

Promising Practices from Persistent and Emergent Positive Outliers

NYKids 20th Anniversary Study



CASE STUDY: FILLMORE CENTRAL SCHOOL

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I've noticed over the years, I mean, when people that work here, it doesn't matter whether they're a teacher, custodian, cafeteria worker, bus driver, it's almost like everybody's got a set of eyes, and they're kind of looking out [for students]. I mean it's through the entire district itself, it's just not one segment of people that are responsible for that. – teacher

[Fillmore educators] try to balance being a welcome, laid-back environment with trying to have the best academics and extracurriculars in the state. – Superintendent

Study Background

For two decades NYKids has been studying typically-performing and outlier schools to identify some of the differences that account for better student performance in the outliers. With increased interest in what supports adaptation and innovation in the context of external shocks and community demographic changes, our current study sought to discover new insights into what sustains schools' significantly better student outcomes over time. This case study describes policies, processes, and practices in Fillmore Central School—an emergent positive outlier school.

School Selection Criteria

NYKids studied Fillmore Central School as part of its College and Career Readiness study of 2017-18. At that time, Fillmore was identified as a typically performing school based on its graduation rates. In this study we used New York State graduation rate data from 2021 and 2022 (the most recent at the time of study sampling), which included cohorts who started 9th grade in 2017, 2018, and 2019. This analysis yielded several emergent positive outlier schools (those that had shown improvements in student performance outcomes), including Fillmore.

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School Context

Located in Allegany County, in the southwestern portion of New York State, Fillmore Central School serves a population of just under 600 students, all housed inside a large, PK-12 school building at the center of the town. While Fillmore is a rural school, it is situated only 75 minutes from the cities of Rochester and Buffalo. The campus of Houghton University, a small, private college nearby, also influences the socioeconomic and cultural characteristics of Fillmore.

At Fillmore, educators described deep ties to the community that have been cultivated over generations; many staff members were themselves graduates of the school and personally familiar with the families of students they served. Many felt that these connections created a sense of mutual investment and collaboration between the school and community, a relationship they described as beneficial for Fillmore students.

Like other rural communities, Fillmore Central School served, as several educators put it, as the “hub” of the town. Indeed, educators described how community and family members alike flocked to the campus to take part in its wide range of extracurricular offerings such as sports, musical performances, and community events, which they emphasized were an important part of students’ learning at the school. While rates of enrollment and poverty have remained somewhat stable over the past decade, educators at Fillmore noted the increasing mental health needs of students, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. To address these needs, they sought to provide additional resources and staff members to support students’ physical and mental health.

Student Demographics 2022-23: Fillmore Central School, Fillmore Central School District (CSD)		
	Fillmore CSD	New York State
Grades Served	K-12	K-12
Total Enrollment	589	2,422,494
Economically Disadvantaged	61%	58%
Students with Disabilities	15%	19%
English Language Learners	0%	10%
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution		
American Indian/Alaska Native	0%	1%
Black or African American	1%	16%
Hispanic/Latino	1%	29%

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Asian/Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	1%	10%
White	96%	40%
Multiracial	0%	3%
Other	0%	0%

HIGHLIGHTS

Developing Well-Rounded Youth

We are trying to prepare life skills for beyond these walls. We want them [students] to be successful as adults, too. So, it's not just looking at a number on a test. – teacher

Educators at Fillmore articulated a goal of developing young adults who would be ready for life after high school. From this view, success for students was not defined narrowly in only academic terms but was seen as achievable through extracurricular activities such as sports, music, and art. In addition, Fillmore educators emphasized the significance of demonstrating positive behaviors in school, such as respect and resiliency, and viewed these character traits as an important measure of students' success alongside their academics.

Building Supportive Relationships with Each Student

It makes me feel good as a parent to know like, we have this amazing group of people in our school that are going to be there to help lift up our kids and support them emotionally and physically. – parent

One way in which educators at Fillmore said they support their students is by developing individual relationships with each student. Teachers explained that they were able to connect with students not only in their classes and across their PK-12 career at Fillmore but also through the range of extracurricular activities offered at the school. In an effort to ensure that all students enjoy a sense of belonging at the school, recently, a Social-Emotional Learning Team was created that pairs staff members with individual students who have been identified as needing additional support.

