

NYKids 2026 Positive Outlier Elementary School Study



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Philadelphia Primary School Case Study

If you walk up and down the halls of this school . . . it's not a lot of fluff. The teachers are constantly instructing.
- principal

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

Philadelphia Primary School (Philly) is situated within the Indian River Central School District (IRCSD), which spreads across 284 square miles of land just below the Canadian border. Someone travelling through this northern region of New York can expect to witness expansive views of farm country and the occasional Amish Buggy headed up the road. Notwithstanding the palpable rural characteristics of Indian River, the district is described by educators as uniquely diverse, as it is home to the Fort Drum military base and its families – with children from various parts of the country and world attending Indian River schools alongside children whose families have lived in the district for generations.

While individuals from a blend of backgrounds comprise Indian River, a significant portion of staff members grew up in the community and work with pride and commitment to the district. New hires from outside the area are consciously woven in among long-standing locals, bringing fresh perspectives and experiences that foment an atmosphere of open-mindedness. Furthermore, educators are supported in their professional careers through a range of resources the district draws on – one illustration of their dedication to student-centered learning and growth.

A person who walks through the doors of Philly itself will encounter a small, tight-knit environment that one parent described as a “safe and calm atmosphere that feels like home.” In a place where all kids are warmly greeted when they walk through the door, belongingness is a main priority. Many Philly students come from families with longstanding generational ties to the local region, while the primary school is also home to children and families who have more recently arrived through the military base. With this convergence of diverse backgrounds, each child is embraced as a staple member of the Philly community. The devotion to inclusivity and strong bonds with the community tie cohesively with a structured and data-driven approach to supporting the whole child. With implementing newer systems like Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), consistently drawing on evidence through Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), and leaning on coaching for high quality instruction – educators foster student thriving through social-economic challenges and significant mental, social-emotional, and behavioral needs.

Student Demographics 2024-2025: Philadelphia Primary School			
	Philadelphia Primary School	Indian River Central School District	New York State
Grades Served	K-3	K-12	K-12
Total Enrollment	122	3,308	2,421,491
Economically Disadvantaged	64%	52%	60%
Students with Disabilities	20%	18%	20%
English Language Learners	0%	4%	12%
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution			
American Indian/Alaska Native	2%	0%	1%
Black or African American	5%	8%	15%
Hispanic/Latino	8%	16%	31%
Asian/Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	0%	2%	11%
White	78%	65%	39%
Multiracial	7%	8%	4%
Other	0%	0%	0%

Philadelphia Primary School was selected for our study due to its relatively higher performance within a high-needs rural school district. Given its demographic profile, Philadelphia met the criteria for stronger academic performance and attendance rates relative to demographically similar peer schools.

Highlights

Student-Centered, Relationship-Driven Community

It's a welcoming environment for parents as well [as students]. Our principal does an amazing job of welcoming all parents to come in if needed. – support staff

Our analysis found that a student-first orientation, grounded in a close-knit community, is a defining strength of Philly Primary. Within a smaller school context, opportunities for authentic human connection are amplified, allowing students to be known, valued, and supported as individuals. This emphasis extends beyond academics to include intentional attention to social-emotional development, with structures that give students time and space to connect with one another. Such an approach reflects a broader commitment to whole-child development, where fostering belonging and relational trust is viewed as essential to student success.

Focus on Staff Empowerment and Strategic Resource Allocations

We have a lot of resources to choose from. – principal

Another key finding underscores the importance of distributed ownership among staff for meeting students' needs, where educators are entrusted to carry out their roles without excessive monitoring or micromanagement. Leaders' practices prioritize building strong initial connections between staff and students while creating an environment in which teachers feel supported rather than controlled. This balance of trust and accountability empowers educators to respond effectively to student needs, reinforcing a culture of professionalism and collaboration.

Adaptive, Context-Responsive Leadership

A huge piece of that [meeting all students' needs] is going to be staff training, both classroom teachers as well as paraprofessionals . . . it's training for librarians and art teachers and phys. ed and everybody else in the area of supporting students. – superintendent

Our research further reveals that openness to trying new approaches is central to effective leadership in this setting, particularly given its rural and high-needs context combined with notable diversity brought by serving military families. Leaders spoke to a willingness to critically examine existing practices and use internal expertise to enhance organizational capacity as well as seek out external professional learning to fill gaps. By embracing innovative approaches and inviting fresh ideas, the district and school are able to respond dynamically to emerging challenges.

