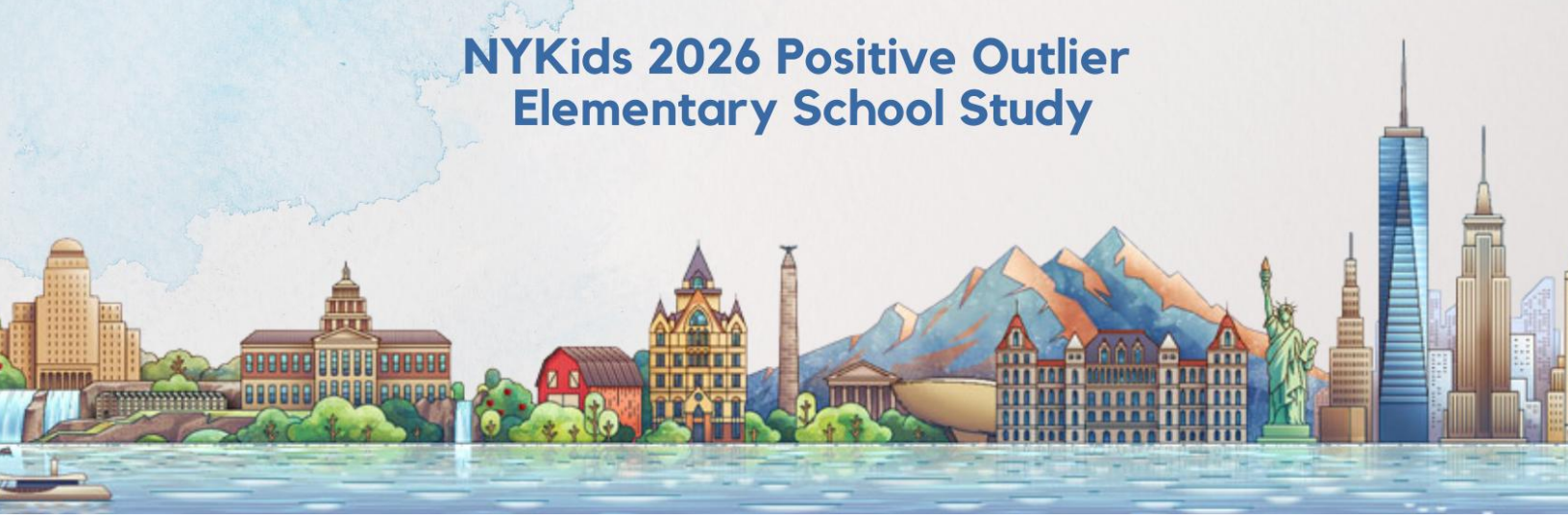


# NYKids 2026 Positive Outlier Elementary School Study



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## Albany School of the Humanities Case Study

*ASH is a no excuse kind of building* – district leader

### Study Background

For over two decades, NYKids has been studying positive outlier schools to identify what is associated with their above-predicted student performance. This study seeks to identify promising practices in support of K-6 children’s development. As in all NYKids research, we characterize important contextual information, including the district and school culture and climate; additionally, this study focuses attention on four main lines of inquiry: academic learning and programming; social-emotional learning and youth mental health; educator preparation, support, and organizational capacity; and family engagement and community relationships.

Scores on New York State English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics assessments for grades 3, 4, 5, and 6 (where applicable) and rates of chronic absenteeism for grades 1-6 were used to identify positive outliers in this study.

### School Context

The Albany School of the Humanities (ASH) is one of 12 elementary schools in the City School District of Albany (CSDA) located in the capital of New York state. The school operates within a dynamic and changing demographic landscape, marked by a significant rise in multilingual learners (MLLs); a shift that has been mirrored across the district, where MLL numbers increased from “about 300 . . . to just short of 2000” (district leader) by 2026. This increase has brought entering and emerging bilingual students (those needing foundational English language skills) directly into ASH for the first time in years, requiring staff to “pivot and figure out how to make what we do at ASH work for that” (teacher).

The superintendent noted that the school’s population “mirrors that of Albany High more than any of our other elementaries,” reinforcing ASH’s longstanding role as a diverse, citywide magnet school. Despite the district having its seventh superintendent in 17 years, the school has maintained a coherent identity rooted in humanities-based magnet programming and a district-aligned equity focus, with school leaders emphasizing that everyone believes that they are all ENL [English as a New Language] teachers.” In the years following the pandemic, renewed attention has been paid to socialization and whole-child development. Staff and parents consistently highlight the school’s emphasis on social-emotional growth, reflected in practices such as values-based awards, restorative approaches, and a student equity team (led by children) that “gets into real issues that affect their friends and their peers” (school leader).

