



# Emergent and Persistent Positive Outlier Schools

What Accounts for Better Student Outcomes Over Time?





## About NYKids

Since its inception in 2004, one goal of NYKids has been to help educators learn about promising practices from other educators. To date NYKids has identified promising practices at all levels, elementary, middle, and high school, with special attention to schools with above-predicted outcomes among socioeconomically, culturally, and linguistically diverse youth taking into account demographic variables. Results of all studies are available in reports, case studies, articles, books, and presentations on the [NYKids website](https://www.ny-kids.org). To download a copy of this report and other NYKids resources, to learn more about NYKids and earlier studies, or to use our school performance tracker database to compare school outcomes go to: [www.ny-kids.org](https://www.ny-kids.org)

NYKids is housed in the University at Albany’s School of Education and is a school improvement hub guided by the mission to “inform, inspire, and improve” in the service of youth, families, and educators in New York State and beyond.

Guidance is provided by an [Advisory Board](#) including representatives from public and private regional and statewide organizations. Funding is provided, in part, by the State of New York and the University at Albany.

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# Introduction and Preview of Findings

The year 2024 is significant in this study's design as it marks NYKids' 20th anniversary. Over NYKids' two decades of informing, inspiring and improving, our research teams conducted 11 studies examining a total of 68 positive outlier schools (those that achieved above-predicted student outcomes taking into account demographic variables) and 34 "typically performing" schools (those that achieved predicted student outcomes taking into account demographic variables).

In the context of demographic shifts, numerous education policy innovations (e.g., Race to the Top) and significantly disruptive events and even crises (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic), this study sought to identify what contributes to positive outlier schools consistently achieving above-predicted student outcomes as well as what contributes to "typically-performing" schools improving student outcomes over time.

## We, therefore, investigated two sets of schools:

**Persistent positive outlier schools** were identified in prior NYKids studies for having achieved statistically significant better student outcomes and continue to do so using the same, but most current, student outcome and demographic variables.

**Emergent positive outlier schools** were identified in prior NYKids studies for having achieved "typical" student outcomes, but have emerged as positive outliers using the same, but most current, student outcome and demographic variables.

## Our study was guided by the questions:

1. Have some positive outlier schools maintained their positive outlier status over time?
2. Have any typically performing schools emerged as positive outliers?
3. What accounts for these outcomes?

## We identified four major, interrelated commonalities among the persistent positive outlier schools. They focus on:

- Building and Rebuilding Positive Relationships
- Enhancing Competency-based and Affinity-based Curriculum and Instruction
- Flattening, Steadying, and Stabilizing Leadership
- Structuring Components of a Learning Organization into the Fabric of the School

# The Case Study Schools

This report is based on case studies of seven schools the NYKids team identified for exhibiting relatively better student outcomes since the first NYKids study in the 2004-05 school year. Each complete case study is available on NYKids' [Research Results](#) page and highlights from them appear throughout this report. Details about the sample selection and study methods can be found on page 33. A separate [Methods and Procedures Report](#) provides more information about the sampling method and conduct of this study.

## PERSISTENT POSITIVE OUTLIER SCHOOLS

### Alfred-Almond Jr/Sr High School



Alfred-Almond Jr/Sr High School sits between the towns of Alfred and Almond along the Allegany Mountain range. Although geographically remote, the region is home to Alfred University and Alfred State College (SUNY). The district has experienced a decrease in student enrollment since NYKids' 2017-18 study of the school. Alfred-Almond boasts a reputation as a strong academic school and offers a range of extracurricular programs, including in the arts. The school bases many of its activities around student interests and seeks to meet different community members' needs and priorities. Alfred-Almond Jr/Sr HS was included in this study due to its identification in the 2017-18 study and its significantly better graduation outcomes in 2021 and 2022.

### Brookfield Central School



Brookfield Central School is located in Madison County, approximately two hours west of Albany and one hour east of Syracuse. The district serves just under 200 students within a large school building in the center of town. Educators at Brookfield felt that the small-town qualities of the district contribute to the strong relationships throughout the school and community. Brookfield offers an array of course choices, including courses for college credit and career and technical education. Brookfield was included in this study due to its identification in the 2012-13 study and its significantly better graduation outcomes in 2021 and 2022.

### Crown Point Central School District (CSD)



Crown Point Central School, in Essex County, is housed in a large brick building in the center of town where you also find a post office, convenience store, small businesses, and a few dozen homes. Crown Point is described by educators as a close-knit "family" where everyone knows each other and staff members hold deep ties within the community. In roughly the last decade, Crown Point has seen a 24% increase in its student population, even amid declines in student populations in neighboring districts. Services for students with disabilities as well as the district's solid reputation are seen as reasons for growing enrollment. Crown Point was included in this study due to its identification in the 2017-18 study and its significantly better graduation outcomes in 2021 and 2022.

### Malverne Senior High School



Located in Nassau County, Malverne Senior High School serves a richly diverse school community. Over the years, the percentage of English language learners (ELLs) has increased, and many of these students are native Spanish speakers; however, a growing number of Malverne students come from South Asia and the Caribbean. Malverne is known for its ties to the Civil Rights movement, which contributes to the district's attention to inclusive and culturally relevant teaching practices. In recent years, Malverne educators have become keen to adapt to new challenges impacting student engagement, as well as youths' overall mental and physical well-being. Malverne was included in this study due to its identification in the 2017-18 study and its significantly better graduation outcomes in 2021 and 2022.

