

NYKids 2026 Positive Outlier Elementary School Study



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Van Schaick Grade School Case Study

You have these people who just have had their heart in Cohoes for so long, and I think that's one of the things that just makes us great. [It] is the people who are here are here for the right reasons and are invested in the community. – district leader

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 and then 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

Van Schaick Grade School is located in the city of Cohoes, New York, ten miles north of Albany and only four miles from the city of Troy. The school is the smallest of three elementary schools in the district and serves 124 students from kindergarten through fifth grade. A Pre-K program, administered by the Boys & Girls Club of America, is housed in the basement wing of the school building.

Although the school sits within the city of Cohoes, Van Schaick has a distinctive “small school” feel, as many educators put it, due in part to being nestled on Van Schaick Island between the Mohawk and Hudson Rivers. Educators noted the challenges facing many students in their school, such as increasing levels of poverty and transience in the community in recent years, as well as growing mental health and behavioral needs that require additional attention. To address these growing needs, educators at Van Schaick have drawn on a strong culture of teamwork and collaboration to ensure that all students are successful and supported.

Another notable feature of the school is consistency, which is seen not only in alignment across grade levels but in the veteran leadership at the school and district levels, which has anchored the school for decades. A third salient feature of the school is the use of data by educators and leaders to drive decisions about teaching, interventions, and curriculum. Educators also explained their increasing efforts to engage students’ families and the surrounding community through various initiatives and programs that often highlight the history of the surrounding area. Noting the rise in behavioral challenges among their students in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, educators at Van Schaick also placed a strong emphasis on developing character traits in students and using social-emotional learning programs to promote positive behavior.

Student Demographics 2024-2025: Van Schaick Grade School, Cohoes City School District			
	Van Schaick Grade School	Cohoes City SD	New York State
Grades Served	K-5	K-12	K-12
Total Enrollment	124	1,842	2,421,491
Economically Disadvantaged	78%	71%	60%
Students with Disabilities	35%	20%	20%
English Language Learners	0%	5%	12%
Student Ethnic/ Racial Distribution			
American Indian/ Alaska Native	0%	1%	1%
Black or African American	13%	13%	15%
Hispanic/ Latino	9%	14%	31%
Asian/ Native Hawaiian/ Other Pacific Islander	2%	2%	11%
White	62%	59%	39%
Multiracial	18%	10%	4%
Other	0%	0%	0%

Van Schaick Grade School was selected due to its strong and balanced performance across both academic achievement and student attendance within a high-need context. Van Schaick Grade School demonstrated substantially higher-than-predicted outcomes with a combined

academic z score¹ of 1.96 and an attendance z score of 1.71, resulting in a composite z score of 1.70. This consistent pattern of higher performance taking into account demographic served across multiple indicators makes it a compelling example of a positive outlier.

Highlights

Working Together to Meet Students' Needs

I know these people have my back, my principal has my back, and just that we're in it together.
– teacher

A culture of collaboration and collegiality was evident across interviews at Van Schaick. Educators described a strong commitment to the school and community, with many not only living within the district but having grown up there as well. Consistent communication among colleagues and between teachers and leaders was also described as an important feature of Van Schaick, as educators regularly meet with each other to discuss how to best meet the needs of students, problem-solve, or share materials. Colleagues have a formal opportunity to work with one another through Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) in which they design their own projects.

Using Data to Drive Decisions and Allocate Resources

So we're really drilling into data to make decisions, not when my gut says he needs it, or I feel he needs it, or he's been getting it. . . . [T]his is about student need. And when you're using data, you can have those conversations because it will tell you what the need is.
– district leader

The use of data to drive decisions was a common refrain among educators at Van Schaick. Using diagnostic tools such as iReady and AIMSweb, educators felt they could “pinpoint” – as one district leader put it – the exact needs of their students and thereby tailor particular interventions to help them succeed. Through continual data monitoring, educators are able to check whether an intervention is working or if changes are needed. This process ensures that students are given the support they need but also that district resources are allocated effectively and efficiently. This strategic use of data is one example of the way equity underlies many initiatives described by educators at Van Schaick; others include the shift to a coteaching model in Kindergarten and the districtwide transition to a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (both of which are described in detail in following sections).

Supporting Student Growth through Consistency and Care

¹ Note: A z score is a way of showing how far a value is from the average compared to other values. 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.

