

Promising Practices from Persistent and Emergent Positive Outliers

NYKids 20th Anniversary Study



CASE STUDY: LAFAYETTE JUNIOR-SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL

Kristen C. Wilcox, Oema Rambarhose, & Sharlee Thomas

I would say priority number one is making sure that the community trust that when they're giving us their most valuable commodity — their children — we're making sure that they stay safe. After that, I think it comes to relationships . . . and some teachers will say curriculum, right, because they [students] are here to learn, and I agree with that. But again, it goes back to that piece of — if we don't have a relationship with that kid, they're not going to learn from us. – principal

Are you a teacher because of your curriculum and your content, or are you a teacher because you want to create opportunities for students? – teacher

Study Background

For two decades NYKids has been studying typically-performing and positive 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 fosters and sustains schools' significantly better student outcomes over time. This case study describes policies, processes, and practices in LaFayette Junior/Senior High School (Jr/Sr HS) — an emergent positive outlier school.

School Selection Criteria

NYKids studied LaFayette Jr/Sr HS in our 2012-13 study. At that time, the Jr/Sr HS was identified as a typically-performing school based on its graduation rates. In the current 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

PROMISING PRACTICES FROM PERSISTENT AND EMERGENT POSITIVE OUTLIERS

NYKids 20th Anniversary Study

(those that had shown improvements in student performance outcomes), including LaFayette.

School Context

The LaFayette Central School District is located in central New York about 10 miles south of the city of Syracuse. This rural district borders the Onondaga Nation, home of the Haudensaunee “firekeepers.” The District’s four schools include: Grimshaw Elementary School, which spans grades PK-6; the Onondaga Nation School, located on the Reservation, which serves Onondaga youth from Grades PK-8; the Jr/Sr HS; and the Big Picture School (a school within the Jr/Sr HS) that offers young people the option of developing an individualized project-based learning plan with internship experiences built into the weekly schedule and support from an advisor/mentor.

The size of graduating classes from LaFayette has been declining in recent years; in the 2012-13 academic year, total enrollment in the Jr/Sr HS was 376, ten years later, it was 323 – a decrease of 14%. This loss of students has affected the numbers of teachers teaching in different content areas and grade levels. However, LaFayette also benefits from “legacy” families that have deep roots in the district and have chosen to stay and bring up their families here. As one support staff member explained, “We have a lot of families whose parents and grandparents have graduated from the district, and now their kids or grandkids are here.”

At the elementary level, Onondaga youth can attend either the Onondaga Nation School (ONS) through Grade 8, or Grimshaw (Grades K-6), entering the Jr/Sr HS as early as Grade 7. In recent years, the numbers of Onondaga youth attending the Jr/Sr HS in Grade 7 rather than entering in Grade 9 after graduating from ONS has fluctuated.

Onondaga youth make up about 1/3 of the Jr/Sr HS student population, and going back several years, the graduation rate among Onondaga youth was considerably lower than their non-native peers (c. 50% for Onondaga youth versus c. 85% for the overall population at the time of the 2012-13 study). Finding ways to engage LaFayette youth who were likely to leave before graduation, whether Onondaga or not, became part of the impetus for innovation. In 2008, several educators had come together to investigate the Big Picture high school model. Since the earlier NYKids study at LaFayette, The Big Picture School has relocated to the main Jr/Sr HS campus, expanded its facilities, and increased the number of students served to c. 60 in Grades 9-12 (it had started with 15

PROMISING PRACTICES FROM PERSISTENT AND EMERGENT POSITIVE OUTLIERS

NYKids 20th Anniversary Study

students in its first year). In the words of one Big Picture teacher and advisor, “We’ve come a long way.”

Overall, while educators characterized the LaFayette community as holding on to traditions, and being “somewhat conservative” (teacher), the district shows evidence of embracing more “nontraditional” perspectives (staff member) and approaches in recent years. These include efforts to support LGBTQ+ students and continue to build from innovations like the Big Picture school.