# The Case Study Schools

## EMERGENT POSITIVE OUTLIER SCHOOLS

### Fillmore Central School



Fillmore Central School serves a total of 600 students who share a building in the center of town in Allegany County in New York's southern tier. Fillmore is a rural school, yet within 75 minutes of the cities of Rochester and Buffalo. Additionally, Houghton University is located near Fillmore and contributes to the socioeconomic and cultural characteristics of the surrounding community. According to staff, the deep-rooted connections built within Fillmore extend into the community and foster a sense of shared commitment to the well-being of students and families. Additionally, community members are offered a range of activities and events to enjoy on the school campus. Fillmore was included in this study due to its identification in the 2017-18 study and its significantly better graduation outcomes in 2021 and 2022.

### LaFayette Jr/Sr High School



Located in central New York, LaFayette Central School District lies about 10 miles south of the city of Syracuse. LaFayette is a rural district and shares a border with the Onondaga Nation. The district is comprised of four schools, including the Onondaga Nation School, which is located on Onondaga Territory. Additionally, LaFayette runs the Big Picture School within the Jr/Sr HS that offers students individualized project-based learning and internship experiences. Educators characterized LaFayette as being steeped in tradition while moving in the direction of embracing new and diverse perspectives. LaFayette was included in this study due to its identification in the 2012-13 study and its significantly better graduation outcomes in 2021 and 2022.

### Roxbury Central School

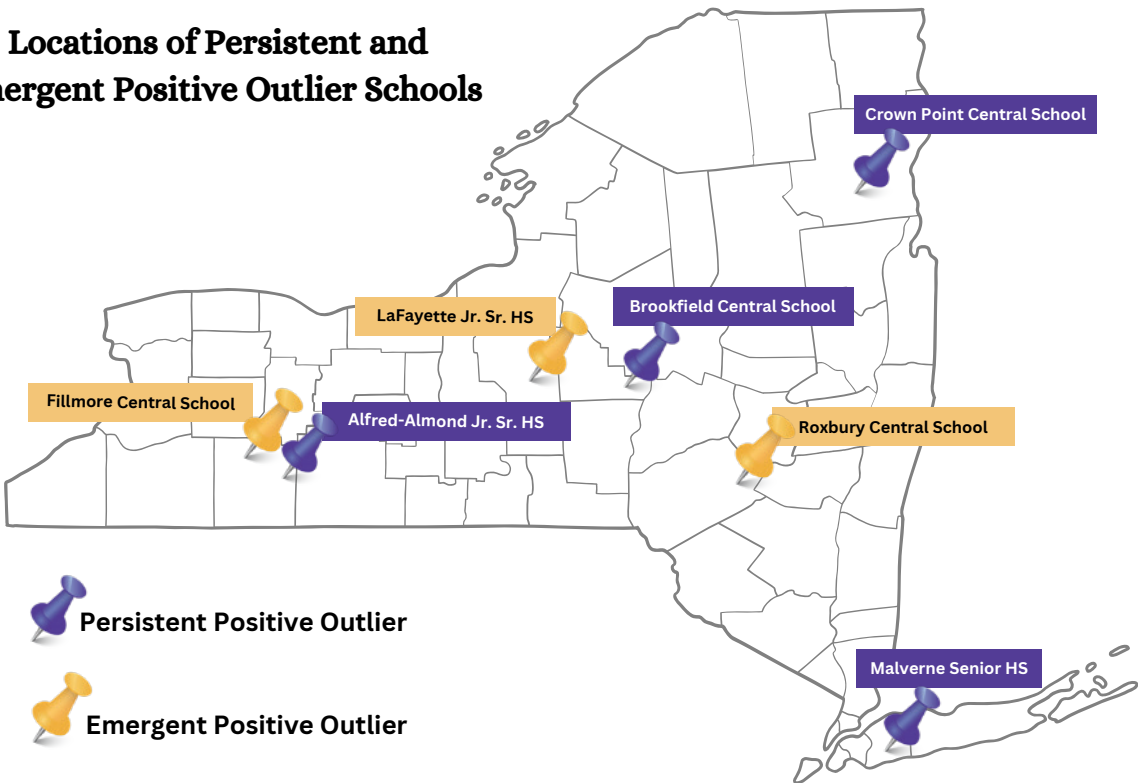


Roxbury Central School is home to just over 200 students. Located in the northern Catskill Mountains, the school is about 90 minutes from the cities of Albany, Poughkeepsie, and Binghamton. Roxbury has seen a recent influx of families moving to the region and buying second homes. Educators described their rural school community as close-knit—a place where educators foster relationships with students over time. “Soft skills” and extracurricular activities are emphasized at Roxbury Central School. Over the years, educators have been adapting to challenges including rising student mental health challenges, budget shortfalls, and outmigration of some community members. Roxbury was included in this study due to its identification in the 2012-13 study and its significantly better graduation outcomes in 2021 and 2022.