We meet the kids where they are and then bring them forward . . . even if they are struggling.
– teacher

At Van Schaick, educators hold high expectations for every student no matter what their aptitudes or backgrounds are. Student success was characterized by educators in terms of individual growth for each student and not purely as an academic measure; social-emotional progress is prioritized at the school as well. As many educators noted, their school is a reliable and “safe” place where students can learn and grow even when their lives outside of school may involve difficulty. The caring climate of Van Schaick is supported through consistency, not only by the veteran leaders of the school and district, but in the stability and alignment to curriculum that links educators to a set of shared instructional practices.

A Closer Look

These 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

Building Character Skills and Positive Behavior

Success really is respectful students – to each other, to themselves, to the staff. . . that if something is hard, things in life are hard, and we can work together [and] make those mistakes to grow.
- teacher

Instilling positive character skills and traits in students was seen by educators as a high priority alongside academics. In addition to a schoolwide Positive Behavior Intervention System (PBIS), students are encouraged by their teachers to be respectful and are offered rewards and celebrations for consistently good behavior. The school hallways are replete with examples that reinforce these models, including the “3 B’s: Be Safe, Be Responsible, Be Respectful” – slogans that can also be heard each morning during the school announcements. Reflecting their efforts to increase attendance, educators at Van Schaick added a fourth B recently: “Be a HERO: Here Everyday, Ready and On time.”

A support staff member explained the high value placed on positive behavior and character at Van Schaick:

It's not only just the academic progress or things that we see, goals that have been achieved, but . . . we try to incorporate having good character and being a good person and how they can change the community and have an effect on the world itself just by being kind to each other. So we kind of instill that in them right from the get-go and try to bring it all the way through.

A Collaborative and Supportive School Culture

All the kids are all of our kids. We all know them very well. - teacher

At Van Schaick, educators draw on a culture of collaboration and mutual support to meet the needs of students and address challenges. Working closely and regularly communicating with one another is, as one support staff member put it, “so common that we don't see it as that we're meeting, that's just what we do.” Educators also expressed a high level of comfort asking their colleagues for advice and materials. “Everybody’s willing to help you out,” said one teacher. Another teacher elaborated on her “helpful” colleagues:

You could go to any teacher and ask, “Do you have this level book?” We share supplies and resources between teachers, even though there's only one section of each grade level, . . . so everybody's super helpful and welcoming. “You know, come in, grab whatever you need.”

This team-based approach is reinforced by the shared value of doing what is “best for kids” – as several educators put it – and the readiness to try different approaches to meet students’ needs. The principal, for instance, noted that staff members had never, in her 22 years as principal, expressed unwillingness to adapt their teaching when changes were being made based on research or data. “I can’t think of a time that . . . I've had any of my teachers who said, ‘I really don't want to do that’ or shut the door and be like, ‘Yeah, I'll tell her I'm doing it, but I'm really not,’” she said.

And building a collaborative community extends to the students as well. For example, a “Welcoming Committee” pairs new students with a “buddy” who takes the responsibility to accompany them throughout their day. The program was initiated over five years ago as educators noticed the increasing levels of transience among their student population. “[I]t's a difficult thing when a student is new to school, . . . so [we asked ourselves] ‘How can we make that better for the child?’ and then that starts the child off in a better place” explained the principal, who felt that “it does make a difference for those kids when they're walking into a new building.”

High Expectations with an Emphasis on Growth

[W]e will get there through hard work. We all make mistakes, but we learn through mistakes. - teacher

Educators at Van Schaick repeatedly described the importance of maintaining high expectations for all students. “Just because they're struggling doesn't mean that we don't expect them to make progress and to make goals and reach those goals,” noted one teacher.

Educators acknowledged, however, that high expectations for all students – through an equity lens – does not mean the *same* expectations for all students. As one teacher put it, “[We] keep the expectation high, but then accommodate for those kids that still might need all the accommodations.” Another explained that their goal was to “meet [students] where they are but

still hold those high expectations for them.” For instance, when defining success for their students, educators at Van Schaick often pointed to student growth even though – as one teacher put it – “growth may look different for each individual person.” Another teacher likewise framed success around growth, “For me, it's just seeing where the kids come in and where they exit . . . that's the thing: If they're growing, that's what I take as a positive.” A support staff member summed up this sentiment, emphasizing student “progress over perfection.”