The principal frames success as “creating an environment where everyone feels . . . they can reach their full potential, not just academic goals,” and both students and support staff describe the school as a place where “we are a family” and “everybody . . . has ownership of every student.” The physical environment supports this whole-child well-being focus: the campus includes an adaptive playground “that allows for students with and without disabilities to play alongside one another,” extensive breakout and collaborative spaces, and a longstanding inclusion of multiple special education strands, including some of the district’s most medically and physically complex learners.

The school’s magnet identity (humanities) is strengthened by a number of enrichment offerings and a multicultural approach that encourages exploration in the arts, literature and music throughout the school day. Fundraising efforts and grants make opportunities such as Broadway trips, museum visits, and theater residencies accessible so “every student can go,” said a teacher, reinforcing the magnet theme and providing exposure to the arts across grade levels. As another teacher asserted, the magnet theme isn’t just in designation, but enacted in practice quite purposefully: “I feel like we actually walk the walk.”

Teachers described a school culture where the principal is “in the mud with you,” covering classes so staff can attend professional development sessions and maximizing instructional time through what colleagues jokingly call the “Wonder Woman schedule.” Despite having autonomy to decline some district initiatives, the school is known for implementing core instructional resources “with 100% fidelity,” contributing to what district leaders describe as “collective teacher efficacy.” Together, these elements—celebrating diversity and equity, a whole-child focus, strong instructional leadership, enrichment, and a deeply collaborative staff culture—help explain why the school “always has a waiting list” and remains a magnet not just in designation, but in promising practices.

Based on NYSED data for the 2024-25 academic year, ASH was home to 377 students<sup>1</sup>. 12% of these students were English Language Learners, 11% had disabilities, and 58% came from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, with 4% of the students reported as being homeless.

Student Demographics 2024-2025: Albany School of Humanities			
	Albany School of Humanities	Albany City School District	New York State
<b>Grades Served</b>	K-5	K-12	K-12
Total Enrollment	377	8,434	2,421,491
Economically Disadvantaged	58%	69%	60%
Students with Disabilities	11%	16%	20%
English Language Learners	12%	20%	12%
<b>Student Ethnic/ Racial Distribution</b>			
American Indian/Alaska Native	0%	0%	1%
Black or African American	39%	39%	15%
Hispanic/Latino	20%	24%	31%
Asian/Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	10%	13%	11%
White	20%	17%	39%
Multiracial	11%	7%	4%
Other	0%	0%	0%

Albany School of Humanities is situated in a high-need, midsize urban district. Its combined academic z score<sup>1</sup> of 1.39, in combination with its exceptionally strong attendance performance ( $z = 2.37$ ), resulted in a high overall composite z score of 1.88. This profile highlights a school that is particularly successful in promoting student attendance while also achieving above-expected academic outcomes, offering an important urban context to the overall study sample.

### Highlights

#### High Expectations and a Shared “ASH Way”

*We all openly talk about this whole notion of goals. We set a short-term goal of 80% of students meeting proficiency . . . we know that's realistic. Like, we don't say that that can't happen. So, I think that's also something that we're all really hungry to achieve. I think that you see that flow through professional development, through CPTs (Common Planning Times) and through coaching cycles; it's all connected overall. I can say we're all hungry for it.*

– teacher

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<sup>1</sup> Note: A z score is a way of showing how far a value is from the average compared to other values. In simple terms, it tells you whether something is above or below typical performance, and by how much. A z score of 0 represents the average, where a z score of 1 means the value is one standard deviation above typical performance.

A defining feature of ASH is its deeply internalized culture of high expectations for every student and staff member. Educators across roles embrace continuous improvement, often using language such as “unfinished” or “yet” to signal that learning is always in progress rather than deficient for students as well as themselves. This mindset aligns with what staff call the “ASH way”—a collective identity centered on belief in student capability, disciplined instructional practice, and a refusal to lower expectations. Professional development, common planning times, and coaching cycles all reinforce these expectations and provide the supportive structure to meet them.

