

NYKids 2026 Positive Outlier Elementary School Study



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New Visions Elementary School Case Study

Everybody matters. Every group matters. – district leader

What we're doing is working, and it's positively impacting our students. – 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; 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

Located on Long Island, only 25 miles from New York City, New Visions Elementary School is one of five elementary schools in the Freeport Union Free School District. Upon entering New Visions, one is greeted by flags from countries all over the world hanging from the ceiling and a long staircase that leads to the second floor of the building. Each morning, energetic music plays

while school leaders and educators welcome students into the building with high-fives, hugs, and applause. This tradition sets the tone for the the school day and reflects the priority set by leaders to make school an enjoyable place for students and staff alike.

New Visions is a racially and linguistically diverse school with a large number of African American students and over a quarter of their population classified as English learners. Educators at New Visions view the diverse cultures and languages of their students as assets and resources, and they utilize culturally responsive curricula to ensure that students from all backgrounds are represented and engaged. In addition, New Visions has strong ties to the surrounding community and, as the sections below illustrate, educators make concerted efforts to engage families, particularly those whose first language may not be English.

Student Demographics 2024-2025: New Visions Elementary School			
	New Visions Elementary School	Freeport UFSD	New York State
Grades Served	K-4	K-12	K-12
Total Enrollment	433	6,125	2,421,491
Economically Disadvantaged	70%	69%	60%
Students with Disabilities	15%	17%	20%
English Language Learners	27%	23%	12%
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution			
American Indian/Alaska Native	1%	1%	1%
Black or African American	22%	21%	15%
Hispanic/Latino	71%	71%	31%
Asian/Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	2%	1%	11%
White	3%	4%	39%
Multiracial	2%	2%	4%
Other	0%	0%	0%

New Visions Elementary School was selected as a particularly strong example of a positive outlier within a high-need, large suburban context. Classified as High-Need and located in a large suburban area, New Visions Elementary School demonstrated exceptionally high performance, with a combined academic z score¹ of 2.35 and an attendance z score of 2.04, resulting in a composite z score of 2.20. This level of consistent outperformance across both

¹ 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.

domains highlights this school as a critical case for understanding effective practices in high-need, linguistically diverse suburban settings.

Highlights

Attending to the Whole Child

I just really want to make sure that from the moment they come to us in pre-K, until students leave us, we are really doing the best that we can to make sure each year they're not just growing academically, but they're growing socially and emotionally, and that we're really setting them up to be able to make good decisions in their lives.

– superintendent

Educators and staff at New Visions collaborate to ensure their school is a caring space where students feel cared for holistically. While producing impressive academic outcomes are celebrated at New Visions, educators reported measuring student success largely in terms of growth and viewed social-emotional well-being as a prerequisite to learning. These values are evident in the many instructional supports provided to students in the form of specialists and teaching assistants as well as the numerous extracurricular programs and specials available to students before school.

Embedding Diversity into the Fabric of the School

The curriculum has to be responsive to student needs. We don't want anything that's a one-size-fits-all.

– district leader

The cultural and linguistic diversity of students and families at New Visions is not simply acknowledged; it is celebrated and viewed as a fundamental element of their school community. “Our philosophy is inclusive” noted a school leader, and this value is embedded deeply in the school, from culturally responsive curriculum and bilingual programming to the multicultural displays throughout hallways and classrooms. Educators at New Visions also make intentional efforts to ensure that families whose first language may not be English are included in the school community through direct outreach, translation, and culturally meaningful activities.

Creating a Positive School Environment for All

We're inviting a lot of energy coming in first thing, just to make sure that everybody's happy coming into work as well as coming into school – principal

Educators at New Visions have developed a warm and inviting school climate that, according to school leaders, contributes not only to the well-being of students but promotes staff retention and student attendance. In the words of one parent, “That’s what makes the building different . . . everybody feels welcome.” As the context above describes, students are greeted warmly each morning with music and hugs, and this feeling extends throughout the entire school day into afterschool activities and extracurriculars like a staff-student basketball game that educators were training for at the time of our visit.

