

NYKids 2026 Positive Outlier Elementary School Study



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August 2026

Chautauqua Lake Elementary School Case Study

I think that . . . when you have an idea . . . you want to do it, but you don't know where to start from. So like, with [our teacher] - she kind of makes it easy. She helps us get a start on it, and . . . that's the hardest part, because after that, our minds just kind of, like, flow with it.
- student

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 then 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 those same grades were used to identify positive outliers in this study.

School Context

Chautauqua Lake Elementary School is located in the town of Mayville on the shores of Chautauqua Lake in Western New York about a half hour drive from cities like Jamestown and Fredonia. It is characterized by an economically modest year-round population alongside a distinct seasonal population attracted to the area, in part, by the nearby Chautauqua Institution. The Institution is a historic educational, cultural, and religious community founded in 1874; it hosts lectures, concerts, and arts programming primarily during a summer season, drawing

visitors from around the world and adding to the cultural enrichment opportunities for children, youth, and families in the area.

The school district was formed roughly 25 years ago through a consolidation the superintendent described as “one of the most successful mergers in the state,” combining the Chautauqua and Mayville districts and later absorbing grades 7-12 tuition students from neighboring Ripley. This merger history, paired with the seasonal wealth of lakefront homeowners, creates an unusual tax profile: relatively high property values but average year-round family income and fairly flat overall school enrollment.

The district includes an elementary and a secondary school on one sprawling retreat-like campus. Leaders characterized it as a “destination district,” as the superintendent put it, that invests heavily in its facilities and enrichment programming to attract and retain families despite limited local industry and scarce affordable housing. Educators who participated in this study described high expectations for staff and students, with district leaders emphasizing a tradition of hiring “rock stars” (per the superintendent) to join their staff. This ambition is buttressed by a strong emphasis on data-driven instruction, curriculum consistency and quality controls, and the Elementary School’s “house system” culture that extends from academics into school spirit and student recognition programs.

The district leadership team showed evidence of applying effort to draw on regional partnerships—Chautauqua County Mental Hygiene, Chautauqua Lake Child Care Center, Erie 2-Chautauqua-Cattaraugus BOCES (E2CCB), and the Chautauqua Institution—among others. These partnerships help to meet students’ and families’ mental and physical health and enrichment needs, reflecting a broader community commitment to caring for its citizens and the environment.

Student Demographics 2024-2025: Chautauqua Lake Elementary School			
	Chautauqua Lake Elementary School	Chautauqua Lake Central School District	New York State
Grades Served	K-5	K-12	K-12
Total Enrollment	285	657	2,421,491
Economically Disadvantaged	46%	45%	60%
Students with Disabilities	16%	16%	20%
English Language Learners	0%	0%	12%
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution			
American Indian/Alaska Native	0%	0%	1%
Black or African American	1%	1%	15%
Hispanic/Latino	4%	3%	31%
Asian/Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	0%	0%	11%
White	93%	94%	39%
Multiracial	2%	1%	4%

Other	0%	0%	0%
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Chautauqua Lake ES was selected to represent a school demonstrating strong performance within an average-need, small-town context. Chautauqua Lake ES had a combined academic z score¹ of 1.65 and an attendance z score of 1.59, yielding a composite z score of 1.62, which is statistically significant taking into account demographic factors.

Highlights

Keeping the Joy in Coming to School through Human Connection

Kids have a strong voice. - principal

Chautauqua Lake ES educators expressed consistent beliefs about healthy child development being strongly correlated with children being provided the chance to express their interests, concerns, and needs and have them genuinely recognized and responded to, with opportunity for decision making and action. The school's house structure anchors this: Students and staff are grouped across grade levels into houses named for character traits expressed in Latin, which are expressed in Latin (e.g., "compassio" for compassion), with a different trait spotlighted each month and a ticket system that invites students to recognize each other for embodying that trait. This structure was repeatedly described as creating cross-grade bridges between students and staff and functioning as a built-in system of peer mentoring. The recent opening of the "Enrichment Lab" period to all students — rather than a select few — reinforced this same value of equity and inclusion, giving every child a designated space for experiential, student-driven projects; students reported engaging in Enrichment Lab at high levels. Even instructional practice reflects this ethos. As one teacher described it, they "reverse engineer" children's own projects back to academic standards rather than dictating the standards first. Taken together, these practices contribute to a school culture that purposefully protects student voice, is intentionally inclusive, and encourages deep emotional connections among peers, educators, and the school itself.