A Closer Look

These characteristics (student-centered, relationship-driven community, a focus on staff empowerment, and strategic resource allocations; and adaptive, context-responsive leadership) 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

Global Community as a Learning Asset

We learn from our students as much as they learn from us . . . they bring experiences from all over the world.
– district leader

The Indian River CSD community is shaped by its proximity to a military base, which offers a globally connected learning environment within a rural setting. Indian River students come from diverse geographic and cultural backgrounds, with more than 20 languages sometimes represented, bringing lived experiences that enrich the learning environment. About 18% of Philly Primary School students are children of military personnel (lower than the average in many of the other IRCSD schools). Nonetheless, the mobility and diversity military families bring to the school were described as assets that offer opportunities to celebrate patriotic events such as April’s “Month of the Military Child.”

Family-Like Culture and Strong Relationships

It [the school] really gives that small, rural family vibe . . . we’re just like a big family.
– support staff

Philly Primary was described as having a deeply relational school climate, consistently portrayed as family oriented, welcoming, and cohesive. Staff and parents interviewed expressed experiencing the school as a tightly knit community where everyone knows one another and shares responsibility for student well-being. This sense of commitment and belonging is reinforced through daily practices—such as greeting every student—and extended to all adults in the building, from teachers to custodians—collective care. The small size of the school enhances communication, collaboration, and consistency, enabling educators to know the whole child and align supports across grade levels. Parents echoed this perspective, noting that safety, comfort, and inclusivity form the foundation for student success and engagement, making the environment both academically and emotionally supportive.

Comprehensive Support and Student-Centered Equity Focus

We put students first. – district leader

The third finding in this line of inquiry centers on a strong, systemic commitment to meeting students’ holistic needs through equitable supports. The district prioritizes “students first” as a guiding principle, shaping decisions about instruction, resource allocations, and interventions—even during disruptions such as the pandemic. Equity is embedded in the district’s mission and operationalized through staffing, grant funding, and collaborative practices such as coteaching

and integrated special education services. Additionally, the school functions as a community hub, providing resources like weekend food programs, counseling referrals, enrichment opportunities via partnerships, and family engagement events to address academic and nonacademic needs. This comprehensive support system reflects a whole-child approach, where learning is inseparable from well-being, ensuring that all students experience the conditions necessary to thrive.

Academic Learning and Programming

Early Literacy and Whole-Child Foundations

We started with one school, then we expanded it to two schools, and now we've expanded it [literacy-learning routines] to all of our Kindergarten teachers for the first eight weeks. We really asked [them] to slow down, provide center work, where the students are able to work on skills that are needed within that classroom.
— district leader

The district's strong emphasis on enhancing early literacy paired with whole-child development, particularly in the early grades, was evident in Philly. Recognizing increased variability in readiness—especially after the pandemic—the district redesigned Kindergarten instruction to include a “full court press” model, as a district leader put it, where multiple educators support students intensively during the first weeks of school. Instruction combines foundational literacy skills (e.g., phonics, book handling, comprehension) with social-emotional learning, communication, and play-based experiences that build motor and interpersonal skills. This approach reflects an understanding that academic success depends on developmental readiness, and early interventions have shown promising results, including reduced summer learning loss and stronger long-term skill retention. The focus on literacy remains aligned with state priorities while adapting to students' evolving needs.

Intentional Intervention Systems

We're very intentional . . . we start small, collect data, and adjust interventions based on what students need.
— district leader

In order to meet children's diverse learning needs, Philly teachers have been provided professional learning opportunities to enhance their abilities to offer MTSS's Tier 1 classroom strategies (provided to all students in general education settings) and collaborate with instructional coaches through stakeholder meetings to analyze student performance data and design targeted supports. If students do not make progress, teachers move systematically into more intensive tiered supports, with ongoing data collection informing each decision. Assessment practices reinforce this approach, including benchmarking multiple times per year, use of longitudinal data tracking across grade levels, and use of real-time intervention data—the communication of which is supported by the small school environment.

Balancing Supports and Enrichment Opportunities

You have to meet students where they are and build from there, not just expect grade-level performance right away.
– teacher

The district's challenge to offer rigorous instruction with differentiated supports and enrichment opportunities is a common one. While teachers spoke to implementing standards-aligned curricula and effective interventions, they, as well as parents, also reported the need for more enrichment opportunities. The school offers enrichment through extracurriculars (e.g., Lego/robotics, reading clubs) and allocates time during the school day for both intervention and extension of learning, yet as one teacher explained,

I think the lower [-performing] kids are getting the help they need, and ... with a smaller school, it's easier to say, "Oh, can you look at so and so?" Or "Can you screen so and so?" Like, staff are very accommodating, but yeah, the higher-end kids who could use a little challenge, a little more challenge, aren't quite thriving as much as they could be.

