can do with and for others in a leadership position.

*The HOBY Leadership Summit definitely helped me because it was the first time that I really was out and away from, not with my family somewhere. We had to go stay over two nights at SUNY Oneonta at the college. And it was like a community service-type deal, so we did a lot of – there were a lot of work-*
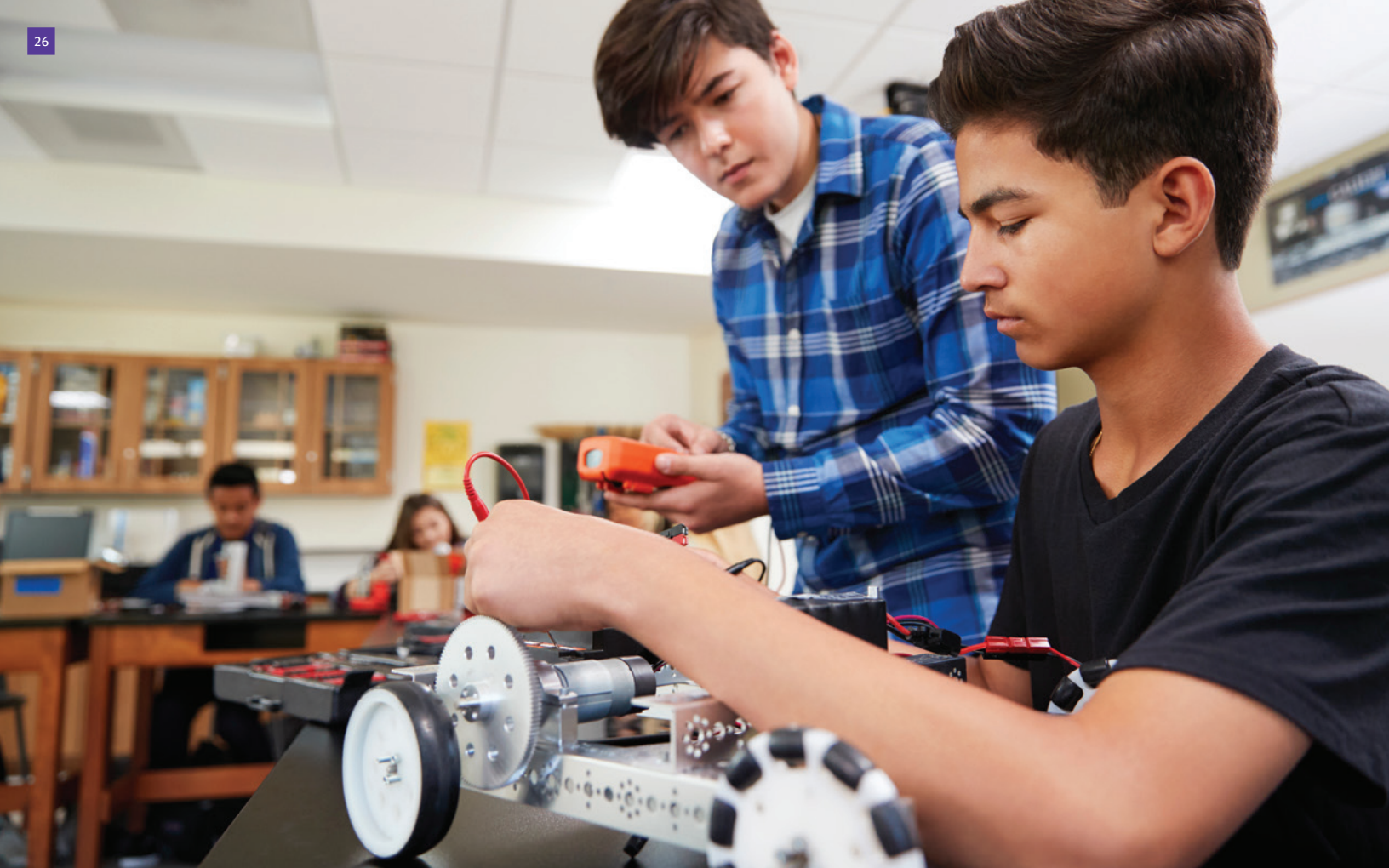
*shops on community service, how to get more involved in your community, and just basically how to be more of a leader in your school community. And into the professional world, how it would translate, all of these things going into a professional sense.*