A Closer Look

These three 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 findings within the context of the study's framework.

Culture, Climate and Community

They're outside the front of the school at pick up and drop off. They know every child. If I tell you, they know every child's name, face, where they belong. And it's amazing, because when I went to school eons ago, I didn't know who my principal was in elementary school.

- parent

Creating a Warm and Inviting School Culture for Staff, Students, and Families

Prioritizing the well-being of children and their families was also evident in the culture at New Visions, which can be observed right at the beginning of the school day. A typical morning for a student who attends New Visions entails a bright, exuberant entrance filled with music and warm welcomes from educators. School staff and leaders earnestly show up to welcome children at morning drop offs and see them off at dismissal every day. "When the child comes inside [the school], it's 'Good morning. How are you doing today?' They are so greeted, and you can see the love," said a parent.

While they aim to start each child's day on a positive note, New Vision leaders use these moments to be present for families as well. As the principal noted, "We make it a point, as you see, to be at morning arrivals and dismissal times because that's where we see a lot of our parents." New Visions leaders stress that being visible is a critical part of their job so they can build rapport and open communication with parents. Their presence extends to events where New Visions leaders take time to show up for the community even after a busy workday. A school leader recounted a recent event where he and the principal spent time "inviting everyone in, saying hello." He continued, "So they're seeing us. They're seeing us all the time. And we think that's really, really important." In addition, school leaders who live in the neighborhood find themselves running into children's families in places like the gym, recreation center, or even during Halloween. The New Visions principal noted their appreciation for the bonds they build with families through being embedded in their community: "So it's nice, I think, being a part of the community, living in the community, and they see me with different hats on."

The efforts by school leaders to develop a positive school culture have been made intentionally to support staff as well. The principal, for instance, explained how the culture of the school has ripple effects on staff satisfaction and instruction:

When we see our kids coming into school every day happy, when we see our staff coming in and having fun in the main office and just feeling good, you're going to see it in the classroom, right? Because that takes away a lot of other stresses that can impact scores and impact student work . . . teachers aren't going to do well if they don't feel good in front of their children.

Focusing on Growth for Every Student

Freeport educators largely discussed student success in individualized terms and used the word “growth” when they described assessing student performance. Although they acknowledged the importance of state assessments – and celebrated their impressive outcomes on these metrics – educators at Freeport also understood that student progress is sometimes missed in these measures. A district leader, for instance, felt that the district was “where we should be and headed in the right direction” on state measures, yet described student growth as crucial, even if “not always visible.” As a school leader added, “You have to also appreciate the progress that kids make.” To this end, educators at New Visions assess their students in varied ways to ensure students are provided targeted supports when needed while also utilizing data that demonstrate student growth. The principal explained this approach:

We are constantly making sure our students are growing throughout the year. So we’re always doing checkpoints with our teachers, analyzing assessments, analyzing data, reviewing that information with our staff, creating goals with our staff so that they understand what the next steps are for our children.

Making Sure Students Come to School

As described above, New Visions is a warm and inviting school that students are excited to attend. Educators credited the positive school culture not only for the strong academic performances of their students but also for the high rates of attendance, a metric that contributed to their identification as a positive outlier for this study. As the principal explained in regards to the exciting atmosphere of the school, “It also helps our attendance because they don’t want to stay home. They want to come here.” Other educators made similar comments; for example a district leader described New Visions as a “a place that students want to come. It’s a place where [students] value learning, and they’re excited to do it.” “All of us work really hard to try to do whatever we can to make learning fun; kids want to come in and learn and grow,” noted a teacher.

Although the fun climate of New Visions is often enough to entice students to come to school, a full-time attendance officer reaches out to families regularly if they notice a student is absent. “We’re starting early,” noted a school leader, who added that “supports are provided to get our kids back in the building” before absences accumulate.