# Demographics of the Case Study Schools

School	Total Enrollment	Grade Span	Economically Disadvantaged	Students with Disabilities	ELL	American Indian / Alaska Native	African American	Hispanic Latino	Asian / Native Hawaiian / Other Pacific Islander	White	Multiracial	National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) Urbanicity Category
Alfred-Almond Jr/Sr HS	272	7-12	45%	15%	0	0	0	5%	4%	88%	3%	Rural Fringe
Brookfield Central School	195	K-12	78%	24%	0	0	1%	0	0	99%	1%	Rural Distant
Crown Point Central School	301	K-12	57%	20%	0	0	0	0	0	100%	0	Rural Distant
Malverne Senior HS	628	9-12	46%	14%	1%	0	48%	28%	7%	15%	1%	Suburb Large
Fillmore Central School	589	6-8	61%	15%	0	0	1%	1%	1%	96%	0	Rural Remote
Lafayette Jr/ Sr HS	323	7-12	43%	12%	0	28%	1%	2%	1%	66%	2%	Rural Fringe
Roxbury Central School	212	K-12	42%	18%	0	0	1%	2%	0	92%	4%	Rural Remote
NYS Average	2,422,494	K-12	58%	19%	10%	1%	16%	29%	10%	40%	3%	

## Locations of Persistent and Emergent Positive Outlier Schools



# The New York Context

**N**ew York State boasts a relatively high proportion of college-educated individuals, with approximately 40% of the population over the age of 25 possessing a bachelor’s degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). In contrast, the state ranks in the bottom third of states in high school completion at approximately 88 percent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). Graduation rates vary across demographic groups; the New York State Education Department (NYSED) reports, for instance, that African American and Hispanic or Latino students graduate at a rate of 81%, whereas White students do so at a rate of 91%. Class and language also matter; economically disadvantaged (a proxy for students living in poverty) students graduate at a rate of 82%, and English language learners, at a rate of only 57%. These inequities emerge at an early age, with rates of proficiency in Math and English Language Arts (ELA) showing disparities across race and class on statewide testing conducted from grades 3-8 (NYSED, 2023a).

In light of these student outcomes, New York, like other states across the nation, has implemented several policy reforms over the past few decades. Many of these were initiated by the U.S. Department of Education with the intent to close opportunity gaps between subgroups of students across the nation (e.g., No Child Left Behind, 2001; Race-to-the-Top, 2011; and the Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). These policies required changes to what was to be taught and assessed and how teachers’ instruction and student learning would be monitored (Wilcox et al., 2017). In recent years, New York has led the way in promoting frameworks that emphasize culturally responsive and sustaining education (NYSED, n.d.-a) and continuous improvement processes and tools to inform school and district improvement planning (NYSED, n.d.-b).

While these frameworks, processes, and tools provide ways to close opportunity gaps and enhance all youth’s learning prospects, they have also placed new demands on educators to meet equity and inclusion goals and enhance the relevance and applicability of what they teach to youths’ lives in and out of school. One strategy to support meeting these goals has been through the work of the Blue-Ribbon Commission on Graduation Measures. This Commission, made up of members of the New York State Education Department, the Board of Regents, a Parent Advisory Committee, and a Student Advisory Committee, proposed

“four priority areas” to guide educational innovation:

- 1) multiple pathways leading to one high school diploma,
- 2) assessment flexibility,
- 3) understanding of meaningful life-ready credentials, and
- 4) culturally responsive curriculum, instruction, and assessment (NYSED, 2023b).

This work to promote equity and enhance all youths’ learning experiences has been accompanied by concerns over educator workforce turnover and shortages (Gardner & Slattry, 2024; Sutchter et al., 2019). One recent RAND Corporation report highlighted a concerning finding: Nearly one in four teachers reported that they were likely to leave the profession by the end of the 2022–23 school year (Doan et al., 2024). Among teachers who remain in the profession, many have suffered from deteriorating morale and job satisfaction (Leo et al., 2022; Will, 2021).

Recent scholarship has noted that turnover is not only a problem among teachers but is also a concern for school and district leaders (DeMatthews et al., 2022). Research shows that the effects of both leader and educator turnover and shortages ultimately predict negative impacts on student achievement and threaten the ability of public schools to meet essential youth and family needs (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). NYKids research as well as other studies offer recommendations that may help mitigate educator turnover. For example, promoting collegial relationships



and a collaborative school culture has been associated with mitigating stress and burnout (Kraft et al., 2021; Schiller et al., 2023). Supportive and responsive leaders can also help ensure retention of high-quality staff (Prilleltensky et al., 2016). In addition, the availability of mental health counseling from trained professionals, the institution of mindfulness practices, and mentorship programs provide important benefits to educators and, by extension, youth as well (Harding et al., 2019; Jakubowski & Sitko-Dominik, 2021).

The past two decades have seen engagement strategies for youth, families, and community partners shift in order to address the historical imbalance of power between schools and other stakeholders. Previous paradigms of “family involvement” have been replaced with more egalitarian frameworks between schools and families that consider the many varied ways families take part in their children’s education (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). These strategies take inspiration from culturally responsive approaches and seek to build from families’ existing resources, funds of knowledge, and cultural backgrounds instead of expecting families to conform to normative school practices that may favor some families above others (Ishimaru, 2014; 2019; Leo et al., 2019). Such a shift requires educators to share power with families in ways that foster agency and empowerment, actively involving family members in their children’s learning experiences inside and outside of school and democratizing relationships between educators and families (Adams & Christenson, 2000; Goodall & Montgomery, 2014).