While challenges remain to strike that balance between supporting advanced learners and addressing learning gaps, the overall approach at Philly Primary reflects a comprehensive approach to meeting children where they are.

Social-Emotional Learning and Mental Health

Getting Down to the Basic Needs: Prioritizing Well-Being to Support Learning

Philly educators are adapting to growing social, emotional, and mental health needs that impact young children's learning and development. Recognizing the diverse challenges children face, school and district leaders have made conscious efforts to regroup and center the needs of students in their care. This manifests as an embrace of slowing down and understanding that young learners thrive best in the classroom when they can access, first and foremost, critical support for their overall well-being. Speaking to their strategies, the superintendent reflected,

So we really want them to be comfortable, happy and as solid and consistent as they can be in their school time, from a social-emotional standpoint. That way, they're then an open vessel for us to bring that learning about.

Aligning with their efforts to focus on core needs, district leaders increased their physical and personnel resources to build up supports in school to assist educators:

I would say there's also probably an increase in behaviors of kids [who] can't regulate their emotions. The district passed a budget to add a social worker, so that's how I got this position. So they're adding more support staff so that there's more consistency and support to address needs.
– support staff

Flexibility alongside Systematic Interventions

We don't have to send "Tamra" out every time she does this. How about we just let her stay in the back of the classroom and wiggle. – district leader

With the increase in support to address rising needs came the adoption of malleable management strategies over traditional measures of discipline. The last theme in this section speaks to educator practices that embrace students on different levels and respond adaptively to behaviors. In Philly, educators aim to reduce classroom disruptions and foster inclusion. This willingness to meet students where they



Figure 1. Philly Star Commitments

are at reverberates through the school's implementation of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), which include the "Philly Star" as a guide. Staff members reference each point of this star and circle which strength (i.e. "Progress") they have observed a student achieving in. Each week students who have received a "Philly Star" get to look forward to their names being drawn for the "Super Student" of the week.

Reflecting on the process of integrating PBIS into the primary school, the principal noted the openness to trying a new system for behavioral supports with a lens of introspection – ultimately sticking with what students respond well to:

PBIS, I think you can find research that it works, and you can also find research that it doesn't work. And our kids seem to really like it. Our schools, you know, it seems that they [students] thrive off of getting some of [these] positive rewards. So, it's working.

All Hands on Deck for Positive Behavior and Development

I work the cafeteria for lunch duty and breakfast duty, and it's always the support from the classroom teacher. So if we're having an issue, I tell the teacher, and they fully support. And, you know, I just tell them, and then I feel the support from the classroom teacher no matter [what]. – support staff

Prioritizing children’s well-being and applying interventions to support their social, emotional, mental health, and behavioral needs is not siloed to specific areas and professions. Responsibilities for caring for student needs are dispersed throughout the building, with the close-knit structure of the environment lending itself to a collective approach where staff can communicate about students and leverage one another’s efforts. This all-in method can also be seen in policies like “Check In and Check Out,” where assigned staff have all eyes and ears on students’ day-to-day progress – forming connections with students and sharing critical feedback with one another.

Educator Preparation, Support, and Organizational Capacity

Robust Professional Development and Teacher Voice

Every professional development I’ve asked for, I’ve never had a “no.” . . . It’s always “go grow and bring it back to everyone else.” – teacher

The district’s heavy investment in professional development (PD) is a key strategy for educator retention and capacity building. Teachers have access to extensive PD opportunities throughout the year, including summer curriculum projects, coaching cycles, and external conferences, the options for which are often shaped directly by teacher input through surveys and proposals. This responsiveness to staff need is complemented by a data-informed approach that identifies areas of need and aligns PD to improve instructional practice.

Leadership for Autonomy with Support and Expectations

They let you do your job . . . but if you need support, the door is always open. – teacher

One way to characterize the leadership approach in Philly Primary is that it balances autonomy with clear expectations. Teachers and support staff reported that they are trusted to lead their own work while having consistent access to administrators, instructional coaches, and colleagues across the district when needed. Leaders intentionally create “ladders of opportunity,” said the superintendent, encouraging staff to take on new roles, pilot initiatives, and contribute to decision-making processes. At the same time, the district promotes collaboration through mentoring structures, including formal mentor/mentee systems and informal peer support, particularly in smaller school settings like Philly, where staff often take on multiple roles. This autonomy, balanced with support, is accompanied by clear expectations for the serious business of teaching and learning.