Holding High Expectations for Staff Excellence and Supporting Improvement Systemically

We believe in the power and genius of our teachers. So, when they have a really amazing idea, . . . we are all in with "What we can do to help?" And a lot of that is just supporting strategic planning, professional development, getting the connections made within the community. — school leader

¹ 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.

Leaders at Chautauqua Lake voiced a clear, shared expectation of excellence — for staff and for students alike — paired with concrete systems for holding the bar high. Hiring is treated as a deliberate “fit,” said a district leader, describing a process that assesses trustworthiness, kindness, openness to collaboration, and flexibility, not just credentials. District leaders also reported strong applicant pools driven largely by reputation and word of mouth. Once staff are on board, the expectation of excellence continues. Innovations are implemented based on merits rather than by mandate. The superintendent's confidence in the district's vision and people, and the consistency with which goals and priorities are interpreted the same way across roles, suggest that high expectations are reinforced by real organizational alignments of supports rather than by expectations or pressure to meet expectations alone. Notably, leaders also described having reached a point of instructional coherence that now frees staff to have the “cherry on the top” conversations, as the principal said — a signal that accountability in Chautauqua isn't just about meeting a bar, but about continuously raising the bar once foundational skills, knowledge, and systems are solid.

Centering on Youth Leadership for Community Action and Service

In this space, Kindergarten through sixth grade work on projects with the new, New York State Portrait of a Graduate. So, with a partnership with Chautauqua County, we started Chautauqua Kids Care, and we're hoping that other schools can kind of build upon this idea and work with us. And so what the kids have done is with different projects that they do for school . . . they [teachers] are trying to really tie back to the community with real, authentic learning and civic leadership.

- teacher

Chautauqua Lake ES's identity is deeply tied to its role as a hub for its community and neighboring districts, not just an academic service provider for its own enrolled students. The district actively publishes performance data and a range of other community service accomplishments through its “Chautauqua Kids Care” website, "Navigator" newsletters, social media, and parent portals — signaling a deliberate effort at transparency and public accountability to families and the broader community. It also partners with county organizations, private industry, and notably the Chautauqua Institution, which was described as a valued partner supporting enrichment and cultural opportunities beyond what the district could offer alone.

Community-facing projects like a student-led water project put children and adults in direct collaboration with local leaders, reinforcing that community engagement is treated as a genuine two-way relationship rather than one-directional outreach. As a BOCES host site serving special needs students from other districts, and as the

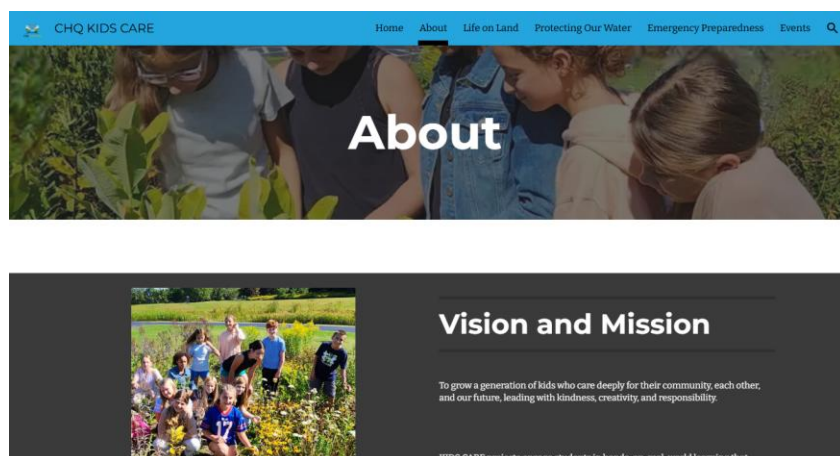


Figure 1. Chautauqua Kids Care Website

anchor of a merger celebrated as one of the most successful in the state, Chautauqua Lake's sense of purpose is explicitly regional — it aims to be a regional lighthouse for community action and service not just a school.