Building from Long-Standing Ties in the Community

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I actually went to Fillmore as a kid. So starting kindergarten all the way up through, [and then] went off to college to be a teacher. And . . . one of the reasons I became a teacher was because of the school. – teacher

Many educators explained that they not only lived in the district but had grown up there, giving them special insights and connections to the community. According to many, the school served as the “hub” of the community and always drew large crowds for events and activities such as sporting events and musicals. In a rural context where resources were sometimes scant, educators also felt that the school and community often mutually relied on one another in order to ensure that children and youth were able to have their needs met.

A CLOSER LOOK

The themes above are evident throughout the six lines of inquiry that frame the study of which this case is one part. The sections below expand on each of these themes within the context of the study’s framework.

Culture, Climate and Community

Cultivating Well-Rounded Youth

At Fillmore, educators were clear that their goals for students went beyond test scores and class grades. Many teachers, for instance, viewed a successful outcome as fostering well-rounded young adults ready for their life outside of school. One teacher explained that to “be a good citizen, a productive citizen” was a primary goal they had for students. These views coincided with the emphasis placed on providing students with numerous opportunities to excel, whether academically or through sports, arts, and music. As one teacher put it, “Success looks different for everybody, because it’s what is your best at this time.”

Creating a Culture of Belonging

A priority mentioned by the superintendent at Fillmore was to create a culture of belonging across the entire district. He explained the need to provide a safe and welcoming foundation for all students as a prerequisite for any learning to take place:

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“Students can't learn until they feel safe. So if they don't feel safe and welcomed . . . it's so exponentially, so much harder to have them reach their full potential.” Another school leader reiterated the importance of belonging and similarly highlighted it as an important characteristic to support students' success: “[Fillmore educators are] trying to build that sense of belonging for everybody -- staff, students, parents, community members. Because when you belong, you achieve.”

While he acknowledged that there was more work to do, the superintendent explained how the close-knit community of Fillmore has allowed students to create connections one with one another that can help promote positive peer relationships:

The students get a lot of credit. . . . They have a lot of empathy for other students. They pretty much have grown up with everyone together, and so they do have that connection to one another. I mean, they all know each other, whereas in a larger school, they might not. So I think that helps.

Drawing on School and Community Resources to Support Students

In a context where poverty is a challenge for many families, educators endeavored to ensure that all students were given the same opportunities regardless of their socioeconomic status. For instance, students whose families were struggling economically were provided items such as graphic calculators or musical instruments to ensure they would still be able to participate in schoolwork or extracurricular activities. Educators explained that the school would pay for registration fees for various events or trips if a student's family could not afford them.

The school also created a “Care Closet” that allows students to obtain items they may need, ranging from school supplies and hygiene items to clothes. A support staff member mentioned that they had even found a refrigerator recently for a family in need. A Secret Santa program headed by the school nurse serves over 100 families in the district who may otherwise be unable to afford gifts during Christmas.

While the school provided a range of resources for students, school staff felt they could draw as needed on the wider community, including the town library, local businesses, and Houghton College, to help provide resources and supports that may not be available at the school. “I would say that the community supports the school very strongly in a number of areas,” said one teacher.

Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

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Engaging Students through Differentiated Instruction and a Relevant Curriculum

In interviews and focus groups, Fillmore teachers explained how they foster engagement in their classes through curricula that are relevant to students' interests and differentiated to meet individual students' needs. One teacher, for example, explained how she engaged students by prioritizing their interests, "I think that's what quality instruction is – it's kind of letting your learners guide you instead of the curriculum guiding what you do." Another teacher commented similarly, noting how students' performance in class was related to how closely they connect with curricular material:

If you can appreciate learning to read and enjoying it, then that becomes a critical step to success in the higher grades. So I'm trying to find things that they're going to love to read. I still have kids come up in the hall . . . saying, "What are you reading right now?" You know, where they see me with it in my hand, and they're like, "Oh, I remember when we read that!" That's success to me.