Student Demographics 2022-23: LaFayette Central School District

	LaFayette Jr/Sr HS	LaFayette CSD	New York State
Grades Served	7-12	K-12	K-12
Total Enrollment	323	739	2,422,494
Economically Disadvantaged	43%	52%	58%
Students with Disabilities	12%	14%	19%
English Language Learners	0%	0%	10%
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution			
American Indian/Alaska Native	28%	38%	1%
African-American	1%	1%	16%
Hispanic/Latino	2%	1%	29%
Asian/Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	1%	1%	10%
White	66%	58%	40%
Multiracial	2%	1%	3%
Other	0%	0%	0%

HIGHLIGHTS

Proactive and Purposeful Centering on Relationships and Well-being

We all work together really well to help students. They really do come first.
– support staff

PROMISING PRACTICES FROM PERSISTENT AND EMERGENT POSITIVE OUTLIERS

NYKids 20th Anniversary Study

One distinguishing feature of LaFayette Jr/Sr HS in recent years is their proactive and purposeful attention to building positive youth-adult relationships and supporting youth well-being overall. As the principal explained, in this relatively small district “We all pretty much know what’s going on with every kid. We’re all familiar with either the home situation or whatever their [students’] struggles are.” While being on the smaller and more tight-knit side of the

spectrum in terms of school and community size aids educators’ intimate knowledge of youth and family needs, LaFayette educators acknowledge that relationships are built, not given.

To that end, LaFayette educators described efforts to infuse relationship-building into the fabric of the school. These efforts have included forging closer ties to Onondaga families to raise awareness about different needs and priorities while at the same time acknowledging and honoring the ways the Onondaga Nation enriches this rural community.



Figure 1: US and Onondaga flags displayed in LaFayette Jr/Sr HS gym

Stabilizing Leadership and Fostering a Leadership Pipeline

In a small district, it takes many hands. – principal

Another notable characteristic of LaFayette Jr/Sr HS is the purposeful attention to stabilizing leadership and developing a sustainable leadership pipeline. One veteran teacher provided historical perspective on the effects of leader turnover and where the school has arrived regarding leadership in more recent years.

There was a lot of administrative turnover. . . . So when (the current principal) was hired . . . there was a lot of skepticism. Like how long was he going to be around? There was a lot of skepticism around his investment in our district. As time went on, I think he proved that he was in it. And he sort of sat back the first couple of years and took a lot in – made little changes, but mostly just observed. And I would say after about two years, he started trying to make some bigger

PROMISING PRACTICES FROM PERSISTENT AND EMERGENT POSITIVE OUTLIERS

NYKids 20th Anniversary Study

changes. . . . He's been our driving force of change . . . and he's very willing to step out and try new things.

In LaFayette, a couple of promising strategies to attract leaders and secure a pipeline of leaders for the future become apparent. First, in this district, allocating leadership roles and responsibilities to staff leading professional learning communities (PLCs) has been a successful “grow your own” leadership distribution strategy. Second, and along the lines of “putting the oxygen mask on first,” leaders seek out and use experienced mentors they know personally or through professional networks to guide them – particularly in relation to being strategic about change efforts – including how quickly they implement a change to ensure staff are ready and on board to support innovation.

Innovating around Curriculum, Instruction, and Interventions

They [school and district leaders] are trying to give kids many different opportunities to do things that they might not otherwise have had the opportunity to do. And trying to make things as accessible as possible. I think those . . . things . . . really are the main goals, and it's coming from district leadership. – teacher

District leaders described the challenges of aligning curriculum and instruction across grade levels, particularly in relation to literacy and in the context of the student learning impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, including learning lags and decreased engagement in general. As one leader explained, “It [change to literacy programming] has not been without bumps and gripes,” but “. . . we needed to bring our district together and identify a common approach for ELA instruction. And we’re making the move in the right direction.” At the time of this study, LaFayette, as a district, was working on aligning the types of assignments students were receiving across grade levels and across content areas as well as shifting to equitable grading. These have been multi-year processes reliant on the above two highlights of centering on relationships and well-being and stabilizing leadership to support such school and districtwide shifts. These alignment efforts have been coupled with testing out, and improving on, innovative instructional and intervention approaches.

PROMISING PRACTICES FROM PERSISTENT AND EMERGENT POSITIVE OUTLIERS

NYKids 20th Anniversary Study

A CLOSER LOOK

The themes above are evident throughout the eight 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

Deepening Relationships

From a historical perspective, veteran LaFayette educators pointed to a growing focus on relationship building between staff and youth and increased expectations for staff to put effort into developing caring relationships with students and supporting youth well-being. A common sentiment they shared, as stated by one support staff member, was,

In our building, since COVID, I think a big priority . . . has been just building community and really talking. Our principal is really big on building relationships with students. So, we need to deliver the curriculum. We need to make sure that kids are passing the Regents exams and graduating from high school. But I know he [the principal put a big push on, "Talk to the students . . . we want you to teach them math. We also want them [students] to enjoy coming to you."