Academic Learning and Programming

In a few short years, [our students] are the future. So how do we create these future-ready students? How do we make them globally aware? – district leader

Weaving Cultural Responsiveness into Pedagogy and Curriculum

At New Visions, diversity is not only recognized but it is celebrated, and the principle of cultural responsiveness guides instructional and curricular choices. A district leader, for instance,

described how choices are made to ensure that curricula used in Freeport schools are responsive to the diverse perspectives of the students they serve:

We looked at culturally responsive curriculum to make sure our students are represented, as well as [that] various perspectives are represented. . . . Who are the authors, what are the titles, who are the main characters, like, are we really representing the broad scope of [our] students?

The school district also has a Director of Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Education (CRSE) who is specifically dedicated to ensuring that “students see themselves within the curriculum,” as a district leader put it. The Director of CRSE also develops and manages a website with resources – articles, videos, and books – so that teachers from any grade level or content area throughout the district can incorporate diverse perspectives into their instruction. As a district leader noted, “Each month has every single celebration, every single acknowledgement, anything that you could possibly think of with curated resources . . .so teachers are not having to scatter themselves all over the place trying to find the materials.”

These values are clear to anyone entering New Visions, where the variety of cultures and languages of students and their families are displayed throughout the school; flags from countries around the world greet those who enter the building, and multicultural displays honoring Black inventors and signs with greetings in different languages are seen throughout the hallway. The multilingual abilities of their sizable and growing English Learner (EL) population is treated as an asset at New Visions, not a limitation. For instance, the school has a Dual Language program for each grade level where bilingual teachers instruct students in both Spanish and English on different days of the week. Educators noted that many families who do not speak Spanish at home enroll their students in this program and eventually seek the Seal of Biliteracy from New York State. “It’s an asset to have two languages, and it’s a gift that we can give to our native English speakers to learn from them,” said a district leader.

While the EL population of New Visions is predominantly Spanish speaking, educators make intentional efforts to ensure speakers of all languages are represented in the classroom. A district leader explained that educators value students’ home languages and seek to utilize them in instruction – regardless of what that language is: “What if a [student who] spoke Arabic is there [in the class]? Just think of how everyone else would be enriched seeing the characters written like that. You want to make sure that all of your students are included. There's no exclusivity in our classrooms.”

Making School Fun with Extracurricular Activities and Specials

Though proud of their achievement data, school leaders noted that their goals go beyond improving academic outcomes to making sure that students enjoy their time in school. “We have to make sure we find some way to inject some joy,” said one school leader. One way in which educators connect with children, keep them in school and engaged, and make school enjoyable is through a number of extracurricular activities and specials. Many of these activities – such as bucket drumming, fitness, basketball, and robotics – are available to students through a morning program that runs for an hour before school. Previously, these enrichment activities ran

alongside academic support programs after school, but the morning schedule was created to ensure that students did not have to choose between the two. “I felt like it was such a conflict for our students who needed that AIS [academic intervention services] support to have to choose . . . so we decided we’re going to move all enrichment programs in the morning so they can actually participate in both if they need to.”

Teachers noted how these activities benefited students in numerous ways. “You won’t know if you like something unless you try it,” explained one teacher. Another teacher described how activities such as basketball provide them with skills such as “critical thinking” and “teamwork.” “It makes the kids feel so good,” said one teacher, who referred to a student’s success with music. She added, “Some kids come to school for music, and if that is what gets them in the building, that’s great; then we can work on the other things.”

Creating Future-Ready Students through the “Portrait of a Graduate”

Leaders explained recent efforts to align curriculum and pedagogy across the district to meet New York State’s changing graduation requirements called “Portrait of a Graduate.” In keeping with the collaborative spirit of Freeport, district leaders invited feedback from educators throughout the district as well as community members as they developed their own version of the framework. As the principal explained, “They had all stakeholders a part of it. . . . Everyone had a voice when the district was creating the Portrait of a Graduate.”

A district leader explained how the impacts of these conversations resulted in a renewed emphasis on creating “future-ready students” at all levels throughout the district, including the elementary school:

It doesn’t start in the high school, right? What are some of the things that we can do instructionally in the elementary schools with the younger students to have them ready, or have them on that pathway . . . to hit those indicators?

