

NYKids 2026 Positive Outlier Elementary School Study



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Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School Case Study

*I think that our kids and our staff are some of the nicest, kindest people you will ever find.
Our school is genuinely a family.* — teacher

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 grades 1-6 were used to identify positive outliers in this study.

School Context

Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School (MLK) is located in the midsize city of Utica, New York. The city sits alongside the Mohawk River and serves as the county seat of Oneida County. The city has undergone large-scale economic changes since its days as a textile production center in the 19th century; these changes have transformed the once industrialized urban landscape into an economy driven by healthcare, education, and a growing technology sector that is supported by the nearby SUNY Polytechnic Institute, part of the State University of New York system. The city has long been a diverse hub for immigrant families and, in recent times, for refugees who have come from all parts of the world searching for safety and security.

MLK reflects the city’s complex economic and cultural history. Among its 302 students, nearly one-quarter are multilingual learners, and virtually all are considered economically disadvantaged. While the specialized needs of these students can pose challenges, educators at MLK draw on a school culture built on the values of care, compassion, and collaboration. Numerous educators, for instance, described the school as a “family” when asked to describe what it was like to work there. As one teacher put it, “I think we all support each other in this building, no matter what position you’re in.”

The linguistic and cultural diversity of MLK is not merely acknowledged by its educators: it is viewed as a defining feature that makes the school unique. “Our kids come from all over the world, and they love each other, and they support each other, and they support us,” said one teacher. All students and their families are welcomed into the MLK family regardless of where they are from and what language they speak, and educators at every level work to embed diversity meaningfully into the curriculum.

Educators at MLK challenge their students through high expectations and a rigorous curriculum aligned with the latest learning standards from New York State, which emphasize higher-order thinking, academic discourse, and project-based learning. The school pledge, spoken by students every morning, reflects a commitment to the values of inclusion and civic responsibility embodied by the Civil Rights leader for whom the school is named: “I pledge to have courage, include others, be respectful and responsible, act nonviolently, and celebrate the way I can improve the world around me.”

Student Demographics 2024-2025: Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School			
	Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School	Utica City School District	New York State
Grades Served	K-6	K-12	K-12
Total Enrollment	302	9,071	2,421,491
Economically Disadvantaged	97%	86%	60%
Students with Disabilities	18%	19%	20%
English Language Learners	22%	17%	12%
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution			
American Indian/Alaska Native	0%	0%	1%
Black or African American	34%	25%	15%
Hispanic/Latino	24%	23%	31%
Asian/Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	25%	21%	11%
White	10%	24%	39%
Multiracial	7%	7%	4%
Other	0%	0%	0%

Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School was selected to provide insight into a high-need urban context characterized by substantial demographic diversity and elevated student needs. Classified by New York state as High-Need and located in a midsize city, the school serves a student population in which 97% of students are economically disadvantaged, 18% are identified as having disabilities, and 22% are English Language Learners. The student body is racially and ethnically diverse, including 34% Black, 24% Hispanic, 25% Asian/Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, and smaller proportions of multiracial and White students. MLK demonstrated above-expected outcomes, with a combined academic z score¹ of 1.10 and an attendance z score of 1.14, resulting in a composite z score of 1.12.

Highlights

Positive Relationships Are at the Heart of Success

I'd say this school is just a family. We are all close, whether it be children and staff, staff in general . . . everybody [is] supporting each other. — support staff

The positive relationships between educators and students were described by educators at MLK as a crucial feature of their school culture and a factor contributing to their successful outcomes. Making a concerted effort to build relationships with each and every student is seen by all staff members as something that is part of their role, not as a task isolated to support staff. Educators thus strive to build an inclusive and welcoming environment for their students and recognize that academic learning is possible only when students feel safe and seen. As a support staff member noted, “I just feel like relationships are just so huge. . . . If I can build a good relationship with our students and our kids, that’s success.”

