

NYKids 2026 Positive Outlier Elementary School Study



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Poland Elementary School Case Study

I think the minute we start finding students that don't want to come to school, that's where we have a major problem. We can't reach those students as easily when they don't want to be here, but as long as we can get them through those doors, that is the most important thing.

- 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 focuses attention on four main lines of inquiry: academic learning and programming; social emotional learning and youth mental health; educator preparation, support, and organizational capacity; and family engagement and community relationships.

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

School Context

The Poland Central School District is geographically large, covering approximately 480 square miles. It is the third largest school district in New York State by land area, although it serves a relatively small enrollment of about 533 students in its two schools: an elementary school that serves grades PK-5 and the Middle School-High School (MS-HS) that serves Grades 6-12.

The district is situated within a small, rural, and relatively stable community in central NY characterized by deep intergenerational ties. Enrollment has declined over time, with educator reports noting a “huge decrease in enrollment” and graduating classes shrinking from “60–70 kids” (staff) to the smallest class being 34 in the 2025-26 school year. However, the student population itself remains largely nontransient.

Socioeconomically, the school serves a broad spectrum of needs, with historically significant levels of poverty (which are often under reported according to locals), yet these conditions have not translated into deficit-oriented thinking among staff, who instead emphasize empathy and action to support students and families in need.

Student Demographics 2024-2025: Poland Elementary School			
	Poland Elementary School	Poland Central School District	New York State
Grades Served	K-5	K-12	K-12
Total Enrollment	216 (K-5)	467	2,421,491
Economically Disadvantaged	43%	40%	60%
Students with Disabilities	12%	14%	20%
English Language Learners	0%	0%	12%
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution			
American Indian/Alaska Native	0%	0%	1%
Black or African American	0%	0%	15%
Hispanic/Latino	3%	3%	31%
Asian/Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	0%	0%	11%
White	95%	94%	39%
Multiracial	2%	3%	4%
Other	0%	0%	0%

Poland Elementary school was selected as a case representing a positive outlier school within a high-need rural context. Classified as located in a distant rural area, Poland ES serves a student population in which 43% of students are economically disadvantaged and 14% are identified as students with disabilities. The student body is predominantly White (95%), with small proportions of Hispanic/Latino and multiracial students. Poland ES students’ academic performance z score¹ was 1.07 and its student attendance z score, 1.33. As a result, Poland

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.

provides an important example of how sustained success can be achieved in a geographically isolated, high-need rural setting

Highlights

Relational Focus as the Foundation of Learning

Teachers have a lot of pride in what they are doing. -teacher

One feature that stood out is the school's strong emphasis on relationships as the foundation for student success. Small class sizes and stable staffing allow educators to build deep, sustained connections with students, which in turn supports engagement, attendance, and individualized learning. This relational approach is not incidental but structural—enabled by low student-teacher ratios and a community in which staff often know students both in and outside of school. Pride in both the profession and the community reinforces this connection, creating a culture where educators are highly invested in student well-being and academic outcomes. This relational foundation is not just a cultural strength but a key condition that makes other instructional and support practices effective.

Structures That Promote Engagement and Physical and Mental Wellness

We are a unique district . . . a Pre-K - 12 district, all on one campus. – district leader

The school's organizational structures are intentionally designed to promote student engagement and physical and mental wellness. A slightly longer school day includes daily physical education and recess for children in PK-5. Educators associate these consistent opportunities for movement to readiness to learn and see them as contributing to both academic and social success. In addition, in recent years social-emotional learning (SEL) lessons have been built into the schedule, signaling institutional commitment to children's developing social-emotional competencies. Supports are similarly embedded and responsive, relying on strong relationships and readily available personnel rather than a formal tiered system, reflecting how the school's small scale allows flexibility and immediacy in addressing student needs.

Community-Centered Culture with a Strong and Evolving Family Engagement Approach

The school is the hub of our community. - parent

The school functions as the social and cultural center of the community, fostering a familial climate that supports both student and staff engagement. This sense of belonging is reinforced by multigenerational ties, shared experiences, and a collective investment in children's success, contributing to relational trust between families and school and district staff. While family engagement is clearly valued and facilitated by these strong relationships, it is also shaped by structural constraints such as geographic distance, transportation challenges, and shifts in family support systems following COVID-19. As a result, extracurricular opportunities are often community driven, especially through youth sports and local organizations, rather than through

school-based programming. Despite these limitations, the school’s deep community roots and culture of pride continue to sustain a supportive, engaging environment for students.