A Closer Look

These practices — Keeping the joy in coming to school through human connection; Holding high expectations for staff excellence and supporting improvement systemically; and Centering on youth leadership for community action and service — 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 findings within the context of the study's framework.

Culture, Climate and Community

A Culture of Unity Reinforced through the House System

We are a family at Chautauqua Lake. - teacher

The house structure emerged as the clearest driver of school culture across every group interviewed. Students, teachers, specialists, and leaders alike described it as the glue that holds the building together. Staff repeatedly noted that the monthly house meetings foster relationships across grade levels and roles that wouldn't otherwise exist; one teacher observed that a colleague of ten years said, "I don't think I had more than four conversations" with certain staff before the house system began pulling everyone into shared spaces every month. This sense of unity extends to students through rituals like "sorting day," when Kindergartners are welcomed into their house by an older student in a celebration staff called "delightful"; a teacher reported that the "joy that then comes from that" is infectious. Even healthy competition between houses has gotten deliberately reframed as connection rather than division: When rivalry once got "a little mean," staff created "Eagles Unite" days so the whole school could unite behind a single value each month rather than only their own house color. Parents notice the effect too, describing the elementary school as feeling like "a family" where "every teacher knows every kid, regardless of what grade they're in."

A Loving Climate Enhanced by Restorative, Relationship-Centered Behavior Support

We come from a place of love and concern. – school leader

Rather than a punitive or purely rules-based approach, the attitude toward encouraging positive behavior was described as deeply relational and deliberately unhurried. Leaders explained that student behavior is treated as a puzzle to understand — not simply a trigger to enforce a rule — for example, by asking, "Is this a student with a disability? Is this a student who got no sleep last night?" before deciding on any consequence, explained a school leader. Restorative practices anchor this approach: Students in conflict are brought together to sit "face to face" and hear each other's side. According to a school leader, this process has "really been beneficial" in changing the dynamic between kids who were struggling. This investment of time to understand is treated

as a long-term relationship builder, said the principal, noting that “our relationships with our parents are because we take that time.” She also reinforced that consistency in responses and communications anchor the climate further — families “can always expect . . . quick communication” whether the news is a concern or “just a great job” message, which staff members added builds trust well before any consequence is ever needed.

A Professional Environment Built on Collegiality, Collaboration, and Psychological Safety

Our staff is just so good. - teacher

Underlying both the house system and the approach to behavioral interventions is a professional culture staff described as collegial, collaborative and psychologically safe. For example, special education staff described coteaching relationships built on trust developed over time — “by the end of the year, you get to the point where . . . you come and you’re like, ‘I would really like to change this for my kids, and then they [classroom teachers] feel open to it,’” said one. Another support staff member added that “the culture here is very positive.” This collegiality isn’t left to chance: It’s structurally supported through monthly half-days for collaborative learning teams (CLTs) and shared planning periods, as well as informal norms like popping into a colleague’s room to troubleshoot a student’s needs in real time. Support staff outside the teaching ranks echoed the same theme, noting that “we all have a voice here . . . it doesn’t matter if you’re a teacher or a TA or secretary.” The superintendent tied this directly to the hiring philosophy, explaining that when comparing equally qualified candidates, the deciding factor is whether someone has “the character pieces . . . caring, compassionate, trustworthy, honest” — because a strong collaborative and psychologically safe school culture depends on selecting people who will contribute to and sustain it.

Academic Learning and Programming

Data-Driven, Tiered and Targeted Academic Support System

We’re ever changing, evolving, looking at that data — what can we do better for our students?
- teacher

Academic intervention at Chautauqua Lake ES is built on structured, data-driven systems (e.g., Response to Intervention (RTI) and/or Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) rather than informal or reactive support. For example, a schoolwide Instructional Support Team (IST) meets monthly, using rubrics and benchmark data (e.g., FastBridge, classroom assessments) to move students fluidly between tiers of support; a teacher described the process as deliberately responsive: “We can move our TAs around . . . we can change the teacher’s schedule so that they can meet in small groups” whenever data shows a child is struggling. Specialists described real ownership over piloting new tools or strategies when the data justified it. One math specialist noted the district let her pilot a fact-fluency grant program, reporting, “It worked well. . . . Now we use it third, fourth and fifth”; this reflects a broader pattern of adopting interventions matched precisely to specific student needs rather than a one-size-fits-all approach. This same rigor extends into special education, where consultant teachers described coplanning tightly with classroom teachers so that support is “exactly what the kids need,” explained a teacher.