Systems of Support and Care

If you don't address their social-emotional needs, it's hard to address their academic needs. — district leader

Educators at MLK spoke of how they address their students’ mental health needs through a range of supports, services, and resources. Besides a part-time counselor and full-time social worker, students at MLK have access to additional counseling services through community-based organizations such as the Integrated Community Alternatives Network (ICAN) and Safe Schools Mohawk Valley. Students’ well-being is also strengthened through social-emotional learning (SEL) programming embedded in lessons throughout the day, as well as in a robust after-school program. Educators also seek to develop positive character traits in their students through the use of restorative justice practices and a Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) program.

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.

Keeping Students Happy and Engaged

Kids are happy to be here. – teacher

Through a curriculum that is both rigorous and engaging, educators at MLK try to ensure that students are excited to come to school. They explained how they design programming at MLK to make certain that students are prepared for the latest state standards, while also ensuring that their culturally and linguistically diverse student population is represented in the curriculum. The school also partners with local organizations such as the Utica Children’s Museum, Cornell Cooperative Extension, and SUNY Polytechnic Institute to provide students with engaging and hands-on activities and programming. These activities – including MLK Day celebrations that are held each quarter on random days to promote attendance – make sure that students not only attend school but that they enjoy their time there.

A Closer Look

The practices highlighted above 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

You can’t teach a kid anything until you build a relationship with them . . . until they know they’re safe and taking a risk is going to be okay. – teacher

Setting High Expectations for Every Student

While acknowledging the many challenges facing their students, educators at MLK and in the school district described the need to maintain high expectations for all students. A district leader, for example, elaborated on the “high expectations” for students in Utica: “We want our kids to graduate [and be] as competitive as any other student in the state, and have the same opportunities available to them.” At MLK, several educators emphasized the need to avoid a deficit-based approach towards their students’ abilities. In one interview, for instance, a teacher explained how educators at MLK don’t place limits on their students:

“Our kids can’t do that. . . .” We don’t say that here. They *can* do it, you just have to give them the right tools to do it . . . we motivate them. Yes, we have that attitude, you give it to the students, “I know you can do this.” And they can.

Likewise, the principal described how educators at MLK support students who may need specialized additional support without lowering their expectations or sacrificing curricular content. “But that doesn’t mean we’re not going to teach phonics. . . . We’re going to push them, and we’re going to do what we need to do to put the interventions into place,” she explained.

Promoting Attendance through a Positive School Climate and Fun Incentives

Educators credited their higher-than-predicted rates of attendance to the warm school climate and caring relationships described below – as well as several targeted strategies designed to encourage students to attend school. “We have a very welcoming school . . . kids want to be here,” commented a support staff member on the positive rates of attendance at the school.

Several strategies specifically target attendance. District leaders, for instance, recently developed an attendance handbook for all educators and worked with the Board of Education to revise the district’s attendance policy to ensure that records are kept on each student. The district also has an “attendance teacher” who is contracted through the regional BOCES and comes to MLK to monitor attendance twice per week. A support staff explained that this attendance teacher “makes sure that you know if someone’s getting over [the number of absences]. She’ll send out letters, things like that. She’ll make calls . . . make home visits . . . it’s definitely improved our attendance quite a bit.”

The school also employs several strategies to give students incentives to come to school. Students who attend all five days in a week, for example, can enter a raffle to win prizes. Awards are also given at quarterly assemblies to reward students with high rates of attendance. The School Leadership Team has created an initiative called “MLK Days” that are held on one random day each quarter. On an MLK Day, students are treated to celebrations, prizes, and other treats to encourage them to come to school. The celebrations also feature exciting educational content such as a visit from the nearby Utica Children’s Museum. Educators also use these opportunities to promote student attendance directly. “[We] set it off with an assembly and then talk about why it’s so important to be at school. And they have a great time throughout the day doing different activities,” explained a support staff. Several educators described the initiative as “successful” in promoting attendance while creating an additional opportunity to celebrate with their students. “The kids go wild. They think it’s so fun, and they never know when it is [going to happen],” noted a support staff member.