Likewise, students at Malverne felt that their experiences in high school instilled in them an ability to navigate social situations that would help them succeed after high school. Elizabeth summed up how the school prepared her for "the real world:"

*I feel like I'm pretty prepared because with the opportunities that I had at school, I'm more open to just embracing other people and just talking to them. And I feel like just being like within this school and knowing everybody here, I feel like that is a beneficial thing. Because then when I go into the real world, I have an idea of how I should communicate, and who I should reach out to if I need help or ideas to succeed.*

**Building from Individual and Others' Cultural Backgrounds and Knowledge**
Though highly varied in their contexts, students at Malverne and Crown Point described how curricular offerings often drew on their cultural background and knowledge and provided opportunities to learn from others. Crown Point students,

for instance, described connections between out-of-school and school learning and provided examples of ways teachers tapped into their out-of-school learning experiences and interests even if it was not very often. For example, Elliott was invited to bring his knowledge of auto mechanics to bear in his technology class, and Mark was tapped as a math peer tutor because of his abilities in math and his affinity for teaching. Jessica, whose family member was a veteran, helped lead an effort to bring a veteran's event to the school. She explained what this experience meant to her personally and how such experiences helped her develop organizational and practical skills such as how to develop a budget for an event:

*We got together with our history teacher who is the finance teacher. We set up a whole day and they [the veterans] came. It was an all-day assembly. We watched a movie about just what "Honor Flight" [a veteran's event held yearly in Washington D.C.] is and we had an interview with other veterans that were not here. And then they did questions and answers with 6th grade through 12th grade. We had that all organized. We had questions that were already printed out for us to ask them.*

Students at Crown Point also spoke to the importance of opportunities to explore outside of their community and connect to other young people outside of their school. The Future Com-

munity and Career Leaders of America Club (FCCLA) activities were top on the list of things they pointed to for opening up their views of the outside world. In this club, which Mark said, "Everyone just kind of calls it the 'Broadway Club' because it's the main thing we do," students take a yearly trip to New York City. Teachers make connections between these Broadway shows and course content through, for example, assignments in history class in the case of the play *Hamilton*. In Cristy's words, out-of-school activities like these are meant to "make sure it's not like a culture shock when we get out there," as many students and families from Crown Point may never visit New York City or another metropolitan area otherwise.

While not something all students participate in, Cristy, Jake, and Lucas also described a program called Reconnecting Youth that brings kids from different schools together to tackle problems challenging young people. Lucas explained that he participated in this program and reported its benefits:

*We did projects that were beneficial. I was able to bring some stuff back and ideas. They taught you what to do if your friends or you knew someone that was thinking about suicide and how you could help them.*

At Malverne, situated near New York City and offering greater ethnic and linguistic diversity than Crown Point, students highlighted the ways in which the curricular offerings often reflected and capitalized on the diversity of the student population. Several student participants, for instance, explained how their teachers encouraged them to connect the curriculum to their cultural backgrounds. For example, Elizabeth, who is Guyanese, described how her teacher welcomed her input on subjects with which she had direct cultural experience and knowledge. "I would put my input into it. . . . It was just nice. It's good that they're open about that [tapping student background knowledge and experience]." Similarly, Mary described how the themes of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* resonated with her on a deep personal level, saying that the book

*talks about all aspects of life that I've experienced. . . . It has a lot to deal with racism and that's a part of my history, especially being African American. . . . That's a big theme in the book that resonated with my family, my household. . . . I found a lot of the concepts in the book to be relatable to my lifestyle in a way.*

Malverne students also generally expressed that being part of such a diverse school culture provided them with important knowledge and experiences that would prepare them well for interacting with people from a variety of backgrounds once they graduated from high school.

## Applying Skills and Connecting Knowledge to Real World and Practical Problems

The young people in this study, reported that learning new skills and gaining new knowledge in their classwork or stepping out of their comfort zones to try new things through activities or joining clubs built their confidence and expanded their abilities to apply skills and knowledge to "real life situations," as Steven, a senior from Malverne, put it. And Robyn described how her interest in history was kindled by a teacher who encouraged her to apply lessons to current events:

*I know sometimes people are like, "Why do we learn about history? It's already happened before." It's something very real and affects your real life and is going to affect the future. . . [My teacher] didn't just teach it in the context of the test; he taught it in real life.*

The wide variety of classes, extracurriculars, and activities offered at Malverne provided students with a range of pathways designed to develop them into well-rounded and resilient young people able to connect in and out-of-school learning and apply skills and knowledge in new contexts or to new tasks. Describing the difficulty and commitment needed to participate in marching band, for instance, Erin explained, "It's definitely taught me how to keep working towards something even though it's really hard. Like I don't just give up."