A Closer Look

These highlights (deeply relational, community-centered culture—supported by small class sizes, intentional structures like an extended day and daily physical education, and responsive family engagement strategies) 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

Continuity and Shared Commitments

So rural schools can have a different set of needs than maybe your city schools or your wealthier school districts. So, I don't feel I've ever been put in a position where I'm being judged by my administration, or I'm being judged by my colleagues. . . . we're a team in this. - teacher

A defining feature of the school context is its tightly knit social fabric. Interviewed teachers consistently described the school as “close knit” where “everybody knows everybody” and relationships extend beyond school walls and across generations. Many educators are themselves alumni or long-term community members—“we grew up here, we graduated from here . . . and now our kids are here,” said one teacher—which reinforces continuity and shared commitment. This relational density supports strong communication and collaboration and fosters a sense of belonging described by one parent as “a big kind of extended family.” The school also benefits from small class sizes, often below 15 students, enabling personalized attention and relationship building that supports both academic engagement and attendance.

Prepared, Productive, and Proud and the Hub of the Community

[We are] student centered. Our motto is being prepared, productive, proud. It really sums it up. We try to make it simple and always go back to that. Are we preparing kids to be lifelong learners, productive and proud, whatever that is, and how does that look in our day-to-day? – support staff

The school functions as a central gathering place within the broader community, both socially and organizationally. It is widely viewed as “the hub of the community,” said a teacher, hosting events, extracurriculars, and cross-grade interactions that connect students from Pre-K through high school on a single campus. A shared mission—“prepared, productive, and proud”—anchors the school’s culture and is reinforced through recognition systems, assemblies, and daily practices. At the same time, school staff prioritize holistic student support, with access to counseling, social workers and community-based health resources, and a strong emphasis on ensuring “everyone has everything that they need,” according to a staff member. Overall, the

school context reflects a rural district that leverages strong relationships, stability in staff, and a collaborative culture to support students amid economic and geographic challenges.

Academic Learning and Programming

So last year, we started a new curriculum within our ELA program, so that has been our big focus . . . just continuing the success of that and making sure the teachers have all those resources.

— school leader

Academic programming at the elementary level reflects a period of active refinement shaped by recent instructional and organizational changes. Staff described a multiyear effort to update literacy practices, expand universal screening, and introduce new structures such as What I Need Now (WINN) to support intervention and enrichment. These shifts are closely connected to state guidance, particularly the 2024 New York State Literacy Briefs, and represent progress toward more systematic and data-informed approaches to instruction. At the same time, educators pointed to the complexity of implementation, including adjustments to new materials, evolving expectations for data use, and the need to balance teacher autonomy with increased coordination and oversight across classrooms. Staff described consistent communication across grade levels as a way to bridge gaps in instruction and better prepare students for transitions between grades.

Shift to Evidence-Based Literacy Instruction

So it was kind of like that shift . . . from whole language to science of reading . . . instead of basing it [instruction] on feelings and thoughts. We have to now base it on data.

— teacher

A central feature of the academic program is its ongoing shift toward evidence-based literacy instruction. Staff described implementing approaches grounded in the Science of Reading (SoR), supported, in part, by the 2024 New York State Literacy Briefs. This includes expanded use of universal screeners, greater attention to phonics and phonemic awareness in early grades, and increasing reliance on data to guide instruction and intervention. These changes have required substantial adjustments in practice, particularly in grades K–2, where new resources and instructional routines have been introduced. This transition reflects efforts to strengthen instructional coherence and improve student outcomes.