Teacher-Driven Curriculum Adoption Built on Piloting and Consensus Building

Oh my gosh. They're like decomposing numbers in their heads. This is amazing. - teacher

A major academic strength at Chautauqua Lake ES is the deliberate, teacher-led process the district uses to select and commit to curricula, rather than relying on top-down mandates. When the principal moved into the position in 2017, she found ELA instruction somewhat fragmented — “everybody was kind of doing a smattering of various things . . . there was no continuity,” she explained. She responded by forming a teacher committee that started not with vendor pitches but with an educator-generated “wish list” of what a quality curriculum should include. The same approach was used for math: Leaders deliberately piloted a new program with those teachers who might be most critical of it—reasoning that if they came back convinced, the results were real. This consensus-building adoption process pays off in buy-in and stability, leaders say: The district has stayed with its chosen ELA program since 2018 rather than “jumping ship” every few years, said the principal. And the superintendent added that sustained investment in “a quality curriculum” helps teachers actually commit to it and master it over time.

Departmentalization as a Deliberate Instructional Specialization Strategy

[Departmentalization] has been a really powerful thing . . . the test results . . . [have changed] pretty significantly. - superintendent

Rather than generalist classroom teachers covering every subject, Chautauqua Lake ES deliberately departmentalizes instruction as early as third grade, giving each teacher a content specialization in ELA, math, science, or social studies. Leaders described this move to departmentalizing as a direct response to a gap they noticed several years ago: Third graders were neither “primary” nor “intermediate” students, said the principal, and were, therefore, often shortchanged on subjects like science or social studies before facing state testing. In response, the district leadership team extended departmentalization from fourth grade to third. The benefits, in staff members’ own accounts, go beyond scheduling — teachers become genuine “specialists in those areas for those grade levels,” and the model “facilitates great collaboration” as teachers within the same subject compare notes on what’s working from grade to grade, explained the superintendent. Leaders pointed to sustained gains in state assessment results as direct evidence of impact, framing the strategy as central to their improved academic outcomes.

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and Mental Health

A Holistic and Collaborative Approach to Mental Health and Well-Being

We are very holistic. We're looking at . . . all of the needs of the students. - support staff

Educators at Chautauqua Lake ES reported relying upon a holistic and collaborative approach to student mental health and well-being. School leaders emphasized the importance of “peel[ing] back the layers” of a student’s situation, looking at “the trauma . . . the acute environmental reasons behind a pattern” that a child may be carrying, as a school leader put it. This perspective

extends to looking beyond the classroom and school walls for root causes of children’s struggles. One teacher observed that some issues can be traced to a variety of environmental factors: “the effects of the pandemic . . . their [parents’] mental health” — factors that make certain behaviors “harder to redirect.” The same teacher pointed to rising technology use as an even bigger driver for particular behaviors, making it “harder to get kids to want to just do something.” In response, educators work to “wrap students and families in love and support” through “emotional support” and “social services support” alike, said a school leader— an orientation that has driven investments in Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), which one teacher said played “a big role in actually bringing us all together” post-pandemic.



Figure 2. House System Flyer

PBIS and Counseling as the Core of the Internal Support System

Our PBIS, I would say, is probably one of the strongest in the world. I mean, we have an incredible PBIS thing going on.... I think, it's the reason why we're as great as we are.
-teacher

This holistic and collaborative approach rests on two main internal resources that work together in a complementary way: PBIS and the counseling team. In practice, PBIS operates through the house system, but there is a lot of work behind it: Programming, teacher meetings, and professional development

sustain a structure that leaders intentionally developed by organizing students and staff into houses named after character traits. As described above, each month, houses gather around a trait — like service or compassion — that students explore together through prompting questions such as “What does service mean? What can we do to serve each other?” explained a teacher. One leader described the day-to-day mechanics behind their associated point system as “collecting points . . . handing out tickets . . . catching the kids, shaping those behaviors. Beyond this system, PBIS functions as an SEL infrastructure that gives students a shared vocabulary for nurturing their own well-being and fostering healthy relationships. The counseling team complements this system by acting as a catalyst for mental health support. The leadership team meets weekly and includes “our school counselors, our school psychologist, our school safety advisor... [and] our Special Ed director” to “discuss our families or kids that are struggling,” said the principal. This cross-role team structure allows educators to detect students who need

additional support early and then embed SEL and mental health support through routine coordination of effort rather than treating these supports as separate services.