At Crown Point, Kyle described what he and others learned about their interests and knowledge in the medical and engineering fields through their involvement with a program called New Visions as just one example:

*Last week the juniors got to go to New Visions for Engineering. It's a program that you could be interested in and we just did a group project. We did it with random students from other schools. My team placed second out of like 48 students. It's more of a hands-on learning experience for people who are interested in the medical and engineering field.*

For other students, like Elliott and Cristy, as mentioned earlier, a family member's career or interests provided opportunities to gain hands-on skill and knowledge necessary for a particular line of work. In both of these cases, adults in the school, whether a teacher or guidance counselor or principal, supported this interest by offering opportunities for them to share their knowledge with others and explore that career avenue through a project or guidance on internship or college options.

Students participating in Malverne's Marching Band prepare for their trip to Florida after competing in the state competition. A case full of trophies from previous competitions is pictured behind.



Crown Point's technology room pictured with a sheet where students sign up for different tasks — some involving leading their peers in activities. Many students described enriching hands-on experiences provided through these opportunities.

## Implications for Practice

| Theme 4: Key Implications | How to do it |
|---|---|
| All adults in the school can assist students with preparation for college or career early on and regularly cultivate "soft" skills (i.e., interpersonal communication and teamwork / collaboration skills and time management / self-regulation). | Assist students with planning for their futures early (7th, 8th, and 9th grades), including how to plan their course taking and what activities they will engage in.<br><br>Offer numerous and varied extracurricular activities and clubs for students, and utilize these as additional opportunities for students to cultivate "soft" skills. |
| Educators can foster student engagement and build from students' cultural knowledge through culturallly responsive approaches. | Encourage students to share aspects of their lives and use cultural knowledge and experience in classroom activities; when designing assignments use materials that hold up and recognize the contributions of diverse people. |
| Provide hands-on learning experiences and opportunities to apply new learning in classes, extracurriculars, clubs, and activities. | Prioritize hands-on activities, emphasizing application of new skills and knowledge to real world problems and practical tasks.<br><br>Provide organized and structured extracurriculars with high expectations for success. |

# Nick (Malverne)

When we sat down for an interview with Nick, a senior from Malverne High School, he described his busy schedule. Like many of the students we spoke with at Malverne, Nick was active in numerous extracurriculars and mentioned these activities and sports as a source of experiential learning and enrichment. He also credited his teachers with stimulating his interest in classes through engaging and supportive pedagogical approaches and reported feeling an intimate connection with the wider community of Malverne and, in particular, his local church.

Notably, Nick was one of the few students that we spoke with who transferred into Malverne High School and was able to offer a view into what it might be like for a new student. As he explained,

*[W]hen I first got to this school I was worried . . . because I'm more of a shy person. I wasn't sure of like how I was going to make friends. But when I was there one person just walked up and was like, "Hey, what's your name? Oh, you want to be friends?" I was like, "Wow. That was easy!"*

Reflecting on how he was "welcomed with open arms" when entering Malverne, Nick described how he felt it necessary to "return the kindness" to incoming freshman. "A lot of people were talking about how the new people coming in would be annoying and loud, but I gave [the] new people a chance. I learned don't take rumors at face value."

Nick spoke at length about the ways in which the extracurricular activities and sports in which he participated provided him with learning experiences that supplemented the content of his classes. For instance, taking chorus classes taught him how to sing, dance, and learn choreography, and this gave him confidence to try out for school musicals. As he put it, taking part in musicals helped "broaden my horizons and step out of my comfort zone." He concluded, "It never hurts to try anything new."