Indeed, the push for Portrait of a Graduate was evident throughout New Visions to ensure that elementary-aged students became familiar with it. “It’s in every classroom; it’s in the hallways, it’s in the cafeteria, it’s in all common spaces,” said a district leader. A school leader described how the alignment of Portrait of a Graduate helped “reinforce” goals that were already emphasized in the school:

[Portrait of a Graduate] reinforced our objective of going beyond just rote learning . . . even Kindergartners can become critical thinkers if we’re posing . . . open-ended questions, letting them have discussions, letting them create their ideas. . . . [There’s]so much more to learning than just like memorization or doing a rote, rote computation.” We want kids to understand the meaning behind what they’re doing.

Social-Emotional Learning and Mental Health

Students have to feel and know that schools are a safe place. – district leader

Building a Culture of Emotional Safety

At Freeport, mental health is not viewed as a responsibility handled solely by counselors and psychologists but is embedded into everyday school life. School staff described emotional safety as the foundation of the district’s approach to mental health and behavioral support. Across interviews, staff emphasized that many students arrive at school carrying stress from home and need adults who can help them feel safe and supported before they can fully engage in learning. This commitment to relationship building was visible in everyday practices such as administrators riding school buses to support students and families, wellness spaces where students can decompress, and a schoolwide emphasis on helping students feel “seen” as one teacher put it. Together, these efforts reflect a belief that strong relationships are not separate from academic success but essential to it.

That culture of emotional safety is also reinforced through explicit instruction and staff development. Social workers were reported to regularly teach classroom lessons through programs such as Sources of Strength, while initiatives such as Sky Schools help students learn emotional regulation strategies and give them language for identifying and communicating feelings. Staff described these skills as being taught proactively rather than only in response to behavioral concerns, signaling that social-emotional learning is embedded in the district’s daily practice. Participants also noted that staff receive ongoing professional learning in restorative practices, de-escalation, power struggles, suicidal ideation, and difficult conversations, along with coaching from specialists who model strategies in classrooms. In this way, the district treats emotional safety as something that must be intentionally taught, practiced, and sustained across adults and settings.

Replacing Punishment with Restoration, Regulation, and Student Agency

District leaders described a clear shift away from punitive discipline toward approaches that prioritize restoration, regulation, and student ownership. Administrators reported substantial declines in suspensions after implementing restorative practices, including one school moving from approximately 30 suspensions in a year to zero. Rather than removing students from school, staff use restorative conversations to help students reflect on the impact of their actions, hear others’ perspectives, and participate in “repairing harm,” as a district leader put it. This approach reflects a broader philosophy that behavioral concerns should be addressed through accountability and relationship building rather than exclusion. A school leader explained how restorative practices move away from “punitive behavior management” and instead put “kids at the center of . . . resolving their conflict.”

This philosophy also shaped how the district responds when students became emotionally or behaviorally dysregulated. Wellness rooms, calming spaces, and classroom-based regulation supports give students a place to pause, process, and return to instruction when ready instead of being sent out of class as punishment. Staff described these spaces as places where students could “regulate emotions” with dignity – as one teacher put it – and receive support from trained adults. The district also extends this restorative approach by positioning students as problem solvers and leaders. Participants described peer mediation programs in which trained fourth-

grade students help younger peers navigate minor conflicts, reinforcing the idea that students can take active roles in resolving problems, building empathy, and strengthening school climate.

Serving as a Community Mental Health Hub

Participants portrayed the district as functioning as a hub for student and family mental health needs, not just as a place of instruction. Schools employ social workers, psychologists, behaviorists, and support staff who provide counseling, consultation, crisis response, and classroom-based services, and participants noted that additional social workers had been added to elementary schools in recent years. These internal supports allow the district to respond quickly to a wide range of needs while also helping teachers and families navigate concerns. In this sense, the district's role extends beyond academics to include direct support for student well-being.