In addition to creating responsive curricula with which students can connect, teachers also explained the importance of differentiating their instruction to ensure students with different learning styles and aptitudes benefit equally from their classes. As one teacher put it, "Differentiation is huge. Teachers need to meet kids where they are and grow them from there and close the gaps of where, what they can and can't do." Another teacher commented, "[Teachers] spend so much of our time differentiating, individualizing things based on kids' needs . . . when I was thinking about what is success, . . . I think it's very individualized."

Staying Current with Technology

To ensure Fillmore would remain "competitive and offer things for the 21st century," as the principal put it, educators described how they incorporated new technology into the classroom and in curricular offerings. For instance, a school leader explained that state grant money has allowed the school to equip all students in grade 5-12 at Fillmore with a laptop and students pre-K through 4 with iPads (although the latter group do not take these devices home with them). The grant also helped provide SmartBoards for classrooms throughout the school. "Teachers were very happy and excited to get the technology and students were as well," she explained.

The Agricultural Program room, which is set to be renovated during the upcoming capital project, recently acquired drones to fly over fields. The school also has a STEAM

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(Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics) room and will soon be outfitted with an eSports Lab. To provide access to additional offerings not available at the school, students may also enroll in technical classes at the regional BOCES. One program mentioned by staff was the “New Visions” program that provided students with training in health and educational careers.

Although educators recognized the importance of integrating new technology into classrooms, they also understood the need to limit the use of technology among students. For instance, the principal explained the “popular” decision (among teachers) to ban the use of cell phones during the school day.

Focusing on Extracurriculars

It would not take long for anyone visiting Fillmore Central School to notice the emphasis on extracurricular activities. Student artwork decorates the walls throughout the school, and with a student population of just under 600, Fillmore boasts an impressive record in high school sports. The principal reported that the boys’ soccer team has been to the state finals three of the past four years, and the girls’ soccer team has been state finalists two of the past three.

Educators at Fillmore spoke about the benefits that these activities provide for students, noting that participation in extracurriculars is, according to several teachers, “huge.” As the superintendent’s quote below the title suggests, extracurricular activities were seen as a way to develop well-rounded youth who can develop a range of skills. With a small student population, students could try many different sports and activities to, as a Fillmore parent said, “get out of their comfort zone.”

In addition, educators explained that extracurriculars also provide a way for them to connect with students in different ways. “If I have a kid that I coach, it’s very, very easy to . . . know where they’re coming from, and . . . stem some things before they become a problem,” said one teacher. Another teacher said, “A plus for our district is that a lot of people just aren’t just teachers, but they do a whole host of other extracurricular or even cocurricular items that reaches a particular kid, and therefore, then you can kind of reach into a family because of that.”

District and School Leadership

Trusting Staff and Providing Autonomy

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A salient aspect of the school that emerged during interviews with leaders at Fillmore was a leadership style that trusted staff members and provided them with autonomy to complete their work. The principal, for example, described his views on leadership in the following way:

But then it's trusting them to do what they need to do. And that's how I operate . . . I don't micromanage people. I trust them to do what they need to do but try to . . . have conversations a lot to make sure we're all going forward on the same page.

The Superintendent reiterated a similar view, emphasizing the need to provide teachers with autonomy and collaborate with them to meet the needs of students at Fillmore:

I believe in hiring good people and giving them autonomy and letting them do their job. . . So, it's a real partnership that we try to create, a real partnership relationship with the administration and the teachers, and we're all just kind of on the same level, and we work together.

Teachers generally corroborated this view and explained how they valued the autonomy they were provided, especially in their instruction, although they also felt that support was available when it was needed. “We’re both autonomous, but also very supported,” said one teacher. Another shared a similar view, saying, “I feel like our administration lets us do what we do best. They don't micromanage us; they recognize that we're masters levels professionals, and we are intelligent and have our own strengths and can adapt.”

While Fillmore leaders expressed the importance of autonomy for teaching staff, they were clear in the need to support teachers and also, when needed, make “tough decisions” – as one leader put it. The principal, for example, described his efforts to support teaching staff:

It's an open door policy where . . . I think we have the relationships where if teachers are feeling stressed in any way, shape, or form that they know it's okay to share that and they won't be judged, or that we'll do our best . . . we have resources . . . we have ways to try to find help for anyone that that needs it.