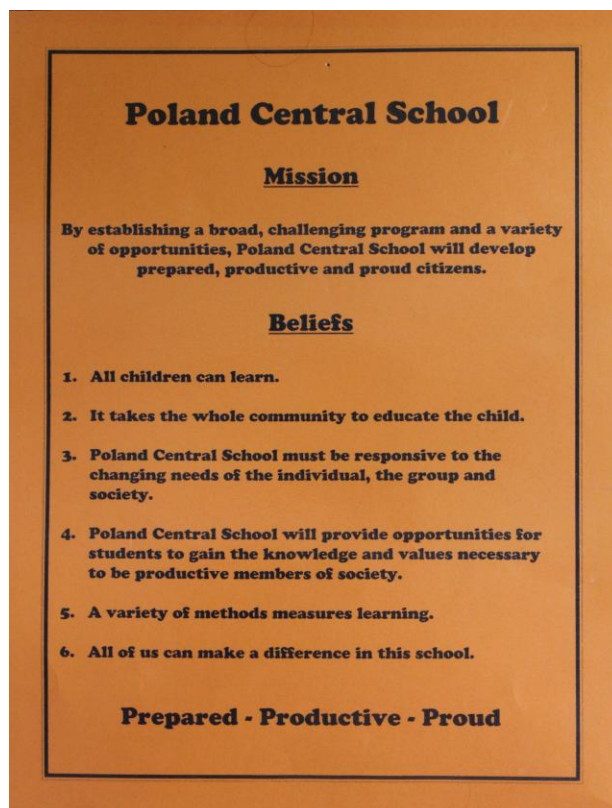


Figure 1. Poland ES Mission

Evolving Systems of Support

We call it What I Need Now. So it's not just our high-needs students that are getting pulled out of the classroom. The whole grade level is shaken up so that . . . each [student] can go to a different teacher or to a different provider. – teacher

The school has expanded practices to support academic readiness, in part by developing a framework for implementing a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS). Central to this effort is WINN, a daily intervention and enrichment block implemented across grade levels. During this time, students are regrouped based on instructional need and supported through small group instruction. Staff described this approach as increasing access to both targeted intervention and enrichment opportunities during the school day. At the same time, systems for using screening data and determining placement within groups continue to evolve, with some flexibility in how decisions are enacted across classrooms and grade levels.

Social-Emotional Learning and Youth Mental Health

Embedded and Universal Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

They[school leaders] also have me implemented in the special rotation, so the kids see me every four days for SEL for thirty minutes. – support staff

A key research highlight is the institutionalization of social-emotional learning (SEL) within the school schedule, ensuring that all students receive consistent exposure to SEL content. By embedding SEL as part of a rotating “special,” students are guaranteed universal access to instruction in areas such as emotional regulation, empathy, and communication. This structure reflects a proactive commitment to building foundational social-emotional skills rather than limiting supports to targeted interventions.



Figure 2. Poland ES hallway banner

Responsive, Relationship-Based Mental Health and Behavioral Support

Building rapport has been my biggest focus this year . . . just making sure that the kids know that I'm a safe space for them.
— support staff

The staff's approach to mental health support is highly relational, flexible, and responsive to student needs. Staff emphasized immediate communication, open access to support personnel, and collaborative problem solving when concerns arise, creating a system in which children can receive timely and personalized care. This responsiveness is bolstered by newly added roles, including a social worker, as well as partnerships with community agencies. Rather than relying on a rigid tiered intervention model, the school's small size allows for ongoing, informal monitoring and support through frequent team discussions and direct family outreach when needed. While this approach enables rapid response and strong relationships, it also means that systems for tracking and coordinating support have risen as a challenge needing a solution. At Poland ES, they have used information system to help document needs and interventions as a more formalized Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) is still emerging.

Educator Preparation, Support, and Organizational Capacity

Connections to Community and Stability

It was the small-town community, it was the friendly faces . . . you were never made to feel like you didn't belong here. . . .It was the bond that I developed with my colleagues . . . that has been a tremendous thing that has kept me here all these years.
— teacher

A defining feature of the school's organizational capacity is the stability of its workforce and the extent to which staff are connected to the local community. Educators described a setting where many staff have long-standing relationships with the district, including individuals who attended the school themselves or have children currently enrolled. Hiring practices emphasize alignment with the needs of a small rural district, including flexibility, collaboration, and a willingness to engage with families and the broader community. These conditions were also described as contributing to the district's ability to attract experienced educators from other settings. Staff also pointed to continuity in leadership and a history of long tenure across roles, contributing to a sense of consistency over time. These factors collectively support a professional environment in which relationships extend beyond roles and across generations, reinforcing staff commitment to the school and community.