Bridging School and Community for Mental Health Support

We house CCMH — Chautauqua County Mental Hygiene — [which] has a satellite office here in our building. - principal

Another important link in Chautauqua Lake ES's whole-child support system extends outward from the school itself through formal partnerships with county mental health services. One school leader described the relationship as one of "strong support with our Chautauqua County Mental Health providers." The superintendent underscored the intentional quality of that partnership, noting that CCMH staff are treated as more than external providers: Educators work "hard . . . to make sure they [CCMH staff] feel like they are part of our school district," he said. This partnership addresses a real access barrier for families and community, as the principal explained: Some "would struggle to get to those organizations, because maybe the closest is Jamestown or Dunkirk," so the agency keeps "someone housed here three days a week." The satellite counselor also "meets with [the] counseling team weekly," she added, integrating community-based mental health support with the school's internal structures rather than treating it as a separate service.

Educator Preparation, Support, and Organizational Capacity

Selecting for Cultural "Fit" and Retaining through Shared Commitment

The people who work here love it here and want to be here. – district leader

Chautauqua Lake's approach to recruitment and retention centers on protecting a specific cultural fit. According to staff involved in choosing candidates, hiring explicitly weighs "trustworthiness, kindness, openness to collaboration, flexibility" alongside instructional skill. This intentional strategy extends into daily culture: Leadership team members describe themselves as "like a family," a framing that reinforces why turnover concerns rarely surface in the district or school, according to one school leader. Retiring staff further affirm the sustainability of this approach: One veteran teacher noted confidently that her replacement "will continue with what we have established. . . . I do not see anything changing, but improving," crediting this approach to sustaining staff commitment to "the philosophy of the district," not any one person.

Distributed Leadership Roles That Build Capacity and Prevent Burnout

You're not going to be on them [committees] all. - teacher

Rather than concentrating responsibility in a handful of staff, school and district leaders deliberately spread decision making and workload across many teacher-led teams — the Building Leadership Team, PBIS, IST, Safety Committee, and CLTs (Collaborative Learning Teams)—with every staff member expected to serve on at least one. Teachers described this distribution as an explicit, known expectation from the start: "When you came here, you knew

you were going to be on something,” said one teacher. Another teacher added that the approach is flexible enough to sustain over a career, since staff can rotate off a committee after a year or two and hand it to a colleague. This flexibility extends to the house-based PBIS system as well, where leaders noted deliberately mixing teachers who didn’t already know each other into shared house teams. “We purposefully put people with people they don’t know”—specifically to build cross-grade relationships that reduce isolation and burnout, reported a teacher. The result, staff said, is a workload that feels shared and sustainable rather than concentrated on a few overworked staff.

A Teacher-Driven Professional Learning Model That Builds Ownership

I was blown away. - teacher

The quote above speaks to a newer teacher’s impression on first encountering the district’s goal-setting model. Perhaps the clearest retention driver at Chautauqua Lake is the district’s shift away from traditional professional development opportunities offered by outside experts toward a staff-driven model (culminating in what is called “The Showcase”). The PD model is built on individual and Collaborative Learning Team (CLT) goals. Veteran staff acknowledged this wasn’t an easy shift; one recalled that in year one, “It [The Showcase] wasn’t well received . . . it felt like you were treated almost like a child being asked to set your own goal after twenty years of teaching.” However, staff broadly described having come around once they saw pay offs: “We take ownership of what we’re doing, and it’s helping us,” said one teacher. Newer teachers, notably, described this professional learning model as a genuine draw to staying in the district rather than an imposition; after comparing notes with family members who teach elsewhere and had “never even heard of” this model, one teacher said she found “real enjoyment . . . and love for it, because it [the learning through self- and CLT-initiated goal setting and showcasing effects] is something I can use.” The annual May showcase — where every teacher presents their CLT work districtwide — reinforces this sense of investment, giving staff both public recognition and a structured, ongoing reason to keep growing their practice within the district rather than seeking it elsewhere.