This emphasis on "really talking" with students has extended to real changes in policies and practices, including taking more restorative approaches to discipline, as will be discussed more below. Like other schools in this study, tensions around just the right balance of care and academic press persist, and what this means for norms of behavior at LaFayette are nuanced by the school's unique positioning as a bridge between the Onondaga Nation and the broader community where cultural values and beliefs come into play.

School as a Site of Youth and Community Connection and Welcome

By virtue of being in a smaller community, the Jr/Sr HS benefits as the place where things are happening. In the words of one support staff member, "There's not a lot of opportunities for a lot of cliquy behavior" or for students to hide away from participating

PROMISING PRACTICES FROM PERSISTENT AND EMERGENT POSITIVE OUTLIERS

NYKids 20th Anniversary Study

in something. Like other small rural schools, sports are a big draw, bringing many in the community to the school. As one district leader explained,

This school is like the center of Lafayette. This is what everybody comes to. . . . You go to a sporting event and the place is packed. So it's pretty cool to see how such a small community can come together around sports.

Beyond sports facilities, clean, new, welcoming spaces abound in LaFayette Jr/Sr HS, reinforcing an intentional growing pride in the school. Spaces for kids to explore different interests include the science lab, sugar shack, garden, and the Big Picture school's "On the Dot" student-created and run coffee shop open to students and staff alike. All send messages to students and community members that "you are seen," "your contribution matters," "you are welcome here," and "we are special." Examples of how connection and welcome are promoted in practice abound at the Big Picture school, where the principal starts the day with morning meeting, and community-building is built into the structure of the day. As she explained,

As a whole school, we celebrate the goals that students set the previous day. . . . We practice mindful breathing every day. Then students head to their advisory where they spend time setting up their day, setting their daily goal. Also checking in with each other, you know, more building of that community.



Figure 2: "On the Dot" student-run coffee shop

Bridging Cultures, Balancing Priorities, and Breaking New Pathways

Over time LaFayette has faced what one veteran teacher characterized as "skepticism" from Onondaga community members about the district, "even though we've come a long way." A Native American liaison and My Brothers' Keeper Coordinator are, in part, responsible for bridging between the Nation and the district. They and other Jr/Sr HS staff spoke to the work of building bridges across cultural divides as fraught with "struggle." Balancing priorities between what "they [Onondaga youth] need per New York State, but also being able to participate in things that are culturally relevant to

PROMISING PRACTICES FROM PERSISTENT AND EMERGENT POSITIVE OUTLIERS

NYKids 20th Anniversary Study

them” has been an ongoing journey, reported a support staff member. On the horizon, however, many educators saw opportunity to build on recent advances in addressing Onondaga marginalization. As one staff member explained,

I think that's the positivity that I see moving forward, that's where I see change happening . . . building relationships with the [Onondaga] parents, so that they are trusting our [school staff] words, . . . listening to their students, . . . dropping that stigma of these schools [public] so that they understand that there are other ways to learn, and there are other ways to be successful. And it's not just traditional high school and traditional college and . . . not everyone has that same path.

Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

Assessing Costs and Benefits of Curriculum and Instructional Shifts

As mentioned above, one of the highlighted features of LaFayette, looking through the lens of its being an emergent outlier, is how they are approaching shifts in curriculum and instruction (C&I). In this regard, the historical context of LaFayette is an important part of the backstory, particularly with respect to Onondaga and wider community perspectives on what the costs and benefits of curriculum and instruction changes might be. As one staff member explained,

But there are some [Onondaga] families that still have that mindset of . . . school is not important. Like that's not for our people, . . . that it's going to take away, that we're going to lose who we are as a people, if all of our kids are continuously going to school, right? We're going to lose who we are, we're going to lose our language, we're going to lose our culture, we're going to lose all of these things that have been tried to be taken away from us all these years.

The concern about a traditional K-12 curriculum being perceived as not “important” or relevant or even equitable extends to the broader community, as well, and has influenced decisions about what C&I shifts to make. As one example of a C&I shift in progress at the time of this study, LaFayette educators prioritized looking closely at the costs and benefits of keeping, modifying, or innovating around their ELA curriculum. The impetus came, in part, from “test scores” according to one leader. Districtwide, leaders and teachers engaged in a multi-year effort that included getting “our district together to identify a common approach to ELA instruction,” said one district leader.