Building Long-Lasting and Meaningful Relationships with Students

Through daily interaction and a shared ethic of caring, educators at MLK cultivate close, individualized relationships with all students in their school. The small size of the school, many educators feel, allows them to keep a close eye on each student, ensuring – as one teacher put it – “kids don’t get lost in the shuffle.” Another teacher explained how closely educators “know” each and every student in the school. “We know them, and we know if they’ve been absent. . . . I can tell who’s having a good day, who’s having a bad day, or if someone’s supposed to be getting breakfast.”

A support staff felt that educators at MLK take time to “really know students and develop that relationship with them,” while a teacher similarly noted that staff members “advocate for students that aren’t even ‘theirs’.” Ensuring that each student feels welcomed and cared for was seen as a feature of MLK that contributes to the positive culture of the school. “I think it means a lot when kids that are not in your class are walking by, and you can say their name . . . it’s personal and it shows them we care about them.” The long-lasting power of these relationships,

educators felt, is evident in the many students who return to MLK to chat with their former teachers as they graduate from high school. “Even former students always come back; that says a lot . . . they are meaningful relationships,” noted one teacher.

The school also uses more direct practices to build bonds with students. The principal, for instance, noted how a fifth-grade class had been struggling due, in part, to the long-term effects from the COVID-19 pandemic. To support these students, educators drew on insights from the “One Trusted Adult” program, based on the book of the same name by Brooklyn Raney, where a staff member pairs with individual students. In addition to weekly meetings and monthly breakfasts, teachers conducted daily check-ins and check-outs with the students they were paired with in order to build more trusting and authentic relationships with their students. Noting the “very good” results of the program, she hopes to expand the program to other grades that may need additional support.

Academic Learning and Programming

I want to give kids the tools to be curious and creative and want to be actively learning about stuff, and taking leadership roles, and taking charge of their own learning
– support staff

Fostering Student-Centered, Active Learning and Higher-Order Thinking

High-quality instruction at MLK, according to educators at all levels, is student centered and engaging and involves critical-thinking, inquiry, and real-world application. A district leader, for instance, explained how educators have been encouraged to move away from “old school, teacher-centered” forms of pedagogy:

We’re really trying to . . . have everything be much more student-centered problem solving, critical thinking, collaborative learning. . . . What do we really want to see? Are they having academic discourse with each other? Are they talking about their learning? Are they taking ownership of their learning?

The principal explained how these districtwide priorities look at MLK, specifically highlighting the school-level focus on “student discourse” and “productive struggle.” These emphases encourage teachers to focus on students as well as content while developing students’ capacity to understand and use academic language in classrooms.

Leaders explained that the emphasis on these skills and competencies was made intentionally to coincide with the changing graduation requirements in New York State called “Portrait of a Graduate” (POG). The principal, for instance, serves on a district-level team related to POG, and next year students at MLK will each take a unit of Project-Based Learning, an extension of the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) programming that is already offered by a team that includes the school librarian and principal. The program engages students with cross-disciplinary, hands-on work such as reading about butterflies and then watching the process of metamorphosis unfold with live caterpillars. The principal also explained a change in students’ report cards, moving away from a traditional assessment model to one that emphasizes the skills

students demonstrate during the quarter while also aligning these competencies to those identified in POG:

We called it Portrait of a Learner . . . we tried to match it to one of the competencies on the wheel [the graphic defining what a graduate should be able to do], and what would it look like in a more of a positive spin like: “student is a good communicator,” “student is able to critically think,” “student is able to problem solve to find a solution” versus “student turns their homework in.”

Embedding Diversity in the Curriculum

At MLK, educators strive to craft curricular offerings that represent and engage their diverse student population. In choosing a new English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum, for instance, the representation of diverse authors and stories was seen as a prerequisite in the choice. A district leader described the kinds of questions that committee members weighed: “Are the kids going to get exposed to characters who look like them, to authors that they can look up to? Are there female authors? Are there male authors? Are there diverse authors?” The school library similarly is stocked intentionally with books that represent students’ cultures.