Likewise, the superintendent acknowledged that “there are times when we have to be bosses.” Yet, he continued that during these moments, “[leaders at Fillmore] handle other people with respect; we try to take the high road as much as we can as leaders.” He continued, “one of our biggest philosophies is: Be the water, not the gas. As a

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leader, our job is to make sure that every teacher has everything they need to be successful.”

Cultivating Leaders from Within

In a rural context where workforce shortages sometimes can make staffing a challenge, the Superintendent of Fillmore explained the importance of building leaders from within the district. He described urging staff members to see themselves as leaders in the building: “First when [educators] hear that they're like, ‘I'm just a teacher.’ I'm like, ‘No, . . . you're a leader.’”

Building leaders from within provided a sense of consistency and stability for Fillmore and also provided tangible incentives for educators to continue working in the district. A teacher, for example, explained how her preparation for a leadership role cemented her commitment to Fillmore and served as a commendation of her work: “So that was kind of like, the point where I was like, ‘Yes, I'm willing to be here forever’ – when my administration recognizes my hard work, and then wants to build me as a future leader.”

The principal also described how his new position – moving from an Assistant Principal to the School Principal – allowed him to “change it up a bit” and focus on curriculum more than he had been able to in his previous role. “It's] a nice change of pace,” he explained, commenting on the new aspects of the position that enticed him to stay in the district.

While these new positions came with advantages, some new leaders described the challenge of taking on a supervisory role with colleagues who were formerly their peers. A staff member, for instance, explained how “at times you do struggle with the change of role and things like that,” but the “[superintendent] has been 100% supportive of everything.”

Leading with a Visible Presence

Leaders at Fillmore spoke about the need to maintain visibility and presence in the school. Though acknowledging that his position as superintendent often required him to work on district- or community-level tasks, he explained the need to have face-to-face conversations with staff and students in the school: “I'm out talking to people because that's the evidence, you know; you've got to have those conversations and get into rooms and see what's going on.” For instance, he described beginning each workday by walking throughout the school building, which houses all grades:

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Every day I walk. I start my day with a different loop around the building, and I end it that way . . . It takes a superintendent that's visible and knows the staff and is out of his office and having conversations, meeting with the administrative team, talking with people, talking with parents.

The principal similarly highlighted the importance of being present and visible, especially to ensure that newly hired teachers would feel comfortable asking for help when needed:

Just be visible, present, and answer questions and allow them to get to know me more. Because I think sometimes there's that . . . stigma where they don't want to be, afraid might not be the right word, but they're also like, well, 'Don't go right to the principal for a question like that' . . . to get them to realize . . . we're here to help; we want you to succeed.

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and Youth Mental Health

Building Relationships with Every Student

Like educators across the country, those at Fillmore have reinforced their focus on students' social-emotional well-being and mental health, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. "Since COVID, I think the social-emotional needs of kids have been at the forefront," said one teacher.

To this end, Fillmore educators have sought to create relationships with every student at the school. One way in which educators ensured this would happen was through an "SEL (Social-Emotional Learning) Team" created during the 2020-2021 school year. The team, composed of two school psychologists, a guidance counselor, the Director of Special Education, the Home-School Liaison, and the Assistant Principal, meets biweekly to discuss students that have been identified as in need of additional support through either word of mouth or through a referral form created by a support staff member. The team then decides what services are needed to address each situation and assigns a particular team member to each student. "This way we are recognizing every student and their needs and then providing them an opportunity to get the support," explained a school leader. While some teachers felt that more time was needed to create relationships between members of the SEL team and students, many also felt that this group was a positive resource on which they could draw to get support for struggling students. One teacher said:

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[The SEL team has] really been beneficial to us as a staff, but also to our students, as we have a lot of people that can meet the different needs of our students. And because we have so many people, we have a process now where if a teacher is concerned, we come to the table about that student and those concerns. And we can kind of match who we think that student will connect with who can best meet that need. And so that's really, really great to have that support.