PROMISING PRACTICES FROM PERSISTENT AND EMERGENT POSITIVE OUTLIERS

NYKids 20th Anniversary Study

After adopting a program and before implementing it, cultural references in materials were examined, and some materials altered in consultation with Onondaga Nation representatives. With the new program in place, leaders gathered teacher feedback and examined student performance data, looking for ways they needed to continue to adjust the program. Meanwhile, a second example of a shift, described by the Superintendent below, was placing more emphasis on career and technical education (CTE) programs at the high school level. As the Superintendent explained,

We've also more than quadrupled our number of students participating in career and technical education, programming, and [our] BOCES. So I think my role is to really identify, what are some of the needs? What are some of the interest levels of our kids? How do we put resources to those areas, while also making sure that we're tending to other areas, logistically?

Navigating Assessing Equitably and for Understanding Versus Effort

In line with examining issues of equity regarding access to engaging curriculum and instruction in ELA and CTE offerings, LaFayette educators have also revisited how they assess learning. As part of this reflection, a multi-year “equitable grading” effort started with the principal’s schoolwide book study on grading for equity, which opened up dialogue and volunteer opportunities for teachers to collaborate around changing their grading practices. At the same time, the Big Picture school’s experience with performance-based assessment was being tapped for insights at the state level as to how to assess student learning other than through traditional tests; this provided another “in-house” model for LaFayette educators to turn to for new assessment ideas. Grading for equity efforts have been coupled with a related initiative to get more consistency in the use of rubrics:

We're putting more of an emphasis on rubrics. She [another teacher] and I sat down over the summer and kind of shored up all of the rubrics. And anything that didn't have a rubric attached to it, we worked together to create one. So that we all -- everyone in the department -- will have access to the same information.

– teacher

PROMISING PRACTICES FROM PERSISTENT AND EMERGENT POSITIVE OUTLIERS

NYKids 20th Anniversary Study

District and School Leadership

Leading for Culture Shifts

As described in the “Highlights” above, LaFayette has been undergoing what can be characterized as a culture shift of centering on relationships, and this extends to taking more restorative approaches to behavior. These shifts rely upon a clear vision, clear messaging around that vision, and strategies that engage the community in reflecting on what they can do better to serve youth in their community. One shift, which requires sustained effort on the part of leaders, is how discipline is approached. In this arena, fraught with minefields that run deep in teachers’ own training and experience, leadership lessons abound. LaFayette leaders and educators did not say they have it (how to adjust behavioral expectations and consequences) all figured out. Rather, transparent communication around, and doses of opportunity for, self-reflection on practices related to discipline have been orchestrated by the leadership team as a first step. For example, recent leader-initiated professional development has included anti-bias work with a simple goal of a cultural shift: in the words of one school leader, for teachers to be “nurturing, warm, and welcoming in their classrooms,” adding, “The kids should want to go and hang out with them during lunch or during after school.” Walking the talk of focusing on relationships has been a focal point for leaders, as evidenced in schoolwide activities for educators like the scavenger hunt intended to connect adults to kids in meaningful ways. As one teacher explained,

There is encouragement. I think that [relationships and rapport] . . . was his [the principal’s] push. And it has been his push for a few years now. And there are a lot of little reminders . . . like we’ll put a scavenger hunt together, for instance. And there will be a question. It’ll say, “Over the course of this month (or whatever the time period is), find three different students and find out what they’re going to do over spring break. You know, little things like that forces you to go talk to some kids that you might not check in with.

This shift extends to the community of the Onondaga Nation as well, where leaders send clear messages about the importance of developing relationships. Attesting to this shift, in the words of one staff member, “The administration here is way different [than in the past]. And I think it’s just grown to more conversations and talking.”