Crucial to his success in these endeavors was the support and encouragement of his chorus teacher, whom he described as "like another parent" and "very, very welcoming." Nick also spoke of his style of teaching, which engaged students through modeling and a hands-on approach. As he explained,

*And the way he teaches the classes . . . he just makes sure everybody's on track. So we start slow, make sure everybody gets it, and we do it every day for sight reading and then we go into the music. When we're doing the music, since his vocal range is . . . he can do the girl, sopranos and altos, and bass and the tenors, so if*
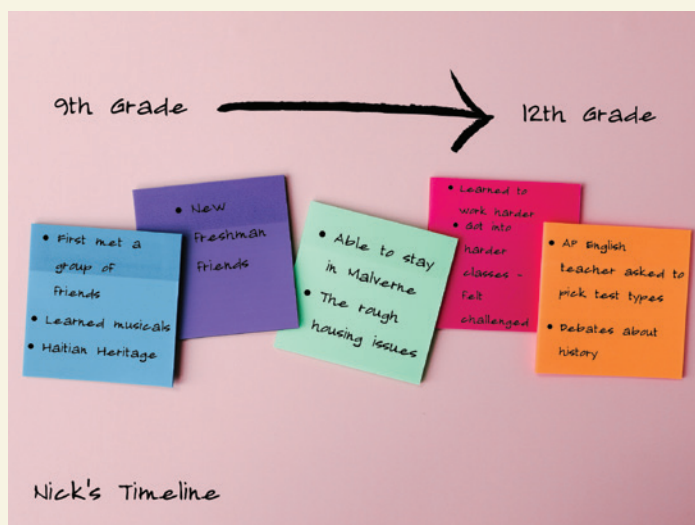
*anybody's stuck on a part, he can do every part and he can see. So while you're seeing him do the music you can see how the notes look also as well, which lead you to learn.*

The diverse student population of the school was described by Nick as providing valuable opportunities to connect with students from similar backgrounds and learn from others with whom he might not share any commonalities. As he put it, "Since in this school we have a lot of different minorities . . . we can [find someone with whom to] share experience because we're both from the same culture." He also explained how his teachers utilized culturally responsive approaches to capitalize on the culturally diverse backgrounds present among the student population. In one particular instance, Nick described how a teacher helped him explore his multi-racial heritage as a source of inspiration for a class paper (see Nick's timeline below):

*She came up to me and we talked about each thing I do with my culture and which thing that I like to do the most. So ultimately, we came up with my Haitian heritage because. . . for example, on the New Year, Haitians, we have Independence Day, so we come all together and we eat this soup, which is called joumou soup and it's a tradition so that we celebrate independence.*

Explaining how this project helped him both appreciate his own cultural background and share it with others, Nick concluded:

*With my teacher we learned that you don't have to be the same identity to know what someone is about or what their identity is. So it's about having empathy.*



9th Grade → 12th Grade

- New Freshman Friends
- First met a group of friends
- Learned musicals
- Haitian Heritage
- Able to stay in Malverne
- The rough housing issues
- Learned to work harder - got into harder classes - felt challenged
- AP English teacher asked to pick test types
- Debates about history

Nick's Timeline

# Conclusion

Although it can be argued that the stakes for preparing the diversity of young people in America's schools for college or career could never be higher, the students who participated in this study described how they feel confidence in their abilities to succeed in life after high school and attributed a variety of in- and out-of-school experiences to this preparation. They spoke to the many opportunities they are offered to make their voices heard, make choices about academics and non-academic pursuits, and lead something of interest to them—all requiring critical thinking and the ability and willingness to plan. They spoke to adults' messages that they have a role and responsibility to bring about social change, to advocate for themselves and for others, and to be active participants in shaping their learning experiences in and beyond high school.

They also spoke to their roles in contributing to a caring school climate and the importance of meeting high expectations for their academic performance as well as behavior. We found in this regard that students described their schools as caring and close-knit, and characterized them as lacking hierarchies among students and with low to no barriers connecting adults and students. They reported how culturally responsive approaches were often evident in and out of the classroom and helped them stay engaged in school. These findings dovetail with our findings in Phase I of this study as educators in Crown Point and Malverne explained how they take pains to make their curriculum and their pedagogy responsive to students' lives and cultural backgrounds. Underlying these themes is the sense articulated by both students and teachers that all youth possess various strengths and aptitudes and that it is crucial for educators to build from these foundations using asset-based and responsive approaches (Bartlett & García, 2011).

While some students admitted that their teachers' high expectations were sometimes challenging to meet and that transitioning from middle to high school was challenging in many ways, they nonetheless felt as though they were offered a wide range of formal and informal supports that in turn motivated and sustained them through adversities. In our Phase I study,

we noted that support staff and teachers in these schools spoke to collegial relationships with each other and the import they place on connecting with each and every child, a finding we characterized as "a humanizing school community." In this Phase II study, this theme echoed in student participants' perspectives as they spoke to receiving the message that building relationships is the responsibility of every individual in the school and attested to having connected with someone or a number of people with whom they could share their struggles and thoughts in a safe place at school. They correlated these relationships with their engagement in academic learning as well as participation in extracurricular activities.