Recent approaches to student engagement have followed a similar trajectory by drawing on culturally relevant and responsive frameworks to inform pedagogy and curriculum from students’ existing resources and knowledge (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2014). In addition, contemporary approaches to student engagement have sought to foster student agency and voice rather than viewing students as passive recipients of school knowledge (Cook-Sather, 2020). Additional frameworks have viewed students’ academic engagement as intimately related to social-emotional well-being, thus

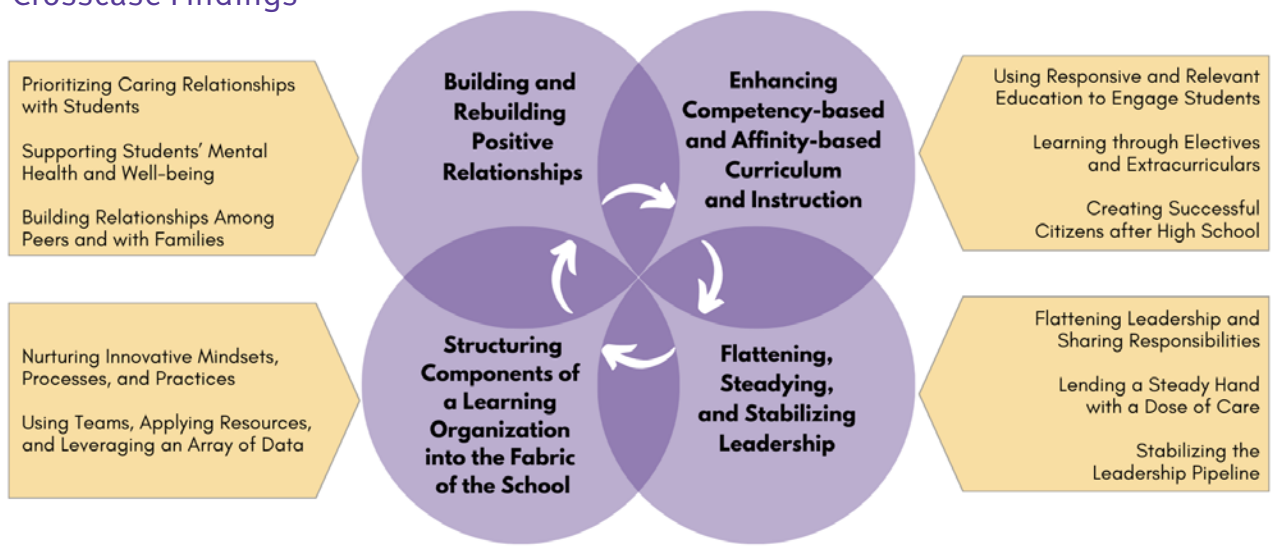
requiring collective partnerships between schools, homes, and communities (Lawson & Lawson, 2020).

In addition, and in response to the rising rates of anxiety and depression among youth (Abrams, 2023), educators have redoubled their efforts to support students’ mental health by hiring additional counseling staff and partnering with community organizations to increase the resources available to all students. Educators have also worked to incorporate social-emotional learning (SEL) opportunities into curricular and extracurricular programming to ensure that students – even those not currently dealing with severe symptoms – are taught ways to cope with adversity and stress (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Relatedly, many educators have revisited the purpose of schooling and goals for students after high school, emphasizing “soft skills” such as civic-mindedness, cooperation, and critical thinking (Mehta & Fine, 2019). Concomitant with this shift has been a broadening of the possible pathways for students after high school through the addition of internship and robust career and technical education (CTE) programs (Dougherty, 2023).

Educators have also employed new systems of data collection and analysis to identify aspects of their school that require improvement and developed interventions to address them. For instance, many schools have adopted a Multi-Tiered System of Supports to ensure that each student’s individual needs can be met accurately. Schools may use team-based models such as Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) to foster collaboration and gain insight from a range of stakeholders. Overall, such efforts represent a shift away from using data solely for accountability purposes and towards school improvement models (Pullin, 2017).

Informed by the research literature summarized above, we examined the following lines of inquiry in this study: school culture and climate, culturally responsive pedagogy, district and school leadership, social-emotional learning, family engagement, community partnerships, staffing and organizational capacity building, interventions and special arrangements, and data generation and utilization.

## Crosscase Findings



# 1.

## Building and Rebuilding Positive Relationships

In recent years youth mental health has become a major priority for educators, policymakers, and researchers. While these concerns were evident prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, reports describing youths' growing mental health struggles have increased in the last several years (Abrams, 2023). Schools play a significant role in not only educating students, but also in providing critical mental health services to students (Duong et al., 2021). Noting the rising challenges youth face, educators have worked to ensure that adequate resources are available to students in need of support, for example by adding staff trained to provide counseling. The widespread challenges faced by students have also prompted a range of opportunities and programs for social-emotional learning (SEL) to strengthen youths' well-being, even if they may not currently be experiencing mental health struggles. As shown in the examples drawn from positive outlier schools below, educators integrate SEL lessons into curricular content or develop programs and opportunities for students to participate in outside of class. Many educators in positive outlier schools in this study also felt that students' social-emotional well-being and mental health should be prioritized above – and viewed as a prerequisite to – students' academic learning.