### **Deep Investment in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion**

*To have a school community where the emphasis and the focus is on embracing and celebrating cultures from around the world—that was important to me.* – parent

The school’s culture is marked by shared commitments to celebrate diversity and ensure equity of opportunity and inclusion. Family members and students reported feeling seen and affirmed, and children mirror the values enacted by adults in their behaviors—demonstrating openness, respect, and inclusive attitudes toward peers from diverse linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Staff have deep knowledge of the students and families they serve, and this understanding informs instruction, engagement practices, and extracurricular programming. From multicultural nights to classroom conversations about identity, ASH cultivates an environment where diversity, equity, and inclusion are celebrated and where intentional and consistent effort is made to ensure all members of the community feel belonging.

### **Autonomy, Agency, and Collaboration**

*I feel like we give all these opportunities to students, and that they have autonomy in those opportunities—that they get a chance to really learn how to explore them. You know, we guide them, but they learn how to explore them themselves.* – teacher

ASH leaders and staff emphasized autonomy and agency, balanced with an ethic of cooperation—not only for students but also for educators and support staff. Students experience voice and choice through academic, artistic, and enrichment opportunities, while teachers exercise professional autonomy in planning, collaboration, and taking on leadership roles. While the principal provides a clear vision and reinforces the importance of using particular resources and practices in the classroom, staff across roles reported being supported in bringing their best and unique selves to their work. This emphasis on autonomy set within a culture of expected collaboration supports creativity, risk taking, and ownership of learning at all levels of the community.

### **Coaching, Interventions, and Leadership as a Connected Ecosystem**

*Our push-in support schedules are so tight . . . nobody here at ASH is sitting idle . . . everyone’s pulling groups, pushing in. And that support has made a huge difference.* – teacher

Coaching, interventions, and leadership are interlocking gears in ASH’s instructional engine. The principal’s highly structured scheduling approach—described as maximizing “every minute,

every day”—ensures that staff time is used efficiently and that instructional supports are available exactly when students need them. Systems and protocols such as CPT (Common Planning Time), Tier 1 meetings, and regular data reviews foster consistent collaboration and responsiveness. Expert instructional coaches and interventionists provide continuity between schoolwide goals, classroom practice, and intervention systems, forming an integrated support structure that elevates both teacher practice and student performance.

## **A Closer Look**

These highlights are evident throughout the four lines of inquiry that frame the study of which this case is one part. The sections below expand on each of these highlights within the context of the study’s framework.

### **Culture, Climate and Community**

#### **Collective Responsibility and a Collaborative Teaching Culture**

*I have the support, and they’re [colleagues] here to help me, and we’re a team.” -teacher*

As mentioned above, ASH has a strong culture of collective responsibility that shapes instructional practice across the school. Teachers consistently described collaboration—not isolation—as the norm, emphasizing how multiple educators routinely push into classrooms to support both academic and behavioral needs. This shared ownership extends beyond formal roles, creating an all-hands-on-deck approach in which responsibility for student success is distributed across staff rather than resting on individual teachers alone. The normalization of collaboration reduces stigma around needing help and fosters a climate in which instructional support and shared problem solving are everyday activities.

#### **High Expectations Coupled with Equity-Focused Support**

*It’s taking what the curriculum is saying and really trying to reach all students. – teacher*

Another key aspect of ASH culture is educators’ commitment to maintaining high academic expectations while simultaneously providing equitable supports. This movement was spearheaded by the many educators who attended the Standards Institute hosted by UnboundEd—an immersive professional development program that provides teachers with the tools to deliver grade-level, engaging, affirming, and meaningful (GLEAM) instruction. Teachers described this professional development as a catalyst for shifting school norms; the “shared learning” from these sessions has grown into a collective commitment to ensuring that all students—regardless of background or starting point—can access grade-level content. Rather than lowering expectations, educators focus on scaffolding, differentiation, and targeted interventions to address unfinished learning. This balance reflects a shared belief that every student is capable of growth and that equity is achieved not by reducing rigor, but by increasing support and responsiveness.

#### **A Community Defined by Trust, Care, and Belonging**

*Every teacher in the building is working really, really hard . . . and we all want the best for the kids. – teacher*

The final finding in this section centers on the deeply relational nature of the school community. Teachers emphasized trust, care, and mutual respect as defining features of the school’s climate, which contributes to both staff satisfaction and student well-being. Educators described feeling valued, supported, and united by a shared mission, conditions that enable risk taking, honest dialogue, and sustained commitment to improvement. This strong sense of belonging—among teachers and students alike—emerges as a foundational element that undergirds instructional coherence, resilience during challenging moments, and a collective drive to ensure that every child feels known, supported, and capable of success.