Importantly, student growth was viewed by educators in a holistic way that went beyond narrow measures of academic achievement. The principal, for instance, elaborated on her view of student success, “So it could be academically they have grown. . . . But also looking at them behaviorally and socially emotionally, what have we done to impact that as well?” A district leader responded similarly, noting that students’ growth can be measured “academically, socially, [and] emotionally.”



Students’ yearly goals are placed around the school seal at the beginning of each year

Academic Learning and Programming

Supporting Success through Consistency

We’re all on the same page. - teacher

At Van Schaick, consistency was mentioned by many educators as a value shared across the entire school and a factor that has contributed to their positive outcomes. Both the principal and superintendent, for example, explained that teachers at Van Schaick adhered to the curriculum with “fidelity.” As one teacher explained, “I do think it's important to stick to the curriculum that you have . . . because the kids are familiar with it.” Another teacher, when asked what might account for the school’s higher-than-predicted outcomes in English Language Arts (ELA), pointed to the “dedication of the classroom teachers to use the curriculum that we’ve adopted.”

By ensuring that all students were learning the same content, teachers could safely assume what students had learned before they entered their classrooms and then build upon this knowledge. A teacher explained how this benefited teachers at different grade levels:

So we need that consistency, Kindergarten through fifth grade, for the consistency of skills, of consistent vocabulary. And you know what that brings with it. If someone, one of

these teachers doesn't do it, that's going to throw everyone off that comes after them, and I think that they've done a really great job at working together to make sure that happens.

Several educators also explained the benefits of this consistency for students with special needs. For instance, teachers aimed to reinforce students' learning throughout the day by using the same vocabulary used by general education teachers when receiving enrichment in a separate classroom:

I think we also try to use that language with the students. Even though we may be using different material, . . . when we pull the kids out, using that same language throughout their different settings throughout the day.

Another support staff member working with special needs students added that it was “wonderful” how general education teachers “follow the curriculum . . . because I have the book, too, so I know exactly where they are and I can support it.”

Creating Future-Ready Learners through Student-Centered Teaching

The teachers here definitely are student centered, and [you] can't be successful here if you're not.
– district leader

As reflected in the district mission to “prepare its students for success in tomorrow’s world,” educators at Van Schaick made distinctive efforts to make teaching relevant and engaging while also ensuring that all students were ready for the future. A district leader emphasized the “student-centered” approach to teaching at Van Schaick, which not only fosters academic engagement but can “help kids to see earlier on that school has relevance to the things that they would like to do in life.”

Several teachers utilized responsive approaches that drew on students’ interests while also expanding their experiences through community activities. One teacher, for instance, took students to places they had not visited within the community such as local parks and restaurants. “I try to do stuff that relates to them at the time and that they can get engaged in,” she noted. The school also holds a “College Day” during which current college students from Cohoes speak to students; and according to the superintendent, the district sponsors Career Fairs “so students are exposed to the future.”

Another aspect of this approach is reflected in the work to prepare elementary students for New York’s State Education Department’s (NYSED) new graduation framework, “Portrait of a Graduate.” To this end, the principal, together with other teachers, developed a “Portrait of a Van Schaick Grade School student” to give students a clear idea of, in her words, “how we contributed to your portrait while you were here at Van Schaick.” As they compared the school’s programming to the NYSED framework, educators reflected on ways in which the school could add to students’ experiences of diversity in their classes. One idea that was generated during this process was a “World Cultural Fair” during which Multilingual Learners (MLLs) from the high school visited Van Schaick to teach students about their culture and language. “The students absolutely loved it,” said the principal.

Using Data to Provide Flexible and Targeted Interventions

[Educators at Van Schaick] really look at each student, look at the data, talk as a team about what are the academic interventions these students need? – superintendent

Multiple forms of data are used by educators at Van Schaick to identify struggling students and provide them with targeted support. iReady diagnostic tools and state-mandated testing (for applicable grades) are both used by educators to evaluate students' progress and decide whether additional support is needed. Through ongoing data monitoring and the use of AIMSweb, educators said they ensured that interventions remain flexible and tailored to students' needs. The superintendent explained how decisions to support students are collaborative and driven by data:

[Educators] are flexible with their instructional resources, meaning that okay, here's the special ed teachers, here's the reading AIS teachers, here's their schedule, here's what they need to do. And then, you know, if new needs arise, then they'll shift. You know, it's not, "Oh, I'm sorry, I can't do this." They'll shift schedules because they're looking at data regularly. [And] if students no longer need an intervention, then they're taken out of the intervention.