Providing SEL Programming

Complementing the additional support provided by the SEL Team, educators at Fillmore incorporated a range of SEL programming into their curricular offerings. In many cases these programs were targeted to support particular subsets of students. At the secondary level, for instance, the program “Why Try?” was taught to 7th graders to ease their transition out of middle school, and 10th graders were provided with a Mental Health First Aid program to help them learn how to talk about their own mental health. Community partners such as Partners for Prevention were also brought into the school to educate high school students about substance abuse. For younger children, educators touted the programs Capturing Kids’ Hearts and Zones of Regulation as having provided ways to help students manage their emotions, especially those coming back to school after the pandemic-induced closures.

Fillmore educators also explained their efforts to increase their own understanding of SEL through professional development opportunities. In addition to several book studies, a teacher explained, educators were participating in an SEL camp later in the school year. “That [SEL-related professional development] seems to be what teachers are crying out for,” she explained.

Parent/Caregiver and Community Partner Engagement

Leveraging Connections to the Community

Several Fillmore educators characterized the relationship between the school and wider community as “close-knit.” Indeed, many educators not only lived in Fillmore but were from the area and were themselves alumni of Fillmore Central School. In addition to these multiple connections, educators explained that many parents were also teachers in the school. One teacher, for instance, estimated that as many as 10 percent of staff had children in the district.

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These deep roots, educators felt, provided them with special insight into the community as well as connections to family members, many of whom they knew personally. As one teacher explained, “I don't just know students, I know their parents, I know their siblings, I know their aunts and uncles, I know their grandparents. They're my neighbors. They're the children of my childhood friends. And so there's an investment.”

Communicating through Varied Means

At Fillmore, educators communicated with families through a range of tools as well as through email, phone calls, and, when needed, home visits. The superintendent also reported that yearly surveys are conducted by an outside business to “[take] the pulse of the community, staff, and students.” He explained that that information is then used during summer professional development to drive goal setting. A parent described the ease with which she felt she could communicate with Fillmore staff, saying, “Communication to me, as a mother, it's never lacking. I never feel like I can't send [teachers] off an email or a text message, or, you know, through the SeeSaw app or Dojo.”

Engaging Families with Extracurriculars

Extracurricular events such as musicals, sports, and art exhibitions were also mentioned as spaces where educators could communicate with family members. Walking behind the school, for instance, visitors will notice a beautifully manicured turf soccer field with the Fillmore logo colorfully centered. The principal explained that, as part of a capital project, Fillmore will be building a concession stand and outdoor bathrooms for families and community members who come to watch the games.

In addition to sports, Fillmore offers an impressive array of other extracurricular activities such as school musicals and band concerts, which are performed in the spacious theater. Consistent with its reputation as the “hub of the community,” the school's art, music, and sporting events are well attended by family and community members. “You don't come to very many extracurricular events here where it's not packed,” explained one teacher. Another said, “I'd say that's the biggest outreach thing that we do.” And another explained that “[extracurricular activities] bring a lot of families and parents into the building. We try to do activities that provide that interaction.”

Staffing, Retention, and Staff Development

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Staffing Creatively to Fit Needs

As in school districts across the country – especially rural ones – Fillmore experienced challenges related to staffing shortages. “Staffing is always a concern . . . because there’s a lack of teachers everywhere, but especially in our region,” acknowledged the superintendent. To address these issues, school and district leaders recruited staff through a variety of means, including word of mouth. For instance, the principal explained that a new teacher had been recommended by a superintendent of another school district, and upon interviewing her, he found her to be a great fit for Fillmore.

Despite shortages, Fillmore recently hired a full-time school psychologist and a second school nurse as well as over a dozen new teachers. While some staff expressed concerns about integrating so many new staff members, many felt that the new hires were a positive addition -- a “breath of fresh air,” as one teacher put it. As another teacher said, “Our new teachers are enthusiastic, open to new ideas, [willing] to take constructive feedback [and to] seek out leadership.”

Providing Relevant and Engaging Opportunities for Professional Development

At Fillmore, educators were provided with a range of professional development (PD) opportunities and were also granted the flexibility to seek out PD offerings that were not available at the school or locally.