**We care about them [students] as human beings . . . before we . . . educate them.** – Teacher (Brookfield)

In addition to the focused attention given to students' mental health, educators at the seven positive outlier schools in this study articulated the importance of building positive relationships with students. Educators felt that trusting relationships were crucial to ensure that students felt comfortable sharing their struggles with educators. Significantly, educators also described their efforts to develop relationships with students collectively and felt that this was a goal embedded in the school culture and shared across all staff members. However, we found relationships between staff members and students were not the only relationships cultivated by educators in the positive outlier schools. For example, at many schools, deliberate efforts were made by educators to connect peers with one another and to create positive relationships between students across grade levels – a finding highlighted in prior research (Leo et al., 2022). Lastly, as recent research has indicated (Hartney & Finger, 2022; Leo et al., 2024), the COVID-19 pandemic strained relationships between families and schools in many communities. Confirming these findings, educators at many schools in this study described the difficulties they faced in engaging families throughout the pandemic, and they detailed

efforts they had made recently to rebuild trust with the community and re-engage families in their children's education.

Three dimensions related to relationships and relationship building salient to this study are:

- Prioritizing caring relationships with students
- Supporting students' mental health and well-being
- Building relationships among peers and with families

### Prioritizing Caring Relationships with Students

Educators at positive outlier schools emphasized the need to build positive relationships with their students in many ways. One message echoed across the seven participating schools was that building caring relationships with students was a necessary requisite to effectively teaching them. For educators at these schools, building relationships with students was viewed as essential for students to be active academic learners.

At LaFayette, for instance, the principal explained that building “trust” with the community and making sure students were “safe” in school was crucial. This applied to teaching, too; as the principal explained, “If we don't have a relationship with that kid, they're not going to learn from us.” Staff at LaFayette also understood the significance and believed that academic engagement would be fostered if they had strong relationships with their 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] we also want them [students] to enjoy coming to you,” said a support staff member.

Educators at other schools also expressed the need to prioritize relationship building. A teacher from Roxbury explained that their teaching “strategies” were “based in personal relationships with the kids.” A support staff member articulated a similar message, noting that student engagement was only possible with trust between staff and students. “If you don't have a positive relationship or a trusting relationship with the student . . . you're not going to be able to move forward,” they said. The principal at Roxbury highlighted the connection between student engagement, attendance, and relationships with staff members, saying, “Kids want to be in school, and they're going to work for someone that they have that connection with.”

A teacher from Alfred-Almond likewise felt that “building those relationships makes a huge difference” in supporting students and engaging them academically. Another Alfred-Almond teacher articulated a similar viewpoint, explaining

how building a “connection” with students helped establish the classroom and school as a safe environment where students felt they could trust educators to share their struggles and reach out to teachers for additional support:

*I think those connections—for me, some of that’s bigger than the rest of it . . . for kids to know that you care about them; that you’re going to advocate; that you’ve noticed them; you know what they need. . . . I’ll get emails from kids from the cafeteria, “Can [I] just come talk to you for five minutes?” “You sure can.” But you have to build that connection first.*

At Fillmore, educators centered their efforts to create relationships with students around the theme of “belonging.” Like the educators quoted above, Fillmore staff recognized that supporting and building positive relationships was necessary for them to reap academic benefits. “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,” said the superintendent.



Fillmore hallway sign, “Everyone is Welcome Here, Everyone Belongs”

Importantly, educators felt that the goal of developing positive relationships with students was shared by all staff members and approached collectively. As a teacher from Fillmore explained,

*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.*

Similarly, a support staff member at Crown Point explained how educators regularly communicated with each other to pass along information about a student who may be struggling. “If there’s one thing going on in the school, everyone on the staff knows,” she explained. These messages not only ensured that no students “slipped through the cracks,” as one teacher put it, but also emphasized the message that relationship building with students was a collective responsibility shared across the entire staff.

In the following section, we explore how educators at positive outlier schools not only established nurturing relationships with students but also increased the resources available to support students’ mental health and well-being.

## Supporting Students’ Mental Health and Well-being

Noting the growing frequency and severity of mental health challenges experienced by their students, educators across positive outlier schools endeavored to increase the supports and resources available to students. They acknowledged that students’ mental health was an important priority which could not take a backseat to academic learning. “[T]here’s a lot more focus on mental health and social-emotional learning and trying to sort of teach the whole child and knowing that . . . it can impact how kids are doing,” said a support staff member at LaFayette. Echoing these sentiments, a support staff member from Fillmore described a shift in the “culture” of the school, partly due to the COVID-19 pandemic. “I think student needs are being put on the forefront. I think that there’s been a shift in the culture of school that allows for student needs to be a priority instead of just focusing on academics,” she said.

To address these growing needs, educators at positive outlier schools found ways to add additional counseling staff and ensure that students had access to mental health counseling and other services. Many schools drew on countywide organizations to supplement the resources available on school grounds. Malverne, for instance, partnered with a nearby healthcare provider for behavioral and other healthcare options and follow-ups for students. Alfred-Almond and Brookfield also added mental health professionals to ensure that all students could receive counseling services if they required them. Like Brookfield, Crown Point drew on grant funds to hire an additional mental health counselor and also partnered with a non-profit organization called “the Prevention Team” to bring extra counseling supports four times per week to the school. A staff member at Crown Point also became a certified trainer in Therapeutic Crisis Intervention (TCI) techniques used to de-escalate situations in which a student may be experiencing a severe behavioral episode and then trained others in these techniques to ensure that students in crisis could be assisted safely.