PROMISING PRACTICES FROM PERSISTENT AND EMERGENT POSITIVE OUTLIERS

NYKids 20th Anniversary Study

Inspiring Leaders and Supporting Them

Such schoolwide cultural shifts take time and are reliant on sustained leadership. Developing a sustainable pipeline of people to take on leadership roles requires what the principal called out as a key strategy — modeling leadership — stated succinctly: “Good leaders are the best recruiters.” Leadership pipelines, from this perspective, require leaders who inspire others to join the ranks, whether in title or function. This strategy, and its effects, were evident in how teachers talked about taking a greater role in supporting the principal and others in leadership positions. As one teacher explained,

One thing that I've seen also shift since I've been here . . . is when he [the principal] came in, he wasn't a one-man show. And [in] my personal opinion, looking from a teacher way of thinking about administration, it doesn't matter how big or small the district or the school is, the principal still has the same number of jobs to do. So I don't care that we only have 800 kids in this building. He still needed help. He could not be at a meeting and be taking care of behavioral problems at the same time. It's just not a one-man thing. So we started getting some interns that were there to help him. They hired a vice principal last year; he actually got moved to AD [Athletic Director], so he's now special ed/AD. But they hired a dean of students. So however they finagle it from year to year, he [the principal] has had help. And I think that has helped the teachers view him as being a more successful leader.

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and Youth Mental Health

A Community in Mourning: Supporting Students After Tragedy

The school and community have experienced several student suicides since the summer of 2022, and according to one support staff member, “There was a lot more need for the community at large to be involved in the process of grieving.” In response, the school community adjusted to offer a more holistic approach to student and community support. This required leadership, and at LaFayette administrators prioritized student mental health in several ways including, when informed of a student loss, they immediately contacted the counseling department to gather information and create a crisis plan for students and the community and communicated openly with the counselors about using best practices that would benefit the district's students and the surrounding community. In turn, teachers and staff offered various supports for students

PROMISING PRACTICES FROM PERSISTENT AND EMERGENT POSITIVE OUTLIERS

NYKids 20th Anniversary Study

to help express and process their grief. Grief counselors and therapy dogs were made readily available to students and staff soon after becoming aware of the student deaths, with counselors from neighboring districts offering support. In addition, activities such as a basketball tournament and memorial service, and board games, kickball and kite flying events were organized to help the community process the losses and invite students and community members to come together. A support staff member echoed the message being sent: “Anyone who needs to come in and be part of the community can come in.”

SEL and Mental Health Data Collection and Proactive Measures

At LaFayette, a behavioral intervention and assessment system (BIMAS) has been implemented to become more proactive in relation to youth mental health. This digital screening tool allows faculty and staff to collect data regarding executive functioning, emotional well-being, and other SEL characteristics. The district is actively working toward being more proactive and getting out in front of possible issues, “We largely react to situations as they come up and we are trying to . . . have more time with kids that we see struggling so that we can try to help them do better,” said a support staff member. Although a continuous effort, the district has implemented options for students to regulate and practice social-emotional skills. Another innovation to support mental health is the Zen Den, where students can sit and relax or just “take a breath,” with the intended effect of helping students to refocus and self-monitor their mental health. In addition, teachers and counselors have become more sensitive to students' emotional needs. Teachers and support staff meet weekly during professional learning communities and student support team times to discuss students' social-emotional as well as academic needs. These weekly meetings allow for frequent, meaningful conversations to create plans of action to support students in need.

Parent/Caregiver and Community Partner Engagement

A Team Approach to Communications

Teachers and staff described some shared tactics to address student needs, starting with trying to converse with students to understand their concerns and contacting parents to communicate concerns. To manage parent and caregiver outreach responsibilities, they rely on a team approach whereby the school facilities staff,

PROMISING PRACTICES FROM PERSISTENT AND EMERGENT POSITIVE OUTLIERS

NYKids 20th Anniversary Study

teachers, and support staff focus their discussion on groups of students within a cohort. This approach allows staff to communicate frequently with each other regarding the needs and concerns of students, identify which families to reach out to, and determine who is making those connections. Leadership also works to foster relationships with families when opportunities are available. For example, the athletic/special education director explained, “I’m the face of the athletic department and the face of the special education department. So when I am chairing all of these special education CSE meetings, I’m sitting there with parents.”

Use of Technology to Foster Parent Communication

Email and a school-to-home communication app play critical roles in fostering communication with parents and caregivers. ParentSquare, the communication app, has recently been implemented districtwide to facilitate mass communication and help families stay informed about upcoming school events and other important information. Parents attested to the value of such technologies; as one parent declared, “As a parent, I like it [the app]. And other parents have said they’ve appreciated it. It’s nice to be able to revert back to . . . ‘Oh, I know, I read that on ParentSquare.’” Additionally, teachers use email to communicate day-to-day events and maintain a record of conversations with caregivers while being considerate of parents’ work obligations. The student management system used by the district is a technology parents can access to view their child’s academic progress. SchoolTool allows parents to view schedules, grades, attendance, discipline, and academic progress. To help parents better understand grading, the teachers also include descriptors. For example, if a student received a zero for an assignment, a short explanation would be included, such as being absent. This additional definition of grading allows parents to have a better understanding of their child’s performance in each class.