These processes are strengthened by the small size and collaborative culture of the school, which allows educators to regularly communicate with each other to discuss students' progress. "It's very easy to touch base with the classroom teachers almost daily," said one support staff. Another reiterated that many conversations with general education teachers "just happen in passing by . . . and just chatting during their lunch break. Or teachers pop into our suite all the time, just to ask questions or get ideas about things."

One example of this flexibility is a recent shift to a coteaching model in Kindergarten, where special education and general education teachers work together in the same classroom. This change was designed to have students receiving special education services "benefit [by] being in the classroom with same-age peers and good role models to help them out," as one teacher put it. Although a teacher acknowledged her initial apprehension about this new arrangement, she concluded that the coteaching model has "been really good for our students in that class."

Social-Emotional Learning and Youth Mental Health

Addressing Social-Emotional Challenges with a Trauma-Informed Mindset

We're constantly just trying to get them to understand that "it's okay, we're going to support you, we're going to work with you, and we're going to be here." – teacher

Leaders and teachers at Van Schaick were clear that their students are facing a new set of mental health challenges. One student support staff member, for example, noted an "uptick" in anxiety, depressive states, and anger in students. A school leader similarly reported a rise in students coming with low "stamina" to engage in schooling activities.



A sign welcomes students to their classroom

In discussing their students' well-being, educators took a trauma-informed approach, which emphasizes growth and compassion while recognizing that students' difficulties often are a consequence of extra-school factors such as struggles at home, unregulated screen time, and lingering effects from the COVID-19 pandemic. "Kids coming in nowadays seem to have a lot more . . . weighing on them . . . because they don't have a lot of stability outside [of school]," noted one support staff member. A district leader acknowledged that "it's hard when students aren't feeling safe with their basic needs. . . It's very hard for them to focus on their learning and focus on the school day."

Instead of simply issuing disciplinary consequences to students who exhibit challenging behaviors, educators at Van Schaick implement targeted interventions to meet student needs and build skills. The principal explained that many conversations with staff members revolve around "classroom management and student behaviors" to ensure that "students still feel that [school] is a safe place that they can go in and learn." "It's okay to make mistakes," said one teacher regarding problematic behaviors.

Additionally, calm spaces have been established across classrooms to give students places to take a break in a developmentally appropriate and nonpunitive way. In the Universal Pre-Kindergarten (UPK) program educators created a "cozy cube," Kindergarten classrooms have a "calm down corner," and in fifth grade, students can take a moment to re-collect themselves at an "opportunity desk."

Allocating Resources to Meet Students' Social-Emotional Needs

We're consistent in consequences and rewards. . . . I think that's a huge factor in supporting them and their mental health and their social-emotional well-being, just knowing what to expect. "If I do this, then this will happen." – teacher

Educators at Van Schaick address students' well-being and mental health through a range of supports. For instance, a schoolwide social-emotional learning (SEL) program called Second Step has been implemented for the first 25 weeks of the school year, and teachers create opportunities to integrate SEL lessons into other aspects of their curriculum. Students also have access to counseling services from a social worker and school psychologist who work full-time in the school as well as through an additional counselor who visits the school once a week from a regional family services organization.

Consistent with their data-driven approach, staff at Van Schaick use the Devereux Student Strengths Assessment (DESSA) screener to assess students' well-being three times a year and

identify students who may need more support. “So we really try to work in a strategic way . . . utilize that data to tell you what specific SEL skill they need to work on,” noted a district leader.

When more acute issues arise, the team at Van Schaick implement more targeted interventions. One teacher, for instance, mentioned that a few years ago, a group of female students were engaging in bullying. The Second Step curriculum was not fully addressing those issues, and the school social worker implemented the Kind Campaign, which involved an hour and a half workshop with students and staff. The principal recalled how the program impacted the students, “And the girls were crying, and they had to write [about]... if they felt they had not been kind to someone. . . . It was good.”

Educator Preparation, Support, and Organizational Capacity

Welcoming a Range of Voices in Decision-Making Processes

Our principal lets us, if we're thinking out of the box, . . . she's like, “Do it.” Like she just trusts you. . . . And I feel comfortable going to her. – teacher

The culture of collaboration at Van Schaick was evident in decision-making processes in which school and district leaders – as well as teachers in leadership roles – welcomed the voices of staff members.