The regional BOCES was mentioned by many educators as a useful source for professional development – ranging from social-emotional programming to curricular revision and leadership mentoring. In some cases, veteran educators from the district have served as mentors for new hires or staff who have recently entered into new roles.

Coinciding with the autonomy to teach, staff also explained that they were encouraged to seek out relevant professional development opportunities but could decide to decide what those opportunities were. For some educators, simply the chance to learn from and collaborate with colleagues from different districts or states was an invaluable resource. As a support staff member explained, “I am pretty much allowed to do whatever [professional development] I say is going to be beneficial for me.”

Leaders, in turn, also expressed the need to target professional development opportunities to the particular needs articulated by staff members. A Fillmore leader, for instance, explained how they planned professional development:

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I want it [professional development] to be . . . impactful and meaningful and something that they can use, you know, the next day. . . . We're getting rid of the fluff. We're really trying to make it meaningful. And I think it's important; I try to attend as many as I can with them, so that I am on the same page that they are.

Interventions, Adjustments, and Special Arrangements

Revising the Response to Intervention Process

Fillmore educators explained that the Special Education program in recent years experienced some unexpected turnover and that their Response to Intervention (RTI) approach, in particular, was in need of some of revision. With this issue in mind, the superintendent appointed a long-serving veteran teacher as Interim Director of Special Education and created the position of Teacher on Special Assignment (TOSA), who was training to potentially take the position of Director. With guidance from these newly appointed leaders, teachers explained, the RTI process was becoming clearer and more evidence based. As one teacher put it,

I think RTI has really been our big initiative, too, and kind of just tightening up that process to make sure . . . we're really tracking students. We're using interventions, as I said, with fidelity and progress monitoring them, doing our diagnostics and benchmarks three times a year. And then we have data team meetings about every six to eight weeks, just trying to tighten that process up so that we're closing those gaps and we're not letting anybody slide through the cracks.

These changes, as a teacher explained, were meant to ensure that the RTI model was more “specific to kids’ needs.” For instance, rather than students only receiving only ELA or math interventions each day, students would now receive both. Leaders at Fillmore also sought to imbue the RTI process with consistency and standardization so teachers would use the same procedures to identify students with disabilities or who required other forms of support. Finally, as leaders explained, the interventions used by special education teachers were now compiled in a list to ensure that best practices were being used and data monitoring systems were in place to understand each interventions’ impact on students’ learning.

Promoting Positive Behaviors

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As described above, educators at Fillmore recognized the increasing prevalence of behavioral problems among students, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. To address these issues, school and district leaders placed renewed focus on promoting positive behaviors in students. Such efforts dovetailed with educators' efforts to create well-rounded and conscientious young adults.

Educators spoke of the changes to their Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) program to “encourage positive behaviors and also build some responsibility,” as one teacher put it. The PBIS system is grounded in a behavior matrix emphasizing three 3 R's: be responsible, respectful, and resilient. A parent explained how they understood the behavioral expectations placed on Fillmore students:

How are you being responsible in the bathroom? How are you being respectful in the hallway? How are you using the stairways? I mean, walk around, and you'll see them. The kids know that if they see something that is not following them [the 3 R's] that they need to tell somebody, whether it's a teacher, an upperclassman, admin, whoever.

Similarly, the Fillmore principal described his philosophy on disciplining students who do not meet behavioral expectations. “I don't just like to throw the book at somebody,” he explained, instead opting for a “progressive” approach where students are provided warnings and consequences for infractions, which increase in their severity if infractions become repetitive. During an interview, the principal recounted a conversation he had with a parent regarding a disciplinary action with a student. While emphasizing the need for consequences, he also emphasized the progress that the student had made over the last school year:

He's done a lot of good . . . he's grown in all these areas, but he still did this, so we did need to do that [discipline]. But . . . we all felt [and] reflected back to last year and realized he'd be at a much different spot . . . if this were last year.

Adding Extra Supports on School Grounds

Fillmore educators explained how they acquired additional resources and redistributed others to ensure students could be supported on school grounds.