Outreach to the Onondaga Nation

There is abundant evidence of the historical injustices Indigenous communities have endured within the educational system in this country, and these have deeply affected those communities, including the Onondaga. Thus, LaFayette educators feel it imperative that they build trusting, supportive relationships with Onondaga parents and caregivers. As one support staff member explained, “There are certain [Onondaga]

PROMISING PRACTICES FROM PERSISTENT AND EMERGENT POSITIVE OUTLIERS

NYKids 20th Anniversary Study

families that have an ingrained distrust with the education system, just based off generational trauma, and everything that's going on, and that has gone on with that, [so we are] trying to continue to build that relationship with our Onondaga Nation and make sure we're being culturally responsive." To this end, the Native American liaison, who as a member of the Onondaga Nation understands the community's unique needs, frequently contacts students and families to foster relationships.

Staffing, Retention, and Staff Development

Staff Fit to School

Staff attested to being attracted to LaFayette because of its small community feel and uniqueness, and Jr/Sr HS leaders described a few priorities when hiring: They look for educators who 1) are a good fit for the uniqueness of LaFayette, 2) have diverse passions and interests beyond their content knowledge, and 3) can connect with young people. While not directly related to the Jr/Sr HS, the emphasis on appropriate fit of staff across the district has been evident in recent hires. For example, when looking for a new principal for the Grade PK-8 Onondaga Nation School, for example, district leaders wanted "someone who's going to function well with our team and share the same common goal of working with us as a district, but also respecting the Nation for their uniqueness," said one leader. For the Big Picture school, the more skills and interests the candidate has beyond their content area, the better, said the current principal:

I'm looking for the certification, but . . . I really don't care about that. . . . I'm really looking for someone who cares about children more than they care about their content or their certification. And someone who has interests and passions and abilities outside of their content. So I'm making the assumption that you can teach your subject. But I want to know what else you can offer. And that you like human beings.

The harmony of staff being attracted to LaFayette's uniqueness and leaders looking for those who appreciate and enhance that uniqueness has worked very well for staff retention. The district has had relatively low turnover and consists mostly of veteran staff. Now that the veteran staff are starting to retire, the district is looking for new staff, especially those with Native-American heritage, but there aren't many candidates available. Unfortunately, the candidate pool is thin, especially for those who fit these criteria.

PROMISING PRACTICES FROM PERSISTENT AND EMERGENT POSITIVE OUTLIERS

NYKids 20th Anniversary Study

Fostering a Culture of Understanding – the LaFayette Way

As LaFayette embraces its uniqueness and is attempting to create an environment in which students are understood and supported, leaders have been adding more support staff. As one support staff member explained, “This past year was the first year that all of our schools had a social worker. . . . We have a school psychologist, a social worker, and at least one school counselor in all of our schools. So making sure that if somebody you know maybe isn't . . . performing well academically and [is] having a rough day in terms of their mental health needs, somebody's there to connect with that child.” The district and school board have added these extra positions in their budgets so the students can receive this support, even after federal/state COVID-related funding runs out.

LaFayette not only supports students directly through support staff, but also uses professional development to foster a culture of understanding in which staff empathize with their students. The superintendent explained, “We try to we try to work in as much as we can to help teachers empathize and understand what our students are going through.” They have offered professional development in epigenetics, relationship building, equitable grading, trauma-informed care, and other related topics. As one example, and as mentioned earlier, the principal offered a voluntary book study opportunity on *Grading for Equity* by Joel Feldman. This book study became so popular that the district set up a second round because the staff who were not part of the conversation the first time requested to participate. This initiative led to meaningful changes in their grading policy and a shift in the culture in general. As one leader explained,

It [the grading for equity initiative] completely transformed the culture. And what I mean by that is, I'll give you an example, the retake policy: like we struggle a bit, and it's not perfect, but at the same time, our kids know that if they mess up, they're going to get another chance to take that exam. But we also found that the negative side of that is that kids won't put forth their best effort sometimes the first time. So we put in basically a caveat of when a retake would be allowed. So [we're] trying to come up with a system that's incorporating some of those values that Joel talked about, but making it what LaFayette feels is best for our students here.