### **Academic Learning and Programming**

#### **Instructional Recalibration**

*They [teachers] make the kids do the actual work and not let them just lollygag around.*  
– student

ASH can be characterized as in the midst of a significant instructional recalibration, particularly around early literacy. District and school leaders described a renewed attention to the science of reading, noting that “hundreds . . . of our teachers [have completed] the Science of Reading micro credential” (a State University of New York compact academic credential taught by SUNY faculty) to reinforce evidence-based practices. CSDA and ASH school leaders reflected on a period during the rollout of the Common Core of Learning in the mid-2010s when an “over emphasis on . . . balanced literacy” contributed to the district “los[ing] sight of foundational literacy in a way that was really unhealthy.” Current efforts, led especially by the instructional supervisor for elementary education, focus on reestablishing strong foundational skills in the primary grades and addressing long-standing challenges in supporting students who enter school without early literacy readiness.

#### **PreK Access and Setting a Good Foundation for Learning**

*We provided this sort of platter of opportunity, and they embraced it. – district leader*

The second finding in this section underscores the role of early learning access and engagement in supporting academic readiness and persistence. The district’s pre-K model blends in-house classrooms with community-based satellite partnerships, extending reach while maintaining curricular oversight. Participants emphasized the importance of providing rich, engaging learning experiences that foster early skill development and positive dispositions toward learning. These findings reinforce the idea that academic readiness is not only about discrete skills, but also about ensuring that young children have consistent, high-quality early educational experiences that prepare them socially, emotionally, and academically for the demands of elementary school.

#### **Data to Enrich, Attain, and Intervene**

*Everyone should be with kids as much as possible. – principal*

A final finding in this section features ASH educators’ deliberate use of data to drive equitable, student-centered instructional decisions. Data are used to ensure that the right support from the right person or people is offered at the right time as much as possible (as the quotation above exemplifies). Leaders and teachers described heavy reliance on multiple data sources, including NWEA assessments, paired with clear routines for data interpretation that move from Building Leadership Teams to classroom teachers. These structures ensure that data are not merely collected but actively used to identify each child’s needs and target timely support so that the right adults are with the right students as much as possible. The EAI block—also referred to as “Dragon Hour”—operationalizes this philosophy by embedding daily time for enrichment, attainment, and intervention, allowing students to receive instruction matched to their current needs without stigma. This system reflects a broader shift from remediation to grade-level instruction, captured by the superintendent’s framing of grade-level expectations as “the floor, not the ceiling.” Together, these practices demonstrate how coherent data systems, aligned instructional routines, and a relentless focus on knowing every child can advance equity while keeping students—rather than programs—at the center of decision making.

**Social-Emotional Learning and Youth Mental Health**

**A Whole-Child Approach to Social-Emotional Learning and Well-Being**

*Success now is creating an environment where everyone feels happy and excited and that they can reach their full potential — not just academically.* – principal

ASH educators consistently reported explicit attention to whole-child well-being that prioritizes social-emotional learning (SEL) alongside academic learning. Leaders described redefining success to include student happiness, belonging, and emotional safety. SEL is embedded in daily practice through values-based recognition, culturally responsive programming, and a consistent focus on helping students regulate emotions, build confidence, and develop routines. This orientation reflects a shared belief that emotional well-being is foundational to learning and that academic growth is most sustainable when students feel safe, supported, and known.

**Mental Health Supports as a Collective, Schoolwide Responsibility**

*It’s a call for support — it’s not about getting a student out of the room so I can teach.*  
– teacher

Educators also reported a robust, collective approach to mental health supports that moves away from punitive discipline and instead toward relational and restorative practices. Teachers and staff described an expectation that children’s emotional and behavioral