Several schools also created teams composed of educators, support staff, and mental health professionals to identify students exhibiting mental health struggles. At Fillmore, for

instance, an SEL Team was formed in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure that students who may be exhibiting mental health challenges would receive the supports they needed. LaFayette (Student Support Team) and Crown Point (Positive School Environment Team) also developed their own groups to support students with mental health struggles in a targeted and timely manner.

### When you belong, you achieve – School Leader (Fillmore)

In addition to shoring up the number of staff providing counseling services to students, educators at positive outlier schools also expanded SEL programming to benefit their entire student population, regardless of whether they required more direct mental health services. At Brookfield, for example, educators offered a Mental Health First Aid program to 10th graders, with plans to expand an augmented form of the class to elementary school students. At Fillmore, a range of SEL programs aimed at helping students manage their emotions were provided to students; for example, WhyTry, Zones of Regulation, and Capturing Kids' Hearts were used to support students struggling with the return to school following the COVID-related closures. Educators at Crown Point also added SEL programming to their curriculum; in addition to mindfulness programs such as MindUP, the school took part in the youth empowerment program called Sweethearts and Heroes. LaFayette developed a range of SEL programs to support students and created a Zen Den where students can take a moment to relax and refocus themselves during stressful moments.

In addition to the elements of SEL added to their curricula, several schools also employed Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS) programs. Alfred-Almond, for example, developed a PBIS program called SOAR – Safety, Ownership, Acceptance, and Respect. The program focuses on relationship building, especially for youth transitioning into secondary school. As a school leader explained:

*[I]t's S-O-A-R for the Eagles. We use golden tickets for students who demonstrate those expected behaviors. If you walk to the elementary, there are matrices that you see that have -- what does it look like in every area. We do assemblies, which are just like huge celebrations for positive behaviors. We do a lot.*

At Fillmore, educators emphasized the significance of instilling character traits, such as respect and resiliency and implemented a new PBIS program to “encourage positive behaviors and also build some responsibility,” as one teacher put it. The system centers around 3 R's: being 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.*

## Building Relationships among Peers and with Families

The final dimension in this theme explores the ways educators in this study fostered positive relationships among peers and with family members.

Peer relationships were described by many positive outlier educators as an important priority and a factor that contributed significantly to the climate and culture of the school. Crown Point – a school previously noted for its emphasis on peer relationships in prior NYKids scholarship (Leo et al., 2022) – has long used a program called Panther Mentors, which pairs children with older students in the school. More recently, educators at Crown Point created a Lunch Bunch group that informally meets weekly to share their thoughts and feelings in a safe space.

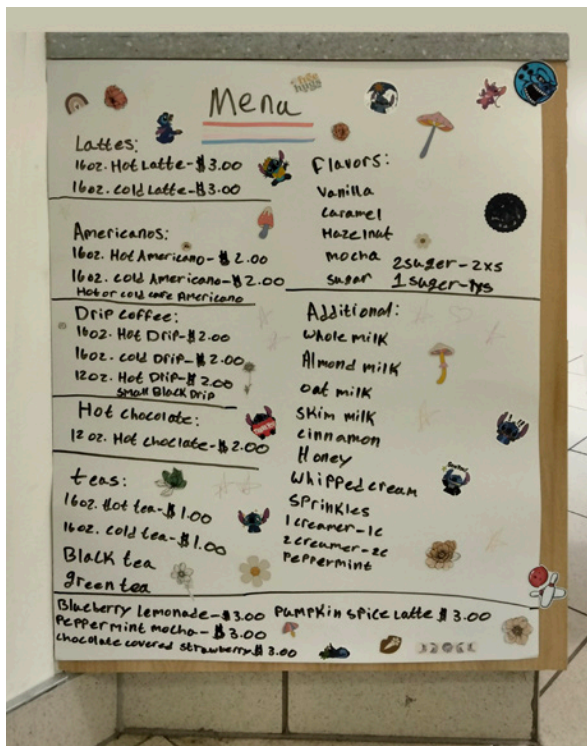
At Brookfield, educators used similar programs to pair up students from different age levels. One example was the Book Buddies program, in which 6th graders read books to pre-K students. The program helped to facilitate connections across grade levels and, according to teachers, carried on through high school. “[Book Buddies] become friends, and when they see him on the playground . . . those kids remember the time when they're seniors and the other kid is that sixth grader, [that] they're Book buddies. It's pretty astonishing,” she explained.

Fillmore, another rural school that took part in this study and housed all students PK-12 in the same building, recounted similar relationships that developed among peers, in part due to the small, close-knit nature of the school and community. As the superintendent explained:

*The students . . . 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.*

In other contexts, educators developed positive peer relationships while also instilling a sense of leadership and agency in the process. At Malverne, for instance, educators described the numerous clubs and extracurriculars that students developed and, in doing so, formed connections with students across the school. Malverne students also participated in a program called Reconnecting Youth to facilitate relationships among peers in their school and the wider community. At LaFayette, students were also encouraged to take ownership over their learning and develop programs and clubs that reflected their own interests. In many cases, these programs helped to establish peer relationships such as a student-run coffee shop called On the Dot, which is open to students and staff at the school. Brookfield created programs that not only

helped develop peer relationships across grade levels, but also expanded student agency and leadership. One such program is the Elementary Safety Patrol in which middle-schoolers assist younger students on and off the bus. According to a Brookfield parent, the program creates positive connections between peers while also giving youth an opportunity to be “in a leadership role” and act as a “role model” for younger kids.