PROMISING PRACTICES FROM PERSISTENT AND EMERGENT POSITIVE OUTLIERS

NYKids 20th Anniversary Study

Interventions, Adjustments, and Special Arrangements

Innovating around Student-Centered and Targeted Interventions

Like most districts across the country, especially post pandemic-related school closures, LaFayette educators have needed to innovate to help their students succeed. The grading policy adjustments, for example, take into consideration that some students may have familial responsibilities and other constraints (e.g., lack of electricity) that prevent them from completing their work at home. In addition to these policy-related changes, LaFayette has also recently innovated around the common problem of sub-optimal impact of their interventions. One solution was to shift the “What I Need” (WIN) intervention program from after school to during the school day. How this evolved is instructive: After opening up conversations among staff about the effectiveness of interventions and landing on the shared conclusion that LaFayette was not reaching the kids that really needed intervention as intended, the principal proposed testing a change. The switch of the WIN program from after school to the middle of the day was initiated and after a few weeks, the principal checked in with students, staff, and parents on the outcome. Participants in this study – including parents, staff, and leaders – were unanimously positive about making the shift permanent, with one leader echoing the sentiment of others on the efficacy of the shift, explaining

that opportunity (mid-day WIN) will give students the opportunity to meet with a teacher of their choice, or if they're in academic good standing, they're able to go to intramurals or they're going to the auditorium for free time. And it's an opportunity for teachers to get their eyes on kids more. Instead of the kids staying after school and hating that 45 minutes after school . . . when they want to go home and play video games, now they're forced to do it during the day.

Other examples of student-centered interventions include implementing a Math Lab to support students struggling with Algebra, specifically; having an advisory teaching assistant in the Big Picture School who follows the students for four years and communicates the student's needs to their advisor and teachers; and enhancing communications with the teachers of incoming students to ensure that the HS staff are aware of students' needs and can proactively prepare to help them in their transitions to the HS.

PROMISING PRACTICES FROM PERSISTENT AND EMERGENT POSITIVE OUTLIERS

NYKids 20th Anniversary Study

Using Trials and Data to Identify What Works and for Whom in LaFayette

As described above regarding the WIN program shift, LaFayette uses trials and data from the trial periods to continuously innovate. A one-year trial period for their new grading policy led to a grading policy that accounted for students' home lives and resulted in a more equitable grading practice schoolwide. A support staff member recounted their collaborative approach:

So, we sat down as a committee, and anyone was welcome to join the committee. I want to say we maybe had 10 people who were actually part of the committee. And we planned it all out over the summer. We debated and we planned and we negotiated. We came up with a trial plan. And then for a year, we piloted the grading policy as a trial. I don't think people had to do it necessarily. But we had some people pilot this program. And then we went back as a school. And we looked at the data. . . . We looked at the issues people were having and revised the policy,. and then we put the revised plan into place.

As another example, the District Improvement Committee, comprised of district and school staff, board members and parents, looked at what the district was doing well and what they were struggling with to inform the implementation of their new ELA and Math programs. As a committee member explained,

I know that there were some inconsistencies with some of the programs related to English language arts and how that was being delivered. And same for math. So they did these assessments and then it was determined, okay, maybe the program we're using isn't good. And so they went with a new ELA program and it was just needing consistency with the chosen program, and not wavering from it, at least for two or three years. And there's resistance there, right, because you've got teachers who teach things their way, but we need to really standardize so that we can see where baseline is and then show growth. And I know for math, they did the same sort of assessment and the math program wasn't the problem, it was just improving the skills.

This shift to a more context-specific and data-based approach to interventions has allowed LaFayette educators to monitor student progress and notice nuances such as needing, in particular, to improve math skills rather than changing to a new math program altogether.

PROMISING PRACTICES FROM PERSISTENT AND EMERGENT POSITIVE OUTLIERS

NYKids 20th Anniversary Study

Data Use and Progress Monitoring

Continuously Improving Practices and Programs with Data

As described above, how data are collected and made sense of in LaFayette has changed over time. The staff and leaders now continuously seek ways to use data to help improve their practices and to inform program and other changes. A school leader explained their evolution to a more collaborative and disciplined approach to collecting and using data:

It's just constantly knowing we can always do better. We can always work to be better. How can we better utilize this data? I think we're way above where we used to be. Data team meetings didn't exist. Now, that [data] is talked about pretty regularly in the seventh and eighth grade teams. Every marking period, I put out what's called an early warning intervention monitoring system. So basically, what it is – is it takes into consideration the student's attendance, grades, behaviors, and out-of-school suspension.