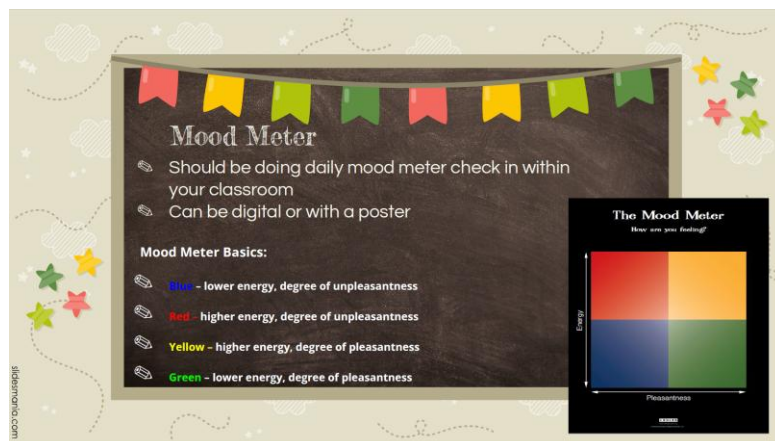


Figure 1. Mood Meter Check-in Protocol

needs are addressed through shared responsibility rather than isolation. Dedicated spaces such as refocus rooms, along with support staff who prioritize relationship building, invite students experiencing “big feelings” (teacher) to reset and return to learning alongside their peers with dignity. Importantly, this work is not confined to counselors or administrators; instead, emotional support is normalized as part of every adult’s role, reinforcing a message to students that asking for help is expected and everywhere.

### **Trusting Relationships and Safe Spaces That Sustain Emotional Resilience**

*It’s a safe space where everyone can share how they’re feeling, and then we problem solve together.* - teacher

The final finding in this section centers on the role of trust and relational safety in sustaining effective SEL and mental health programming. Across interviews, teachers emphasized that students’ willingness to engage, take risks, and persevere is rooted in consistent, caring relationships with adults and peers. Staff spoke about taking time to check in with students, noticing emotional cues, and responding with empathy rather than judgment. This foundation extends to adults as well, with teachers describing a professional environment marked by honesty, mutual support, and shared problem solving, which extends to parents and other caregivers. Together, these conditions create a resilient school climate in which mental health and social-emotional well-being are continuously nurtured and closely linked to students’ capacity to learn.

### **Educator Preparation, Support, and Organizational Capacity**

#### **Strategic Shifts: Aligning Instructional Support and Curriculum**

*We’ll come in and we’ll help you, and you’ll learn this.* – school leader

At ASH, administrators and instructional leaders have cultivated a robust learning environment by pivoting traditional evaluation toward what might be characterized as radical support. Historically, frequent curriculum shifts and initiative fatigue strained the staff; in response, instructional coaches abandoned the pursuit of the “new shiny apple” (district leader) to prioritize resources that fit the school’s specific needs. This led to the adoption of an innovative, problem-based approach to teaching mathematics (Illustrative Mathematics, IM). This was a strategic move intended to provide all students with high-quality access to complex concepts. IM was intentionally selected because its embedded instructional routines natively mirrored the high-leverage practices ASH teachers had already mastered, and the curriculum was specifically designed to support all students, especially MLLs. By aligning new resources with existing expertise, leadership transformed the curriculum “switch” into a seamless evolution rather than a disruption.

School leaders ensure a measured roll-out of new initiatives by engaging in the learning themselves first, then spreading it to their staff. This deliberate approach has turned ASH into a district model for “studio classroom” observations, said a school leader. As a district leader noted, the principal “lives and breathes the instructional work,” ensuring that high academic expectations are always matched by professional empowerment. Ultimately, this intentional support has bolstered teachers’ collective efficacy and serves as a vital retention tool; in an

environment where their professional expertise is respected and teachers feel empowered to meet the needs of their evolving student population, they want to stay, as echoed in this teachers' statement: "I'm gonna say that I feel so supported by administration and by staff. I'm going to support my colleagues here, and I think it's a good reciprocity kind of situation."

### **A Model for Sustainable Staffing**

*If the teachers are happy, then you know that they care (about the kids) and that it's a good place for kids to be.* – parent

In addition to a supportive instructional environment—and perhaps because of it—ASH also boasts a joyful professional culture characterized by deep relational trust between students, educators, and leaders. As the parent's sentiment (in the quotation above) suggests, the professional fulfillment of the staff is visible to the families they serve. This environment is a deliberate reflection of the principal's foundational philosophy: "You have to create a space where people want to be." This staff satisfaction is evidenced by, and drives, the school's remarkable stability: departures are typically due to retirement rather than turnover. This professional fulfillment fuels a self-sustaining recruitment model driven by word-of-mouth. ASH educators speak so highly of their environment that they naturally entice other high-quality teachers to join the team. This environment is further fortified through a strategic "grow-your-own" pipeline. By hiring student-teachers already familiar with the building, leaders ensure a seamless cultural fit with educators who already embody the "ASH Way."