Additionally, educators at MLK support the large number of multilingual learners (MLs) they serve through a responsive approach that values students’ languages and cultures. Rather than adopting a monolingual policy, a district leader described instead how students’ home languages are viewed by educators as a resource on which teachers can scaffold English instruction. “Kids will still learn English, and you support that [through their] home language. It’s important,” she said. The ENL (English as a New Language) curriculum, as a teacher explained, does not simply provide students with basic English fundamentals but also provides students with content from other subject areas as it “alternates between social studies and science” through a multicultural lens.

The emphasis on diversity does not end with the school day; the RED (Raiders Extended Day) program provides students with enrichment after school, including academic support, social-emotional learning, physical activity, and free meals. As with the regular curriculum, the RED program also incorporates students’ identities in meaningful ways such as bulletin boards designed by students and support staff that in the appropriate month celebrates Asian Heritage Month, Juneteenth, and Ramadan. A support staff member noted the importance of “proving to [students] that they’re being heard and . . . also represents them in that way. They were very happy and proud to see that in school.”

Supporting Students with Special Needs through Targeted Interventions and Inclusivity

To support students with special needs MLK uses a comprehensive approach that emphasizes inclusivity and data-driven interventions. A Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) helps educators tailor interventions to meet the needs of each student. The tiered system thus ensures that instructional strategies are “differentiated by what the child needs,” as a district leader noted. Educators also utilize “cohort analysis” – which compares the academic progress of students with the same linguistic background who arrived at the same time – so that multilingual learners who may have disabilities are identified accurately. “That helps us even that playing field,”

explained one teacher. Additional staff help ensure that students' needs are being met, including a districtwide director of AIS (Academic Intervention Services) and a "targeted assistance" program that pairs retired teachers with elementary students three times a week in order to identify and address reading gaps in younger students.

The district is guided by the principle of inclusivity, and both leaders and teachers described efforts to make certain that all students are welcomed into the school community regardless of their needs. For example, the district established two self-contained classrooms on campus so students who require more restrictive environments can remain within the district. Students with special needs are also included in as many activities as possible, such as assemblies and graduation ceremonies. "[Students with disabilities] are included, so it's just those little ways that we can get them in [activities and events]. And it makes the parents feel good too, because they see their kids out there." In addition, the district organizes a "Raider Rally" where over 750 special education students from across the district participate in various sports and activities. The event goes all day and features a DJ, a mobile museum, and a demonstration from local law enforcement. A teacher summarized a recent Rally, "It was just a really great event. They all loved it. They had so much fun."

Social-Emotional Learning and Mental Health

We all want the same thing: for the kids to thrive and do the best that they can.

- support staff

Fostering Positive Character Skills through PBIS and Restorative Justice

Classroom teachers at MLK reported using restorative practices to create spaces where student-to-student and student-to-teacher connections are allowed and encouraged. Teaching staff first encountered restorative practices at a training and experienced firsthand how useful it can be to elicit poignant, vulnerable discussions that support meaningful connections. After experiencing these practices themselves, the teachers tried it in their classrooms and reported identifying internal challenges experienced by students that would have otherwise gone unnoticed. One teacher reported the usefulness of restorative practices to aid in students' social and overall development:

Yes, it's amazing. . . . I think that they're developing listening skills, you know, they're learning it's more than just like learning academics, they're learning how to be a person, how to be a friend. I think that that's a really important thing.

The Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) system at MLK has also been an integral part of reducing disciplinary referrals and creating a more positive school climate according to educators. The PBIS team holds informative assemblies at the beginning of the school year to remind returning students about behavioral expectations and reinforce incentives while introducing new students to school norms and culture.

Addressing Student Needs through a "System of Care"

In 2022 district leaders created a System of Care to connect each school with community organizations that provide mental health care for youth, including the Integrated Community Alternatives Network (ICAN) and Safe Schools Mohawk Valley. A district leader noted that “our partners are invaluable to us . . . [they] have really filled a void, I think, that we needed here.” ICAN and Safe Schools are in each of the 13 buildings across the district to provide wraparound support services as well as academic tutoring and programming. At MLK, these agencies are integrated into the tiered support model (MTSS) and can be used to offer additional support to students who require it. For example, ICAN provides additional counselors that are available to students during the school day as well as a part-time nurse practitioner who is available to assist students who take medications. Bringing providers into the school removes barriers for students’ caregivers, such as scheduling, transportation, and funding. As a district leader explained, “Where other districts . . . struggle to get wraparound supports for their kids, ours are embedded right here.”