Student-run coffee shop menu at LaFayette

Educators at schools made efforts to create and strengthen trusting relationships with students’ families. Across the seven participating schools, educators explained using a variety of tools to communicate with families ranging from traditional emails, phone calls, and letters home to apps such as SchoolTool, Class Dojo and ParentSquare. The underlying message from these educators was an effort to accommodate families and communicate with them in ways that best suited them and their schedules. As a teacher from Brookfield explained, “If a parent doesn’t answer an email, follow up [with] a phone call just so you can get that parent involvement in some way, shape, or form.” Parents who participated in the study often expressed appreciation for the variety of communication platforms made available to them; as one parent from LaFayette put it, “As a parent, I like it. 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.’”

Efforts to solicit family members’ perspectives and involve them in decisions about their children’s education were also evident in several participating schools. ThoughtExchange was described as a useful program that could survey family members about their opinions and welcome them to contribute

feedback that could be used in decision making. For example, leaders at Fillmore explained how an upcoming capital project included plans to build a concession stand and outside bathrooms for sporting events – a request made by families through a survey. At Malverne, family members were encouraged to voice their opinions through a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Committee. A parent described how the committee provided a platform for family members to be heard:

*They [Malverne educators] were so intentional about getting information from the general population as to what the needs are, what’s important to the community, what are some of the positives as well as the negatives so that they can improve on them. There were a lot of surveys that were sent out, some included just the students, some were for students and staff, some were for students, staff, and parents. We [parents] definitely did see them [Malverne educators] use that information to add certain programs and just make minor changes around the school that had a big impact on the student population.*

Educators at several schools described the need to reach out to families not only with concerns about their children but also with positive news and updates about children’s academic progress or recently completed projects. For instance, at Roxbury, educators created private Facebook pages where family members can see what their children are working on throughout the school year. The pages helped show families the “good things that are happening here,” explained one teacher. “I feel like that’s helped things a little bit trying to get people back in the building in a positive way, trying to build some of that positive communication,” she continued. Similarly, at Brookfield, the annual Celebration of Excellence recognizes students’ academic and athletic successes during the school year. Family members are sent letters that notify them about the celebration. Regarding the celebration of their children’s accomplishments, one Brookfield parent explained, “It’s nice to be able to hang those on your fridge.”

**I would have to say, the interaction between staff and parents is very open, and it’s very good.**

– Dean of Students (Crown Point)

In addition to these more formal events, educators across positive outlier schools described how extracurriculars (described more in Theme 2) serve to engage family members. For instance, at Fillmore, educators explained how sporting events, musicals, and art exhibits drew large numbers of family and community members. “You don’t come to very many extracurricular events here where it’s not packed,” said one teacher at Fillmore, while another added, “I’d say that’s the biggest outreach thing that we do.”

## On the Continuum

One of the ways to interpret similarities and differences between emergent and persistent outliers is on a continuum.

### Emergent Positive Outlier Schools

Building positive relationships with students is seen as an important priority for educators; however, it is unclear whether this responsibility is shared across the entire staff. There is a growing recognition that students' social-emotional well-being is paramount to academic success, but it is not viewed as a prerequisite.

Educators have added resources and additional staff to support students' mental health and well-being although social-emotional learning opportunities are not fully embedded in school programs or curriculum.

Relationship building extends to families and peers. Educators are seeking to rebuild trust with families and the wider community due to strains that occurred or were exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Families are engaged using a variety of tools, although communications are usually one-way.

### Persistent Positive Outlier Schools

Building positive relationships with students is seen as a shared responsibility among entire staff. Student well-being is prioritized above academic success and seen as a necessary prerequisite to academic engagement.

Staff members seek to support students with a variety of mental health resources and social-emotional learning opportunities that are embedded in curricular and extracurricular programming.

Relationship-building among peers is seen as an important piece of school culture and promoted through various programs and activities. Family engagement is accomplished by giving family members voice and welcoming their opinions about their children's schooling. Despite recent challenges, the relationship between the school and community remains positive due, in part, to trust built prior to the pandemic.

## WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE IN

# Crown Point Central School

This excerpt from the Crown Point Central School case study highlights findings related to Theme 1.

## Building Long-Term Relationships with Students

A recurring theme in interviews with educators at Crown Point was the focus on building positive, long-term relationships with students. With a small staff and all students housed in the same building, educators felt that they could develop close connections with students as they progressed through the different levels of school. As a teacher explained,

*Everyone is very in tune with the students because they have the same 25 students in their class all day long. All of our high schoolers have the same English teacher, so they have them for four years. So they're not just another kid in the bunch. [The Superintendent] can name every student's parent; where they live; who their siblings are.*

Other educators emphasized relationship building as a crucial element of their job duties and an important factor that accounts for positive outcomes with their students. “I just think relationships are so important and are one of the reasons that we have the success that we do here,” said one teacher. Another explained, “I think one of the most important things you can do with your students is to have a relationship with them.”

## A Variety of Social-Emotional Learning Programs

Educators described a number of programs dedicated to enhancing students' social-emotional learning. Educators felt that these programs were necessary for all students – not just those exhibiting more severe challenges. “[Students] got used to being at home, and then they weren't comfortable returning to school,” said one teacher referring to the effects of the pandemic. As another teacher put it, “The students are not the same as they were prior to the pandemic.”