At the same time, the district relies on partnerships with outside providers to extend care beyond what schools can offer internally. Collaborations with organizations such as Northwell Health and Cohen's Children's Medical Center create what a district leader described as a "direct pipeline to services," helping families connect to treatment more quickly and reducing delays in care. Participants also emphasized the importance of proactive identification systems, including Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) processes, ongoing data review, multidisciplinary teams, and technology monitoring that alerts staff when students search for self-harm or suicide-related content on school devices. Together, these systems reflect a preventive approach in which early identification, coordinated response, and access to external treatment are treated as essential parts of supporting student well-being.

Educator Preparation, Support, and Organizational Capacity

[Leaders] ... don't switch us up on the fly. They know our strengths and where we'll work best.
— teacher

Using Teaching Assistants and Specialists to Support Instruction

According to leaders at New Visions, a major factor contributing to their successful outcomes is the efficient use of additional instructional staff to support instruction. One example mentioned by the principal is the use of reading and math specialists and teaching assistants to push into classrooms throughout the school. These staff members don't simply "check homework," as the principal explained; they are "delivering small-group instruction alongside classroom teachers." After witnessing the progress made when reading specialists began to push into Kindergarten classrooms, school leaders extended this configuration to first grade and saw similar gains.

While leaders explained the importance of keeping students in the classroom as often as possible, the unique layout of the school building provides many options to assist students who may require additional support. For instance, small nooks throughout the halls provide spaces where teaching assistants and AIS teachers can meet with small groups of students outside of the

classroom. As the principal explained, “We use every single space in our building when we have to provide small group instruction.”

Distributing Leadership and Welcoming Feedback

While not shying away from making tough decisions, leaders at New Visions articulated a vision of distributed leadership that welcomes feedback from teachers and treats them as professionals capable of doing their jobs without micromanaging. “You have to trust your staff to do what’s best for kids, and I think we do,” said the principal. In focus groups, teachers validated this approach, as several said they felt that their voices are “heard” by leaders. “We can go to our administrators easily to say we have a concern,” one explained. Another teacher felt that leaders trust in their staff and don’t attempt to “fix things that aren’t broken.”

District leaders echoed a similar approach, collaborating not only with school-level leaders but teaching staff as well. As one district leader noted, decisions made by leaders at Freeport are never “singular.” “We’ve always been a very collaborative group from like district leaders down to our building leaders,” said another district leader. The superintendent likewise explained how teachers are “comfortable” reaching out to her “because they feel that they’ll be heard.” She continued, “I listen to those around me. I try to understand where they’re coming from.”

Promoting Collaboration through Common Planning Time

While content area teachers were able to meet during the school day when their students were in specials (such as physical education, music, art, or library), a school leader noticed that it was not providing “the level of collaboration that we might have expected.” In response, school leaders created an extra period per week of common planning time during which teachers meet as a grade-level team. As a school leader put it, “Schools don’t move unless teachers are collaborating and working together.” The principal explained that these periods are sometimes used for particular purposes such as goal setting, learning to use new applications, or analyzing data, while at other times educators can use this time to simply “talk about . . . how lessons are going or what next week is looking like.” A school leader described the “positive impact” this additional time has had on teachers, “[School leaders] have gotten so much positive feedback from teachers like, ‘Thank you. Thank you for giving us this time to collaborate.’” Teachers, too, commented on the utility of this time to “share ideas,” as one teacher put it. “Nobody is working in isolation,” said another.

Family Engagement and Community Relationships

I think we move mountains to make sure parents feel like they have the power to help.
— teacher

Consciously Connecting School to a Multicultural and Diverse Community

New Visions educators make a collective effort to ensure that school resources are tangible for their diverse, multicultural community. These conscious intentions are reflected in culturally

responsive strategies that celebrate the milieu of backgrounds comprising the “Freeport Family” and thoughtfully meet students’ critical needs.

Events held at New Visions aim to uplift the children and families who represent the diverse demographic of the district. One district leader described in detail a multicultural event that takes place every October:

We are a very diverse school, very diverse community, so the parents and even teachers get involved, too, bring a dish from their home country or their culture, and we have the entire gym lined up with all this different food. And you go around and you try food that you’ve never thought you were going to try before, from a culture you’ve never heard of, or you never would even imagine trying something from. And the kids get involved, and they dress up in their cultural heritage, and it’s great.