### **Distributed Leadership and Organizational Capacity**

*There has been this sense of not trying to carry all the water . . . we are developing the capacity of those around us. The definition of 'leader' in our district is shifting.*  
– district leader

The culture of mutual trust at ASH creates a foundation of shared responsibility where leadership responsibilities are held not by a single individual but are instead distributed across the staff. This is visible in the structure of Common Planning Time (CPT), which is led by teachers rather than administrators. As one school leader explained, "The teachers really have a voice . . . we are honoring their expertise." This strength-based perspective operates under the principal's belief that "everyone has something to offer." To facilitate this, she provides the logistical support and coverage necessary for teachers to visit one another's classrooms, transforming peer-to-peer observation into a primary vehicle for professional growth. Strategic "buy-in" is further cultivated through the Building Leadership Team (BLT), which serves as a laboratory for new initiatives. By asking BLT members to act as early adopters—whether piloting peer observations or "dabbling" in a math intervention curriculum over the summer—the administration ensures that shifts are peer-supported evolutions rather than top-down mandates. By aligning these logistical supports with a culture of teacher-led growth, ASH has built a high level of organizational capacity that is both resilient and self-sustaining.

## Family Engagement and Community Relationships

### **Cultivating Belonging**

*I feel like we get that from ASH . . . that they make sure that they treat us [parents and caregivers] like we're family. Yeah, and I know it sounds almost cliché, but they treat us as one of their family members. – parent*

Parents who choose to send their children to ASH participate in the city's lottery process and by doing so indicate that they want their children to be at ASH. One draw for parents is the welcoming environment for children and families from diverse backgrounds. Initiatives such as Multicultural Night reinforce the belongingness, as ASH families host tables representing their cultural heritage, and a literacy night focuses on identity and acceptance. To bridge linguistic barriers between the school and its growing multilingual families, ASH uses a real-time translation feature that allows parents and teachers to message one another through automated translation. As the ENL (English as a New Language) teacher shared, "A thing I love with communicating with the parents is in our Dojo program that it translates back and forth, so you can message with the parents and they can translate it."

### **Community-Driven Support through Collective Volunteerism**

*So every student can go [on field trips]. . . we do that work [apply for grants]. . . PTA does fund-raising. Then we individually run fundraisers. – teacher*

The ASH community works together through a model of shared financial and social investment to ensure that school's enrichment opportunities remain accessible to all students regardless of their socio-economic status. The ASH PTA, a 501(c)3 nonprofit, plays an important role through its network of parent volunteers, raising more than 80% of its annual operating budget through dedicated fundraising campaigns. Initiatives such as "Clear the List" for classroom supplies and seasonal sales of candy or flowers help ensure that the magnet theme of ASH remains accessible to all. The PTA's fundraising, combined with teacher-led grants, allows ASH to provide Broadway trips and museum visits at "zero cost to the students" so that every student can go. With 58% of students coming from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, ASH has been able to provide relief to families through a "backpack program" that sends food home weekly and maintains a school-based pantry and clothing closet, ensuring that every child's basic needs are met with dignity. In addition, ASH's robust network of volunteers, ranging from grandparents and retired teachers to programs like the "Wizard's Wardrobe," where students are provided literacy support, create opportunities where community members can come in to read with students.

### **Collaborative Partnerships for Specialized Advocacy and Support**

*Our employees got certified and qualified to be able to be assistants in that [after-school] program. And the same thing is happening with the OPWDD [Office of Persons with Developmental Disabilities services). – district leader*

The district fosters deep relationships with specialized agencies to provide families with a variety of resources. This includes participating in the Capital Region Refugee and Immigrant Roundtable and partnering with other agencies to provide support to ASH’s diverse MLL population. For students with disabilities, ASH acts as a navigator, connecting parents and caregivers with the Office of Persons with Developmental Disabilities (OPWDD) as well as regional family services agencies. At ASH, a collaborative framework highlights an innovative continuity of care model that bridges the gap between school day and home life by encouraging district employees to also work for community partners beyond the school day. Through this, it ensures that students transition into the care of familiar adults for after-school hours. ASH also leverages local community-based organizations like Boys and Girls Club of America, Jewish Community Center (JCC), and the Police Athletic League (PAL) to provide diverse after-school options to parents and caregivers.

### **In a Nutshell**

ASH is distinct in its “no excuses” approach to supporting all students in meeting their potentials; championing diversity, equity, and inclusion; and focusing on developing agency and autonomy for learning within a culture of collaboration – and this extends from students to staff. At ASH, supports for whole-child well-being, strong instructional leadership, and abundant enrichment opportunities help explain why the school “always has a waiting list” (district leader) and remains a magnet not just in designation, but in promising practices. ASH educators foster a school community where engagement between staff, families, and community members is grounded in trust, care, open communication and mutual respect.

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