Working Conditions That Support Retention

I can't see being any place else at this point, because . . . I walk in the door and I . . . just feel the warmth in this building.
— teacher

Working conditions at Poland Elementary are characterized by consistently small class sizes, which are intentionally structured to support student learning and development. Staff described these conditions as an important factor not only for students, but also for educators, contributing

to a professional environment that is both manageable and sustainable over time. Teachers noted that smaller instructional groups allow for more individualized attention and reduce the complexity of classroom management. In addition, classrooms are supported by paraprofessionals and other staff who assist with both academic and behavioral needs. These combined features create working conditions that educators identified as a reason for remaining in the district and continuing to invest in their work.

Collaborative and Adaptive Capacity Building

There's constant communication taking place between the grade level as well as administration . . . sometimes cross curricular as well . . . so that we can bridge any gaps . . . and make sure we're doing the best we can for students. – teacher

Capacity building at Poland Elementary reflects the ways collaboration and adaptation among staff support both organizational functioning and student needs. While a variety of scheduled meetings are in place to coordinate the sharing of data and inform instructional planning, staff also described ongoing informal collaboration that reinforces a shared responsibility for student success. This collective approach extends across roles, with educators, support staff, and administrators working together to address individual student needs. Flexibility is a defining feature of this work, as staff frequently take on multiple roles in response to emerging needs. Leaders further support these efforts through a listening-oriented approach that emphasizes shared decision making. Together, these structures and practices contribute to an environment where systems continue to develop while being supported by ongoing communication, strong relationships, and flexibility.

Family Engagement and Community Relationships

Addressing Variability in Family Involvement

I think we have a huge community base here. . . . Everybody really cares about everybody and their students. – building leader

Family member involvement in the school was described as variable. This reflects the broad spectrum of community members served by the district, with many family members very closely associated with the school through their employment and those who are not employed by the school and/or live at a distance. Geographic distance and limited access to external resources shape the extent of family member involvement and this is consistent with the challenges faced by many rural districts. Within the Poland context, approaches to engage with harder-to-reach families are largely informal but are complemented by the work of a small group of parents and school staff who work together to provide families support and school involvement opportunities in lieu of a traditional PTA or PTO.

Communication and Relationship-Based Family Engagement

I find that the teachers are very responsive. Parent Square . . . has been a great tool for communication . . . and it's very, very easy to get a hold of them [school staff]. – parent

Good communications are a central component of family engagement at Poland Elementary and functions as a primary mechanism for maintaining positive relationships with families. Frequent digital messaging serves as the primary tool for parent-teacher communication and is often proactive, extending beyond traditional phone calls, conferences, and informal interactions. Parents described consistent communication and appreciate the individual attention afforded to their children, noting efforts by both teachers and staff to ensure timely and transparent sharing of information. Communication practices are also characterized by their relational and adaptive nature, with staff adjusting approaches based on individual family needs. As patterns of family participation continue to shift, communication has evolved to take on a more immediate, two-way and digital form.

Community Partnerships and Access in a Rural Context

A big one [student and family support partner] that we refer out to is community health . . . they have walk-in hours; . . . they also have support staff that go to the home.
— support staff

Community partnerships at Poland Elementary are shaped by the school's rural context and the geographic distribution of families across a large area. While the school is located within driving distance of a larger urban center, access to medical and mental health resources can remain a challenge for some families. In response, the staff work to provide support during the school day and through on-site opportunities. Staff also actively connect families to outside services, including mental health providers, therapy networks, and county-level agencies, serving as a bridge between families and external support systems. These partnerships tend to be targeted and functional, developed in response to specific student needs rather than formal institutional arrangements.

In a Nutshell

Poland ES is distinctive in its close-knit relational foundation, supportive structures for staff and students alike, and deep community ties. Small class sizes and stable staffing enable close, sustained relationships between educators and students, fostering trust, engagement, and shared responsibility. These connections are reinforced by school structures that prioritize well-being, including a PreK–12 campus, daily physical activity, and embedded social-emotional supports. The school's small scale allows for flexible, responsive care rather than reliance on formal systems. At the same time, the school serves as a central community hub, with multigenerational connections and shared pride sustaining a strong sense of belonging. Despite geographic distance hurdles, community support helps maintain a cohesive environment that promotes both student well-being and academic success.

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