Another noteworthy occasion is Family Literacy Night, where this year’s theme aimed to draw attention to the multiple languages and passports of the world. Holidays from many cultures are also honored in the district through food-centered festivities and decorations. Districtwide community events also bring Freeport families together, as community members gather for an annual Peace march and commemorate Black History and Hispanic Heritage months through celebratory concerts.

With the variety of events and activities that bridge school and community, Freeport leaders utilize mindful strategies to welcome parents who do not speak English as their first language. For instance, leaders ensure Spanish-speaking translators are available during community events and parent teacher conferences, while promotional flyers as well as information via the ParentSquare application can be translated in multiple languages. These inclusive approaches transfer to classrooms, where teachers are encouraged to be actively mindful of their students’ religious and cultural backgrounds to adequately meet their learning needs.

The Highly Active and Embedded Parent Teacher Association

The Parent Teacher Association (PTA) at New Visions is known for its visible involvement in everyday school and community life. The PTA is deeply engrained within the functions of New Visions and provides support for events that uphold the values of the district, including learning, inclusion, and supporting student and staff needs. New Visions leaders collaborate with the PTA and consistently welcome the team into the school for planning and participation in classroom activities. In reflecting on their presence in school, one parent commented:

They’re so used to seeing us every day, almost. If it’s not for five minutes, it’s not picking up something, delivering something, making copies, doing something. . . . [We’re] just weaved into the fabric of the building at this point. And we’re like, if they have an assembly, I’m going to be there. I’m going to support. It doesn’t matter if it’s Kindergarten, I’m going to be there to support.

Through their steady partnership with New Visions leaders and staff, the PTA brings events to the community that tie into the curriculum and foster growth. As one parent noted, “It’s really about this cohesiveness, where all is one. So what they’re teaching in the classroom, how can we back it up, and how can we repeat it?” Additional PTA-sponsored events aim to support the whole child by inviting parents and caregivers in and focusing on areas that span from math skills, fine-motor development, to providing food for children and families.

Proactive and Egalitarian Communication with Family Members

At New Visions, families are invited into school as equal partners, and school leaders ensure that their concerns are heard. New Vision leaders also strive to stay ahead of engagement through practices that focus on building relationships while applying an approach that combines empathy and responsiveness. A school leader elaborated on how they communicate with families:

So just greeting parents with warmth on the phone or in person is so, so important. . . . There’s something about schools where, if you remember being a kid and if a school was a scary place for you, it might be as an adult. . . . You’re coming into your child’s school and you might feel like you’re being judged, you might feel uneasy. So we try to disarm parents and kids as much as possible by just greeting them with warmth and friendliness. And it goes a long way. It really does.

This communication style reverberates among school staff in their prompt correspondence with parents and caregivers via the ParentSquare App, through which information about the goings on at school is frequently shared. A systematic approach is also applied to encourage attendance: a dedicated staff member who has formed a close-knit and no-nonsense connection with parents takes daily charge of contacting the families of children who are absent. Additionally, school- and districtwide programs are foregrounded in forward-thinking and equity-oriented parent outreach. These initiatives include “Parent Universities” and the bridge program, in which family members can physically come to school to learn with their children, as well as school tours for new Kindergarten and first grade families.

In a Nutshell

New Visions Elementary School is characterized by a warm and welcoming school environment that creates positive experiences for students and staff. Educators at New Visions celebrate the diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds of their students through culturally responsive curriculum, multilingual displays, and a Dual Language program that treats bilingualism as an asset. Student well-being is prioritized at New Visions through social-emotional learning programs and restorative practices. In addition to rigorous instruction, students have access to enrichment programs such as robotics, bucket drumming, and basketball to inject joy into their school day. Lastly, families are treated as collaborators and empowered through a range of multicultural events and intentional outreach efforts facilitated by a robust PTA.

New Visions Elementary School
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