In interviews, leaders expressed their willingness to work with staff members to make decisions. The superintendent, for instance, described her leadership style as “relational.” Though acknowledging the need to “make the tough decisions,” she highlighted efforts to “[work] together to ensure that their voices are heard.” A district leader similarly explained how meetings with teacher leaders provided valuable opportunities to “initiate conversations about change and how to go about that change, always trying to leave it to them [teachers] as to what they want [to do], and how they want to proceed.”

At Van Schaick, the principal reiterated a similar message as she discussed the ways the Building Leadership Team (BLT) solicits input from their colleagues to develop yearly school plans. By having an “open-door policy,” as one teacher put it, the principal maintains “different connections” throughout the school in order to “know what the needs are” of all staff. A teacher described how the principal and other members of the BLT involve their colleagues in decision making:

[We] go out and talk to people and say, “What do you think about this?” or “What do you think about that?”. . . So even though we represent, you know, we're on the leadership team and represent the staff, I feel like we have a good handle on what the staff will want to do moving forward as part of our plan.

BLT members also acknowledged that they were open to feedback from staff and often adapt initiatives based on the perspectives of their colleagues. “So things might start here [with the BLT]. Initiatives might come through us, but it's really like a starting point,” explained a teacher. As exemplified by the quote above by a teacher who appreciated the support to “think outside the box,” educators at Van Schaick felt safe to express their thoughts, ideas, and concerns to leaders:

“[Staff] feel comfortable going to anybody and sharing their concerns and thoughts . . . and then we bring it to the BLT,” said one teacher.

Learning with Colleagues through Professional Learning Communities

You can be smaller and not a true cohesive learning community, but they really are [at Van Schaick].
- superintendent

One way in which Van Schaick educators increase their knowledge base and expertise is through Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). Educators choose the PLCs they want to work with as well as the topic they want to work on. As a teacher explained, “[T]he nice thing about the PLCs is that the teachers really get to decide what it is they want to work on. . . . So you can really kind of tailor it to like what your class needs and who you're working with.” PLCs also provide educators with a space to learn about the various challenges experienced by their colleagues and different strategies they may have developed. “So [educators] have a place where they can share their frustrations and tell you what's happening and then brainstorm how other people are [solving problems],” said a teacher. Another educator similarly explained, “[PLCs] allow you to bounce ideas off of each other and then also support each other with materials or strategies that benefit each person.”

While support staff members work together based on their role, rather than their grade level, the PLCs provide teachers with an opportunity to work vertically across grades, since there is only one teacher per grade level. This work, as the superintendent explained, allows educators at Van Schaick to be “really able to look at alignment as children move from grade to grade.”

One recent initiative undertaken by PLCs at Van Schaick is research into best practices to support their MLLs . Currently, one elementary school in the district houses all MLLs; however, the principal reported that some would be returning to Van Schaick next year. “So we're trying to get a handle on good strategies and things to help accommodate [MLLs] and help their learning. We're doing a lot of research on that in [the PLC],” explained a teacher.

Shifting to a Multi-Tiered System of Supports

[If] the data is showing your child needs help, they're going to get it. – district leader

A significant change underway in the district is the transition to a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS). Supported through a grant issued by the Office of Mental Health of New York State, educators and district leaders have broadened the use of MTSS in the district with the intent to align all schools to this system within the next year. MTSS, as the principal put it, will mean that intervention services are “streamlined and consistent across the district.”

A district leader noted how MTSS ensures that educators and staff are identifying “who needs the support . . . by giving [students] the appropriate interventions that they need based on what the data is telling us.” In this sense, MTSS simplifies the referral process and relies on consistent assessment and benchmarking processes so that students are automatically receiving the services best suited to them. A district leader elaborated on the utility of the process:

Those students automatically get placed in Tier Two and Tier Three. So, it's no longer you fill out a referral, and we decide is this significant enough to be a three? Is this only a two? . . . [Students are] getting Tier Two or Tier Three [interventions] based on the data that all kids were assessed with.

Although MTSS has not yet been implemented districtwide, educators at Van Schaick have already begun to adapt the current system of tiered interventions so that they will be aligned with other schools. A district leader acknowledged the “hard work” involved in this process while noting how many educators are “excited for change [and the ability to] . . . really move the needle on kids’ success.”