Finally, the young people in this study articulated the importance placed on developing soft skills (i.e., interpersonal communication and teamwork/collaboration skills and time management/self-regulation skills) in preparation for life beyond high school and provided numerous examples of in and out-of-school experiences that facilitated this learning. They also reported being offered multiple opportunities to apply new skills and connect knowledge to real world and practical problems through hands-on and experiential activities.

This combination of cultivating and exercising agency; contributing to a caring climate and meeting high expectations;

forging harmonious and supportive relationships; and building skills and knowledge for life after high school converge and culminate into a powerful force for young people's development into well-rounded and capable young adults. From their perspectives, students in this study expressed the idea that the world is amenable to positive change when these opportunities, expectations, and priorities are set and drive their high school experience. The composite of these four elements that characterize positive outlier school students' experiences (see Figure 3) provides a partial roadmap for those who seek to prepare young people for college, career, and civic life.

Policymakers, district and school leaders, teachers and other school staff may find this partial roadmap provides guidance into what they may do to remove barriers and create opportunities for diverse young people to find their own paths and exploit their own potentials. From all of the contributors to this study, we hope that this report and the case studies on which it is based will aid others in guiding efforts to improve young people's high school experiences.
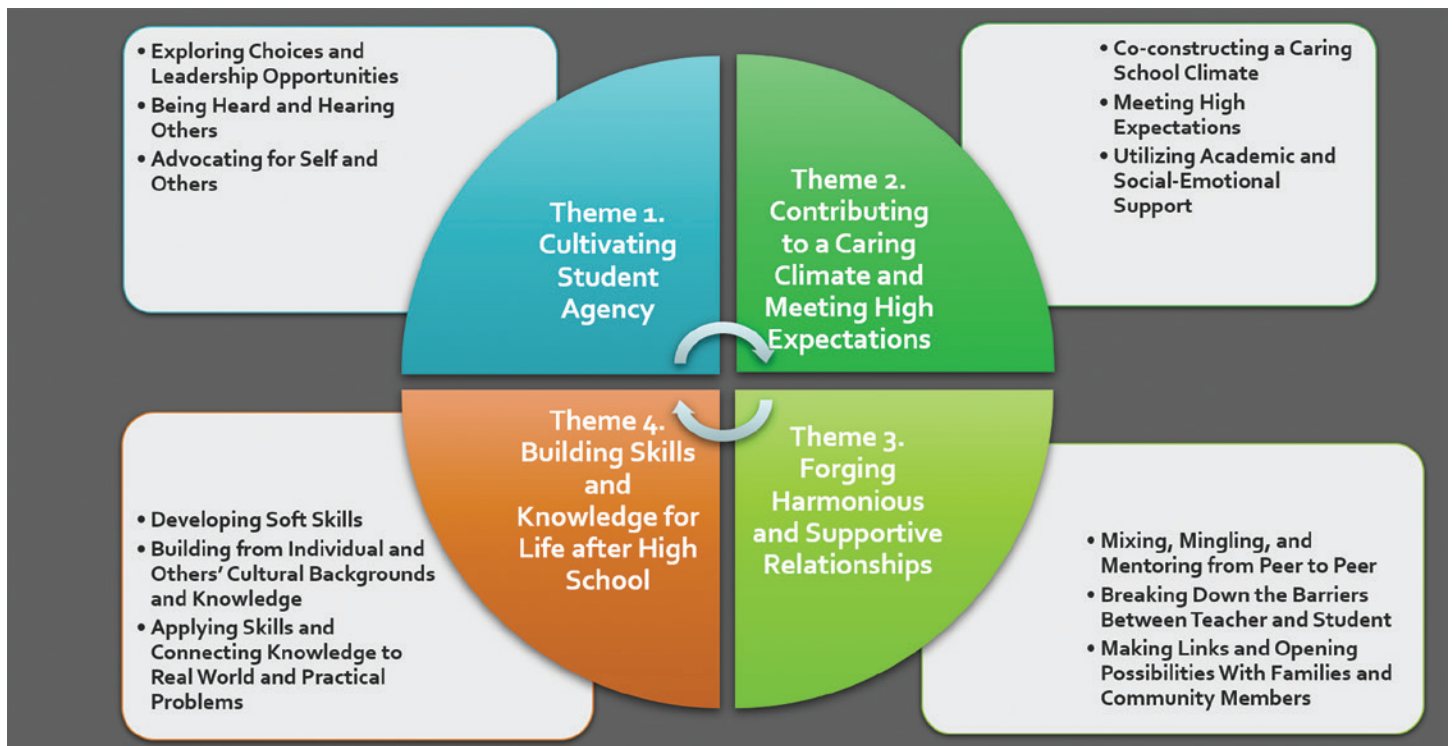