LaFayette educators attested to using data to identify specific gaps in student knowledge and skills as well as to identify patterns in behavioral or other concerns. The principal asserted that “analyzing data is really a skill in and of itself,” and because of this has drawn on external support from BOCES to help school staff analyze trend data and make sense of it. He explained the approach they are using:

If we have conversations of, “This discipline isn't working, or that's not,” show me the referral, show me why; let's have those conversations. . . . one of the things that we're doing is we're doing an audit through BOCES and they're going to come and look at everything. They're going to look at our suspension rates, our attendance rates. They're going to look at all of this type of stuff. And they're going to say, “Here are the trends that we see.”

Strategically Improving Student Progress Monitoring Systems

LaFayette is also trying to improve how it collects and uses behavioral data specifically. The district uses the Behavioral Intervention Monitoring and Assessment System (BIMAS) to monitor student's needs, but the BIMAS program does not allow them to progress monitor as effectively as they would like. A school counselor explains what they are working on to improve:

PROMISING PRACTICES FROM PERSISTENT AND EMERGENT POSITIVE OUTLIERS

NYKids 20th Anniversary Study

When we go to CSE [Committee on Special Education] and a student receives mandated counseling on their IEP or their 504, we are trying to find a way to use the BIMAS to write those goals, and then to monitor those goals because that's currently something that we struggle with. A lot of times, goals get put on their IEPs that have to do with mental health. They're not written in a way that supports actual data collection. . . . So that's something we're working on. And that's something we'd very much like to be able to do: to have a system where we're actually progress-monitoring and not just meeting with students to try and help them with no real way to know if we're helping or not.

Another interesting note about the shift in using and improving the use of data is that it is strategic and well planned. LaFayette educators tend to not tackle everything at once, but rather to work on high priority areas in manageable phases. When implementing IXL (an interactive online learning platform), for example, they started slowly on purpose – as explained by the principal:

This is our first year, and my goal for this year with IXL was get teachers using it. If we could do 10 minutes a week. Get the kids familiar with it. Don't just make it a one and done universal screener, but get them exposed to it. Try to start moving it into your curriculum, and not put any mandates or not put any goals necessarily on the board of this is what I want you to get. But just get it in your classroom. So then next year, what we'll do is we're going to do a usage report. So I want to set leaderboards based on grade levels and just how many questions are we answering right, wrong, or indifferent? . . . And then let's see where that leads us... how many skills are we actually mastering? Are we getting that 80? So setting that bar and moving it a little bit each time so eventually we're getting to that proficiency piece. But it's going to take time because we see that kids are struggling with these skills. And some of these kids are way below grade level. And so this is really about exposure. Next year is about completion and completion with accuracy. And then we go from that, right. And start setting goals of overall proficiency.

Instead of overwhelming teachers by mandating IXL use right away, leaders rolled IXL out in a methodological way using data to monitor how it is being used throughout the journey. They set small goals and slowly look to advance towards these goals without the added pressure of urgency. They embrace the idea that change takes time.

PROMISING PRACTICES FROM PERSISTENT AND EMERGENT POSITIVE OUTLIERS

NYKids 20th Anniversary Study

In a Nutshell

LaFayette Jr/Sr High School shows evidence of having made several cultural, organizational, and practical shifts in recent years to meet the needs of their unique rural community. These include shifting from defining success largely by the state's outcome measures to defining success as youth holistic well-being, engagement, and academic growth. As part of this cultural shift they have centered their efforts on developing deeper relationships with youth and with Onondaga Nation families and have provided anti-bias/equity professional learning opportunities and shifts in grading and discipline policies to support these changes. LaFayette shows evidence of clarifying their vision for the future and matching that vision with a leadership pipeline and staffing to fit their community needs now and in the future. These cultural and organizational shifts are matched with the use of innovative instructional models (e.g., Big Picture); student-centered interventions (e.g., mid-day WIN); and adaptations to, or adoptions of, new math and ELA programs and data systems.

LaFayette Junior Senior High School

Principal Jason Ryan

Big Picture High School

Principal Susan Hart

3122 Rt. 11 North

LaFayette, NY 13084