Family Engagement and Community Relationships

A Culture of Relational Communication

Parents understand that when they drop their students off here, that we are going to take care of them just like we would take care of our own children – principal

Van Schaick Elementary is grounded in a strong culture of relational communication that keeps families closely connected to student learning and well-being. Educators described a consistent, relationship-first approach that emphasizes open, nonpunitive dialogue and active listening as the foundation for trust. As one staff member explained, “[Families] have to trust you. They have to buy in.” Staff intentionally use multiple communication pathways, including frequent digital messages, end-of-day conversations, phone calls, and home visits, to ensure that caregivers can access and process information in ways that fit their daily realities. This flexibility reduces barriers for busy and vulnerable families and reinforces the school’s belief that authentic engagement begins with meeting caregivers where they are.

Across interviews, staff emphasized that this communication is more than procedural; it is deeply relational. Teachers and support staff take time to understand families’ circumstances, extend empathy during moments of stress, and offer support before judgment. This perspective was echoed by a support staff member who shared, “Whichever way is easier for them, and honestly, whatever time is easier for them.”

While many schools employ similar communication tools, Van Schaick distinguishes itself through the consistency of these practices. Leaders, teachers, and support staff use the same caregiver centered tone and habits, creating a predictable and supportive communication environment. This sentiment is reflected in the comment, “We’re always talking with parents, and our main goal is often to just let the parents know that we’re here to support them in any way that we can.” Such alignment strengthens trust, fosters partnerships, and positions families as true collaborators in supporting students.

Leveraging Community Connections to Enrich Learning

“I feel like we have a lot of good, rooted connections.” - teacher

Van Schaick capitalizes on its small size and strong relationships to build an environment saturated with opportunity. This dynamic was emphasized by a teacher who shared, “I think a lot of our community partners know when they need a group of students for something, we're ready.” Rather than waiting for partnerships to come to them, though, the school extends itself outward, embedding students in the local community and cultivating sustained connections.

Many community relationships, for instance, create authentic, real world learning opportunities. The principal plays an instrumental role in securing these collaborations, such as coordinating with the State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) for fifth graders to participate in Hudson River data collection. This proactive approach is reflected in an observation by a teacher, “Anything that's going on in the community that we can be a part of, [the principal] makes sure we are.” Partnerships with local organizations also open doors to historical and civic learning experiences. For example, the Daughters of the American Revolution offer access to a nearby historic site, provide Constitution related activities, and host a book giveaway for students. As one staff member explained, “That's a nice partnership that we have for the kids.”

Targeted Attendance and Supports

Seeing the kids happy and excited to come to school . . . means that we're doing something right here, where they feel safe and supported and want to come. That's a huge success.
– teacher

Attendance is a major focus for all staff at Van Schaick, and the school has developed clear systems to identify and support families in need. A district leader emphasized the efforts being made districtwide at “understanding why attendance matters and the need to be in school every day . . . and when you miss a day, what that does, and how that impacts a student's success within the classroom.” To address chronic absenteeism, Van Schaick relies on frequent data monitoring and early outreach. Letters are sent each trimester to families whose children fall below the 95% attendance target, and staff use classroom challenges, individual recognition, raffles, and even a mayor-issued proclamation to energize positive messaging around attendance.

The school pairs incentives with direct outreach. Home visits and targeted digital messages help ensure caregivers receive information and encouragement, recognizing that attendance habits depend as much on adults as on students. Teachers reinforce this communication by sharing a “stop light” attendance visual at conferences with caregivers and asking them to sign it, closing the communication loop. Although some felt that connecting with families has been more challenging since the COVID-19 pandemic, staff are rebuilding relationships through UPK and Kindergarten programs, establishing strong habits early. The PTO also contributes to this work. A \$100 monthly raffle held for the families of students meeting the 95% attendance threshold has also improved outcomes, according to the principal.

In a Nutshell

A culture of collaboration and teamwork is evident at Van Schaick Grade School, where educators work together to meet students’ needs in a variety of ways – from informal, everyday

conversations to formal learning communities where they tackle pressing issues. The collaborative climate of the school is strengthened by leaders' willingness to incorporate feedback and staff voices in decision-making processes. Educators at Van Schaick also utilize data to strengthen teaching practices and identify students who may require additional academic or social-emotional support. These data-informed decisions also ensure that the resources and supports are allocated to students efficiently and effectively. Finally, educators at Van Schaick described a caring school culture where students feel safe and excited to attend school, a feature that many interviewees felt contributed to their students' positive outcomes.

Van Schaick Grade School
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