Figure 3. Four Elements of Students' Experiences

# Methods

### Sampling

Building from the Phase I study school sample, we identified two schools – Crown Point Central High School and Malverne Senior High School – to investigate in this study. The schools are situated in different types of communities – one rural and one suburban – and have maintained their positive outlier performance over several years. The other schools included in the Phase I study were not included in this study, as they serve similar student populations, fall into the same urbanicity category with the selected schools, or were so negatively impacted by the COVID19 pandemic in the 2019-2020 school year that they could not participate fully.

NYKids researchers tracked the performance trajectory of Crown Point and Malverne by analyzing their most recent graduation rates. For the sake of consistency, we continued using an average graduation rate of three successive years as the metric for comparison of these schools with other schools in New York state instead of a one-year rate that might represent an anomaly.

Specifically, we analyzed graduation data of four cohorts of 9th graders: cohort 1 included 9th graders who started high school in the years 2010-2012 (the cohort used in the Phase I study); cohort 2 included 9th graders who started in the years 2011-2013; cohort 3 included 9th graders who started in the years 2012-2014; and cohort 4 included 9th graders who started in the years 2013-2015. In addition to overall graduation rates, we compared and contrasted the graduation rates of four key subgroups that were highlighted in the Phase I study. These subgroups – African-American/Black, Hispanic/Latino, English language learners, and economically disadvantaged students – were compared against the New York state average as well.

### Recruitment, Data Collection, and Data Analysis

We used Institutional Review Board approved protocols throughout this study to gain parent and student consent and assent for participation. Once consent and assent were attained, a team of two researchers then conducted interviews and focus groups with participating 11th and 12th grade students of different genders, ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. In these interviews and focus groups we asked participants to craft two types of artifacts, including "ecological maps" (i.e., depictions of places and spaces of import to them in and outside of school) and timelines of their experiences prior to and during high school. A total of 22 interviews, 5 focus groups, 14 documents, and 76 artifacts comprise the data set for this study.

The NYKids research team began with a set of codes based upon the literature review and foci of inquiry and then coded data inductively allowing for analytic flexibility as we identified unexpected "emergent" categories and dimensions of codes (Miles et al., 2014). At least two team members generated a descriptive case study of each school case based on the entire data set, thus engaging in researcher and source triangulation to enhance the credibility of the findings. We then shared the case studies with participants, requesting feedback on any inaccuracies, a member-checking measure to ensure the integrity of the data and interpretations. This report was crafted with the intent to richly describe patterns (as well as anomalies) vis-à-vis the research questions. We have shared this report with participants and the school principals for feedback. More detail about the study methods is available in the methods and procedures report available at ny-kids.org.

# Acknowledgements

# References

Anderson, R. C., Graham, M., Kennedy, P., Nelson, N., Stoolmiller, M., Baker, S. K., & Fien, H. (2019). Student agency at the crux: Mitigating disengagement in middle and high school. *Contemporary Educational Psychology, 56*(1), 205-217.

Baroutsis, A., McGregor, G., & Mills, M. (2016). Pedagogic voice: Student voice in teaching and engagement pedagogies. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society, 24*(1), 123-140.

Bartlett, L., & García, O. (2011). Additive schooling in subtractive times: *Bilingual education and Dominican immigrant youth in the Heights*. Nashville, Tennessee: Vanderbilt University Press.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard university press.

Carnevale, F. A. (2020). A "thick" conception of children's voices: A hermeneutical framework for childhood research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 19*(1), 1-9.

Christenson, S. L., & Havsy, L. H. (2004). Family-school-peer relationships: Significance for social, emotional and academic learning. In J. Zins, R. Weissberg, M. Wang, & H. Walberg (Eds.), *Building academic success on social and emotional learning: What does the research say?* (pp. 59-75). New York: Teachers College Press.