Family Engagement and Community Relationships

Building Relationships with Families: Multi-Channel Communication

There’s literally a chart [of who to contact for what] . . . if you have a problem. — parent

Chautauqua Lake ES has built a structured, multi-channel system of communication to build and maintain communications in a very active community. This system relies on different modes of communication depending on what the school needs to share; these modes include ParentSquare, phone calls for personal conversations, and the district’s “Navigator” newsletter for broader updates. One support staff member described ParentSquare (a communication platform that allows for alerts, updates, etc.) as “amazing . . . we can get quick responses,” and another added that “with the ParentSquare, it’s been phenomenal.” The principal noted that “most of it is for positive messaging — ‘Here’s what we’re doing today. Here’s pictures of your kiddo,’” while a

Building Team (BT) member pointed to its two-way function: “We post all of our different events that we have . . . and QR codes to get feedback from them [parents].” One teacher noted the importance of personalization in communications, explaining that she keeps “notes about families and their preferences for communication.” One family member echoed this positive experience of transparent communication, noting that “they [school staff] are just very up front and willing to share everything.” If an issue arises, family members benefit from a chart of who to contact for what.

Family Involvement and Engagement in School Life

I would say the vast majority [of parents] want to do something. — parent

At Chautauqua Lake ES, family involvement is embedded across the school’s calendar, from cross-grade house ceremonies to structured Parent Teacher Council (PTC) events and community gatherings. Leaders have been deliberate about opening the house structure to parents; as the principal explained, “We’ve also been purposeful in inviting parents to our opening ceremony and our closing ceremony, and a lot come, and it’s great for them to see it in action.” The PTC anchors a more formal channel of involvement, which a parent described this way: “Four of us parents that are actively involved,” along with “three or four teacher representatives” and, notably, the principal herself — “she [the principal] is at every meeting.” Beyond monthly meetings, the PTC organizes a rhythm of schoolwide events — “a booth set up at Open House,” a Trunk or Treat, and a hand-signed t-shirts event when “the sixth graders move up to seventh grade,” a parent listed.

A Web of Community Partnerships

We have a lot of community collaboration. - school leader

Community partnerships extend across a wide range of organizations — from the Fire Department to the County, the Chautauqua Institution, and the local library — reflecting a school that actively participates in and welcomes contributions from its surrounding community. The Chautauqua Institution stands out as an anchor partner — described by staff as “a beautiful art society” that the school takes advantage of during the year, with “free passes in the summer” noted a teacher. In addition, educators work with the local library through the “Hooked on Books committee,” which turns library visits into rewards for independent reading, said a teacher; with North Lake Fire Department, described by a teacher as “a really good community partnership” that includes safety training and equipment; and with the County, which the superintendent called “a very big support structure” for social services and student well-being. The school also serves an important regional role for caring for and educating children and youth with special needs: as the superintendent explained, “We have 10 other school districts that come here every day with some high-needs special ed kids.” The district hosts over twenty BOCES special education classrooms. It also functions as a merged-athletics host school; “A lot of our neighboring districts will come here for practices and games,” said a school leader, which provides opportunities for students beyond Chautauqua lake’s own enrollment.

In a Nutshell

Chautauqua Lake ES is a place where joy is pursued through connection, expectations for students and staff are held high, and student leadership sits at the center of learning. The school's house system anchors the school culture and is complemented by restorative practices and a tiered and targeted intervention system to support students' academic and social emotional development. Staff retention is built on cultural-fit hiring, distributed leadership, and a teacher-driven professional learning model. Family engagement is fostered through multi-channel communication, active parent involvement in school life, and a wide web of community partnerships. What sets Chautauqua Lake ES apart is not any single practice, but the deliberate coherence among them — the way school culture and climate, innovations around curriculum and instruction, SEL and mental health supports, professional learning opportunities, and community engagement efforts reinforce one another around a shared commitment to children's healthy development and preparation for life.

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