One important change, for instance, mentioned by school and district leaders at Fillmore was the shift to keeping students in self-contained classrooms on campus rather than having them receive services at the district BOCES. As the superintendent explained, families with children requiring these specific supports may not have a reliable vehicle

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or may find it challenging to afford the gas needed to transport their children. Although families at first felt uneasy with these changes, he felt it was important for children to avoid “the stress of ‘Why am I being sent out? I’m different.’” By building the “internal capacity” – as he put it – Fillmore kept more students in the school and in their classrooms by having consultant teachers push in and support general education teachers. “So today, we have 27 kids in the building, that four years ago, would have been sent out,” he said.

Through a grant, Fillmore also partners with Literacy West, a nonprofit agency that offers education and tutoring as well as afterschool programming. One teacher, for instance, described a program sponsored by Literacy West in which students go to Buffalo and work in a food truck and restaurant run by a chef associated with Chef Gordon Ramsey. Houghton College was also mentioned by several educators as providing their students with use of their facilities for sports and other activities. The superintendent also explained that the school has developed an afterschool program running from 3:30 to 4:30 every day during which students can get additional academic support from teachers and get a bus home.

Data Use and Progress Monitoring

Using Data to Support Students with Special Needs

Educators explained how they used various forms of data to identify gaps in individual student’s learning and develop differentiated instructional practices to best meet the needs of their students receiving special education services. Several programs were mentioned by staff members as tools that assisted them in this process including, aimswebPlus, iReady, and Fountas & Pinnell. Data also played an important role in the RTI revision process described above, as educators used benchmarking data to help them monitor students’ progress. A teacher detailed this process:

If a kid is in Tier Two, they are benchmarked or progress monitored at least twice a month in the area that they’re low in. It might be oral reading fluency [or] letter naming fluency. And then Tier Three kids are progress monitored weekly. And then we also take into account teacher data, too. So they bring their data, we have the benchmark data and then state testing data from the year before, we’ll use that.

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The principal also explained that data meetings occur every 1-2 months; the Committee on Special Education (CSE) team takes a look at student data to evaluate the effectiveness of various interventions and decide on whether a student should be moved to a different tier. In addition, Fillmore educators explained how these data support their ability to differentiate instruction for students with special needs. One teacher explained how crafting instruction that was developmentally appropriate for students also helped quell behavioral issues:

[Data] will show you like, “This is what they need help on.” And then you can do smaller groups. . . . Typically when work is at their level . . . it’s not a cure all, but you know, some of those behaviors will go away because the work is appropriate for them.

Supplementing State Data with Informal Measures

At Fillmore, educators used state data to monitor students’ progress while also acknowledging the need to supplement these data with other informal measures. One teacher, for instance, felt that Regents Exam data helped them adjust their instructional practices, explaining, “My big one is state test. They break it down standard by standard. So if I’m at a lower percentage, okay, well, what was that? We’ve got to spend some more time on that, they didn’t get that.”

Although educators at Fillmore described using formal data monitoring processes and state measures to guide their instruction, they also felt that such measures needed to be complemented by informal practices to gain a fuller sense of their students’ academic performance. One teacher, for example, brought up the crucial information that conversations with their colleagues provided. For example,

I mean, for me, it’s going next door to a colleague’s room and just chatting informally, and bringing up a student. . . . But I think it’s just informal communication with colleagues, more than anything else.

For some educators, these communications were especially useful to provide insight across grade levels and plan instruction for incoming cohorts. As one teacher elaborated,

Well, I would say in terms of our continuity, which historically has been good among our staff, I rely on my colleagues to know what to expect in the next few years and to understand what this group is like. . . . Because I have an 11th and 12th grade back-to-back and I want to know what type of group I’m getting next

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year, and I have the advantage of being at the end of the road for these kids, so I can kind of you know, I can talk to these people and find out what I'm looking at and adjust my curriculum that way.

In a Nutshell

In the close-knit, rural context of Fillmore, a high priority of educators is creating strong relationships – whether it is between staff and students, among staff themselves, or between the school and community. At Fillmore, educators also sought to support students by providing them with a number of avenues for success through academics, sports, arts, music. With a strong sense of attachment to the surrounding community, educators spoke of the importance of maintaining positive relationships with families and partnering with local businesses and institutions to meet their students' needs.

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