Cohen, J. (2009). Transforming school climate: Educational and psychoanalytic perspectives: Introduction. *Schools, 6*(1), 99-103.

Cook-Sather, A. (2006). Sound, presence, and power: "Student voice" in educational research and reform. *Curriculum Inquiry, 36*(4), 359-390.

Devaney, E., & Moroney, D. (2017). Out-of-school time learning and 21st-century skills. In H. J. Malone & T. Donahue (Eds.), *The growing out of school time field: past, present, and future* (pp. 245-249). Charlotte, NC: IAP-Information Age Publishing, Inc.

Eccles, J. S., Lord, S., & Buchanan, C. M. (1996). School transitions in early adolescence: What are we doing to our young people? In J. A. Graber, J. Brooks-Gunn & A. C. Petersen (Eds.), *Transitions through adolescence: Interpersonal domains and context* (pp. 251-284). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.

Gase, L. N., Gomez, L. M., Kuo, T., Glenn, B. A., Inkelas, M., & Ponce, N. A. (2017). Relationships among student, staff, and administrative measures of school climate and student health and academic outcomes. *Journal of school health, 87*(5), 319-328.

Gay, G. (2018). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Gay, G. (2013). *Teaching to and through cultural diversity. Curriculum inquiry, 43*(1), 48-70.

Gee, J. P. (2015). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideologies in discourse* (5th edition). New York, NY: Routledge.

González, N., Moll, L. C., Floyd-Tenery, M., Rivera, A., Rendon, P., Gonzales, R., & Amanti, C. (1993). *UC Berkeley: Center for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence*. Retrieved from https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5tm6x7cm

Goodenow, C., & Grady, K. E. (1993). The relationship of school belonging and friends' values to academic motivation among urban adolescent students. *The Journal of Experimental Education, 62*(1), 60-71.

Goodman, J. F., & Eren, N. S. (2013). Student agency: Success, failure, and lessons learned. *Ethics and Education, 8*(2), 123-139.

Haynes, N. M., Emmons, C., & Ben-Avie, M. (1997). School climate as a factor in student adjustment and achievement. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation, 8*(3), 321-329.

Heller, R., Wolfe, R. E., & Steinberg, A. (2017). *Rethinking readiness: Deeper learning for college, work, and life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

Holland, D. C., Lachicotte Jr, W., Skinner, D., & Cain, C. (1998). *Identity and agency in cultural worlds*. US: Harvard University Press.

Hooks, B. (2014). *Teaching to transgress*. NY: Routledge.

Howard, T. C., and A. Rodriguez-Scheel. (2017). Culturally relevant pedagogy 20 years later: Progress or pontificating? What have we learned, and where do we go? *Teachers College Record, 119*(1), 1-32.

Klemenčič, M. (2015) What is student agency? An ontological exploration in the context of research on student engagement. In M. Klemenčič, S. Bergan and R. Primozic (Eds.), *Student Engagement in Europe: Society, Higher Education and Student Governance (Council of Europe Higher Education Series No. 20)* (pp. 11-29). Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal, 32*(3), 465-491.

Laskey, M. L., & Hetzel, C. J. (2010, August 30). Self-regulated learning, metacognition, and soft skills: the 21st century learner. Online Submission to ERIC. Retrieved from https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED511589.pdf

Lawson, M. A., & Lawson, H. A. (2013). New conceptual frameworks for student engagement research, policy, and practice. *Review of Educational Research, 83*(3), 432-479.

Leo, A., & Wilcox, K. C. (2020). Beyond deficit and determinism to address the Latinx attainment gap. *Journal of Latinos and Education,* https://doi.org/10.1080/15348431.2020.1815537.

Leo, A., Wilcox, K. C., & Lawson, H. A. (2019). Culturally responsive and asset-based strategies for family engagement in odds-beating secondary schools. *School Community Journal, 29*(2), 255-280.

Levin, B. (2000). Putting students at the centre in education reform. *Journal of Educational Change*, 1(2), 155-172.

Lipponen, L., & Kumpulainen, K. (2011). Acting as accountable authors: Creating interactional spaces for agency work in teacher education. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 27*(5), 812-819.

Mameli, C., Molinari, L., & Passini, S. (2019). Agency and responsibility in adolescent students: A challenge for the societies of tomorrow. *British Journal of Educational Psychology, 89*(1), 41-56.