Strategic Recruitment and Comprehensive Staff Supports

You want somebody that’s going to come to work on time, have a strong work ethic, get along well with others. But I really do think the biggest thing for me is just seeing that level of passion for their field. – district leader

The third finding in this line of inquiry focuses on strategic recruitment alongside comprehensive supports designed to sustain educators in the profession. While the district faces challenges

common to the field—such as shortages in specialized areas and post-pandemic workforce shifts—it actively recruits through partnerships, social media outreach, and “grow-your-own” pipelines linked to local colleges. Hiring priorities emphasize passion, openness to new ideas, and commitment to student success, aligning with the district’s mission-driven culture. Retention efforts extend beyond hiring to include employee assistance programs, strong benefits, flexible leave policies, and intentional efforts to balance internal promotion with external hiring to maintain fresh perspectives. Together, these strategies have created a system that not only attracts educators but also supports their well-being and long-term engagement.

Family Engagement and Community Relationships

Building Community after Disruptions

As in many schools across the state, the Covid-19 pandemic caused significant interruptions to schooling that created obstacles to family and community engagement. Philly educators recounted adjusting to the decrease in face-to-face parent connection that limited parent-school collaboration through the years. One teacher explained,

I think that with Covid, I know that you had mentioned that earlier, and how that kind of put a damper on what we expected education to be . . . because they [school or district leaders] had to cut off a lot of parents coming in and community coming in. I think that that’s one of [principal]’s goals he’s kind of reiterated quite a few times -- is getting that collaboration back.

Nevertheless, the primary school’s staff and leaders have made concerted strides to bolster school-family-community engagement by bringing back activities and organizing new events through the school. A featured event, “Kids Night Out,” or KNO, has become an evening occasion cherished by kids, families, and staff alike:

Yeah, we have kind of brought back a few events that we had done before, and then introduced new events like, we call it KNO, Kids Night Out. It’s on a Friday night. Kids get to stay for an extra two hours. We serve them dinner. We have lots of activities for them. We also encourage parents to participate as chaperones, so they facilitate certain events -- just to get that community connection going.

– teacher

Close-Knit Atmosphere Fosters Comfort and Honest Communication

I’m very low key on, like, if a parent wants to come in the building to drop off cupcakes or go see the nurse, like, go ahead. This is your community. – principal

While Philly educators have made strides to boost school-community events, the size and position of the school itself contribute to the family-like environment. To that end, as Philly functions as a central hub for the community, staff and leaders establish natural, personal

connections with parents and caregivers through open conversations and inviting them through the doors. Families are embraced in everyday activities and treated as equal partners in their children's education. Parents thus speak to feeling secure when talking to teachers about a variety of topics regarding their children. One Philly teacher (who is also a parent) reflected:

We have an open door policy at our school. I think parents do feel comfortable even talking about things that are very uncomfortable. They still feel that they can come and talk about things for their child, whether that's, you know, things that they're expecting academically with their children, or even, like, genuine personal like, well-being things. They really, I think, feel comfortable coming and talking to any of our staff.

Community Action to Support the Whole Child

We've got a history of layered grants, with everything from a STEM focus to an ELA focus to social economics focus and lots of different things. Those grants allowed us to partner to a stronger degree with some of the BOCES programs, such as . . . our licensed clinical social worker approach and also. . . our ranks of counseling and counseling support across the district . . .[and] some after school programming and tutoring.
– district leader

Philadelphia Primary is a backbone of the community and serves its students' and families' needs through the informal bonds educators have established. Zooming out to the broader ecology, the Philly family is further supported through a network of resources that rally around children's well-being and development. This system includes a range of partnerships and grants that cover various learning and enrichment opportunities, early childhood education programs, support for mental health, social and emotional needs, and any struggles within family environments. Additionally, children and their families who experience economic disadvantages are provided extra assistance accessing food outside of school time through initiatives like the school's backpack program.

In a Nutshell

Philly Primary's small size enables a deeply student-centered, relationship-driven community in which students and families feel welcomed and known, and where social-emotional development is intentionally prioritized alongside academics. This relational foundation is complemented by a culture of staff empowerment, in which educators are trusted to exercise professional judgment, share responsibility for student success, and leverage available resources without excessive oversight, which fosters collaboration and ownership. Underpinning both collaboration and ownership is a flexible, context-responsive leadership approach that encourages continuous learning and improvement—investing in broad-based staff training, drawing on internal expertise, and remaining open to innovation to meet the needs of a diverse and evolving student population. Together, these elements create an environment that is not only supportive and inclusive but also adaptable and resilient in addressing challenges.

Philadelphia Primary School
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