Creating Safe, Trusted, Accessible School Teams

Educators at MLK prioritize students’ social-emotional learning (SEL) alongside academics and utilize a range of SEL programming to make sure that students feel safe and comfortable. The school, for instance, uses the character education curriculum called “Positivity Project” and seeks to embed elements into daily lessons as well as in the RED afterschool program. Educators also reported the positive impact that mindfulness activities such as breathing exercises and positive affirmations have had on their students. Each week, as a support staff member explained, a “Peaceful Morning” assembly is held for the entire school to start the week off on a positive note:

The kids come in the gym and they sit with their teachers, and we go over everything that’s happening that week. We talk about . . . a book fair coming up, the student council will talk about what they’re selling for the week. They’ll share events, we talk, and [we] celebrate the birthdays.

The principal also reported the recent creation of an SEL team to monitor students’ well-being and develop new initiatives.

Educator Preparation, Support, and Organizational Capacity

Everything is done collaboratively. We always have committees. We don’t really typically make decisions in isolation. We like to have all stakeholder voices at a table.

- district leader

Using Data to Inform Decisions

Data are used at MLK for a range of functions including to drive instruction, monitor student progress, and set goals. Educators use a combination of formal measures, such as iReady diagnostics and standardized state assessments, and informal measures, such as teacher observations, to make decisions about instruction. For example, educators explained how

assessment data or diagnostic scores provide useful insights into instructional gaps and identify students who may benefit from small-group instruction or other interventions. In addition, a data team meets monthly to develop broader instructional strategies that are rolled out throughout the school, such as an initiative designed to measure the mastery of specific standards at each grade-level. “We’re looking at test scores, we’re looking at frequently assessed questions, and then aligning the curriculum, using iReady data and doing some strategic instructional planning,” said the principal.

Data are also used to set goals and develop plans across the school and district. The principal explained how she and other leaders work over the summer to develop goals for the upcoming year using assessment data as well as survey responses from teachers, students, and family members. The goals go beyond academics to include elements like leadership, family engagement, and social-emotional well-being.

Leading Collaboratively to Stimulate Improvement

At MLK, leaders collaborate with other educators and staff members for the shared purpose of school improvement. The principal, for instance, described her approach to leading by “facilitating” rather than by following a hierarchical model of leadership:

I’m not going to talk at you, you’re a professional. . . . My teachers help make all decisions, any decisions that we have control over, right? There’s district stuff that comes down that we don’t, none of us can control [it]. However, we really do everything as a team, and if I don’t have a team, I’ll put one together to make those decisions, because I don’t think it should ever come from me.

Several educators responded positively regarding the ways the principal seeks input from staff members on decisions impacting staff and students. “[Principal is] very open to different ideas,” explained one teacher. A support staff member similarly commented on being able to “go to [principal] with any ideas.” She elaborated, “I’ve gone to her and said . . . ‘I don’t like that this is the way it is, how can we change this, or if we ask the district to modify this . . .’ and she’s a very good advocate.”

A School Leadership Team (SLT) comprised of department heads, several support staff leaders, and the principal also meet monthly to discuss various issues and initiatives impacting the school. A support staff member described how leaders met to discuss ways to improve student attendance and eventually came up with the idea to hold parties on a random day (“MLK Days”) each quarter as an incentive for students to want to attend school. Another idea that was generated through SLT meetings was a “Hall-oween” celebration in which students can dress up in costumes and walk through the halls. Families and teachers join the event and pass out candy to the students as they pass by.