Mehta, J., & Fine, S. (2019). *In search of deeper learning: The quest to remake the American high school*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook*. CA: Sage Publications.

Mitchell, G. W., Skinner, L. B., & White, B. J. (2010). Essential soft skills for success in the twenty-first century workforce as perceived by business educators. *Delta Pi Epsilon Journal, 52*(1), 43-53.

Nelson, R. M., & DeBacker, T. K. (2008). Achievement motivation in adolescents: The role of peer climate and best friends. *Journal of Experimental Education, 76*(2), 170-189.

Ottmar, E. (2019). The effects of deeper learning opportunities on student achievement: Examining differential pathways. *Psychology in the Schools, 56*(5), 840-855.

Robinson, C., & Taylor, C. (2007). Theorizing student voice: Values and perspectives. Improving schools, *10*(1), 5-17.

Rudduck J. (2007) Student Voice, Student Engagement, And School Reform. In D. Thiessen, A. Cook Sather (Eds), *International handbook of student experience in elementary and secondary school* (pp. 587-610). Dordrecht: Springer.

Rudduck, J., & Fielding, M. (2006). Student voice and the perils of popularity. *Educational Review, 58*(2), 219-231.

Swenson, L. M., Nordstrom, A., & Hiester, M. (2008). The role of peer relationships in adjustment to college. *Journal of College Student Development, 49*(6), 551-567.

Thapa, A., Cohen, J., Guffey, S., & Higgins-D'Alessandro, A. (2013). A review of school climate research. *Review of Educational Research, 83*(3), 357-385.

Trilling, B., & Fadel, C. (2012). Tactics for success. *RSA Journal, 158*(5550), 10-15.

Trilling, B., & Fadel, C. (2009). *21st century skills: Learning for life in our times*. John Wiley & Sons.

Uslu, F., & Gizir, S. (2017). School belonging of adolescents: The role of teacher–student relationships, peer relationships and family involvement. *Educational Sciences: Theory & Practice, 17*(1), 63-82.

Wilcox, K. C., Leo, A., & Kramer, C. (2018). *College and career readiness: Promising practices from odds-beating secondary schools*. Albany, NY: University at Albany School of Education.

Wortham, S. (2006). *Learning identity: The joint emergence of social identification and academic learning*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

White, N., La Salle, T., Ashby, J. S., & Meyers, J. (2014). A brief measure of adolescent perceptions of school climate. *School Psychology Quarterly, 29*(3), 349-359.

York, A., & Kirshner, B. (2015). How positioning shapes opportunities for student agency in schools. *Teachers College Record, 117*(13), 103-118.

YouthPower. (n.d.). Positive Youth Development (PYD) Framework. YOUTHPOWER2, LEARNING AND EVALUATION. Retrieved from https://www.youth-power.org/positive-youth-development-pyd-framework

Yu, M. V. B., Johnson, H. E., Deutsch, N. L., & Varga, S. M. (2018). "She calls me by my last name:" Exploring adolescent perceptions of positive teacher-student relationships. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 33*(3), 332-362.

COMPASS-AIM: A unique direct school improvement support innovation based on NYKids research

NYKids has developed a unique direct school improvement support innovation with the help of our advisory board members that draws upon the principles of Improvement Science, melds them with action research procedures, and integrates positive outlier studies (such as this one) to support school and district leadership teams in pursuing their continuous improvement efforts.

This innovation (called COMPASS- an acronym) is designed to engage improvers in the following activities:

1) **C**omparing their practices to those of positive outlier schools
2) **A**ssessing priorities for improvement in relation to community needs and district and school resources
3) **S**electing levers for improvement by examining extant research and examples from positive outlier schools
4) **S**etting *SMART* (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Results Oriented/Relevant/Rigorous, and Time Bound) goals

Once the above actions are taken the next step is to set in motion the continuous improvement process (called AIM- an acronym) including:

5) **A**ction planning based on specific near term and long term aims and a theory of improvement
6) **I**mplementing the action plan
7) **M**onitoring progress

To join a growing number of our partners engaging in COMPASS-AIM, please reach out to us at nykids@albany.edu or 518-442-9085.

To download a copy of this report and any of the individual school case studies that contributed to it or to learn more about the NYKids project, go to ny-kids.org

"... I think that schools talk a good game about vision, but I think we are living the vision, and I think that comes from COMPASS because that's how we kicked it off."

– School Principal Participant in COMPASS

# NYKids