Supporting Educators through Professional Development

New initiatives as well as changes to curriculum and instruction are supported by leaders at MLK and districtwide through targeted Professional Development (PD). As described above, one particularly impactful PD mentioned by educators was the training in restorative justice

delivered by ICAN. A teacher felt that the training “really had an impact on me.” Another educator explained how professional development, including a grant that supported a partnership with Hunter College, helped support the districtwide shift towards “higher-order thinking questions” and “differentiation” in math. “Just having that opportunity to have that professional development for a few years, I began using . . . some resources that [a professor from Hunter College] offered us.” In addition, the district has been working to more closely align its Universal Pre-Kindergarten (UPK) program to the Kindergarten curriculum and providing PD so that UPK teachers can ensure that their students are prepared for the next grade.

Educators are also provided with the flexibility to choose PD opportunities and training that interests them. A support staff member described how she and her colleagues choose webinar programs that address important issues such as behavioral management. “We are able to pick a topic that we all agree upon, that we’d like to have the webinar on. So that’s really good,” she explained. Similarly, a support staff member described how their participation at a conference provided helpful insights as she began the school’s student-run morning show.

Family Engagement and Community Relationships

I think we do a good job of approaching parents in a positive way, encouraging them, asking them for their support, their views, their opinions — teacher

Building Trust with Families

Numerous educators commented on what they felt was a positive relationship between students’ families and the staff of MLK. One important strategy that educators described using to develop these bonds was through establishing trust and working collaboratively with the shared goal of supporting children. As one teacher put it, “Our parents here . . . are very open and very communicat[ive] because they want what’s best for their child, just like we do.” A district leader described family members as “partners” and felt that their support was indispensable to student success.

Rather than leaving family outreach to teaching staff alone, the school district has parent liaison/advocate positions to support family engagement and build trust between the schools and community. Home visits, attendance follow-ups, and connecting families to outside supports are all ways that liaisons work to meet the needs of students and their families. As community members themselves, liaisons are positioned well to build trust with families, and they understand the need to approach families in a nonjudgmental way in order to build positive relationship with them: “The very first thing, very important, you have to gain their trust. . . . We have to make them feel that we’re here for you, no matter what your situation is. We’re not here to judge you.”

Creating Special Supports for Newcomer Families

Recognizing that many family members in the district may still be learning English, educators in the school district draw on a number of resources to ensure that families feel included in the school community and are able to receive important information about their children. While

educators utilize interpreters and translation services to communicate with multilingual family members, the district also employs four “nationality workers” who speak the most common languages in the region other than English (including Spanish, Arabic, Burmese, Karen, Mai Mai, Somali, and Swahili). These workers, as a school leader explained, often know family members through the wider community and can lean on their preexisting relationships with families when they communicate with them about school-related matters. “They help us out quite a lot, and we appreciate that very much,” said one teacher.

Educators also explained the important role played by the Mohawk Valley Resource Center for Refugees (referred to simply as “the Center”). This agency provides newly arrived families with a cultural orientation, English-language instruction, and direct support for those seeking to access social services. The Center also partners with the district to host events and celebrations.

Utilizing Events to Engage Families

In addition to regular communications with family members through the ParentSquare application and newsletters, educators at MLK utilize a range of events to engage family members and encourage participation in the school community. Open houses, game nights, literacy nights, “movie month,” and a December book giveaway with a Santa visit are some of the examples mentioned by educators as engaging events that bring families to the school. An annual “multicultural night” is also held at the high school and features food from local restaurants, raffles, and performances from many of the diverse cultural groups residing in the city. One teacher described the night as “massive and amazing.” Another teacher explained how these events provide opportunities to showcase how “talented” the families of their students are.

In a Nutshell

Described by many educators as a “family,” the school culture of MLK is characterized by inclusivity and collaboration. Educators explained how they strive to celebrate the diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds of their students and ensure their identities and interests are represented in curricular offerings. While acknowledging the challenges of their students, educators at MLK maintain an ethos of high expectations for all students and academic rigor aligned with the latest standards from New York State. Alongside academics, MLK educators ensure that students’ social-emotional well-being and mental health needs are met through social-emotional learning programming, forms of restorative justice, and a Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) system, while also drawing on the supports and resources provided through community partnerships.

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