One program praised by several participants is “Sweethearts and Heroes,” which, according to its website, focuses on “youth empowerment” by “invit[ing] the sharing of stories, perspectives, and emotions.” As one educator put it, the program has helped students by “bringing out the good in other people by noticing the good in yourself.”

In addition to these programs, in 2023 Crown Point teachers began a “Lunch Bunch” group that brought together students voluntarily to meet and share with each other informally during the school day. Complementing these programs, educators felt that the close-knit nature of the school and their multiple roles ensured all students feel a sense of belonging somewhere and with someone.



Warm and welcoming Academic Intervention Services (ELA) classroom at Crown Point

## Fostering Personal Connections with Families

Many educators felt that the close-knit rural community of Crown Point allowed them to create positive relationships with family members. For example, many educators explained how teaching students throughout their entire K-12 education provided them with time to cultivate long-lasting relationships with family members based on years of personal experience with their children. As one educator put it, “[Students’] parents know who I am, I’ve been here long enough that I’ve kind of earned my stripes, so to speak.”

Other educators explained how their presence in the community helped connect them with parents in different ways whether it was at activities, events, or by coaching sports. “I think it’s also helpful that it is small because those connections are able to be built so much easier,” said one teacher. Several educators were longtime members of the community and alumni of Crown Point. Growing up in the town gave these educators additional insights and previous relationships with family members that carried over into their positions at the school. As the Dean of Students said, “I graduated from here. So a lot of the parents I went to school with, or, you know, family, or you know, friends, whatever it is, so I’m very well known.”

# 2.

## Enhancing Competency-based and Affinity-based Curriculum and Instruction

Efforts to keep students engaged in classrooms have long been a priority for educators, school leaders, researchers, and policymakers. Recent research suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic and school-related closures created new challenges as teachers struggled to keep students motivated and academically engaged during periods of remote learning (Yang et al., 2023). These declines in student engagement may have been largest among historically underserved groups of students (Center for Reinventing Public Education, 2023). But, even prior to the pandemic, researchers had contended that traditional models of schooling in which students are passive consumers of knowledge were no longer pedagogically viable (Cook-Sather, 2020). Instead, students should be given opportunities to use their voices and have decision-making power over their own learning. Students should also be provided with curricular options based on their interests, aptitudes, and bases of knowledge. Such responsive and relevant forms of curricular instruction can connect students to their communities as can hands-on forms of learning (Gay, 2018; Yemini et al., 2022).

**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.** – Teacher (Fillmore)

These shifts have been evident in postsecondary planning, as well. While college readiness remains a priority for educators, there is a growing emphasis on workforce preparation of students, especially for blue-collar occupations, through various pathways such as Career and Technical Education (CTE) (Wilcox et al., 2018). Although CTE has been viewed as a less rigorous alternative for secondary students, recent research suggests that these programs make youth more competitive in the labor market and do not necessarily deter them from pursuing a college degree (Ecton & Dougherty, 2023).

As our research on the positive outlier schools demonstrates below, educators strove to keep students engaged by developing curricula that drew on students' interests. Educators also created hands-on learning opportunities that further highlighted issues relevant to students' lives outside of school, creating a range of electives and extracurriculars in which students could participate. Lastly, educators initiated various post-secondary pathways for students and promoted

an idea of “success” that centered around becoming an active member of one's community and society.

Patterns related to competency-based and affinity-based curriculum and instruction found in this study are:

- Using responsive and relevant education to engage students
- Learning through electives and extracurriculars
- Creating successful citizens after high school

### Using Responsive and Relevant Education to Engage Students

When describing how they kept students engaged in their own learning, a common refrain of positive outlier educators was to incorporate responsive and relevant topics into curricula. In many cases, they inquired into students' interests and preferences in an effort to provide students with a sense of control over their own learning.

For example, at Crown Point, a teacher explained how she began her classes by simply asking students “what it is they want to learn.” She explained this feedback was integral to the direction of the class, “So that is literally how I drive the course, because I want it to be meaningful to them. And I don't want them to feel like they're wasting their time.” Educators at Brookfield also described numerous efforts to make classwork engaging to their students through hands-on learning opportunities that were relevant to students' lives (see more examples below). Like their peers in Crown Point, Brookfield teachers explained how they integrated students' interests into their classrooms: “For me, high-quality teaching always starts with the kids,” said one teacher.

Our team uncovered many examples of responsive curricular offerings provided in positive outlier schools. In Brookfield and Fillmore, for instance, educators drew on the agricultural history of the community and reinstated Agriculture programs that gave students hands-on opportunities to hone their skills with both plants and animals. At Roxbury, educators also worked to connect classroom discussions to issues outside the classroom. Describing a lesson that linked Veteran's Day and post-traumatic stress disorder to a wider conversation about mental health, one Roxbury teacher explained: “A problem can be applicable to the community.” Roxbury educators also engaged students in environmental



issues impacting their community, participating in initiatives such as the Catskill Stream Brush Buffer in which they planted trees along the East Branch of the Delaware River to help mitigate erosion.

extracurricular opportunities to engage students and promote a vision of success that extended beyond solely academic accomplishments (discussed more in the final dimension of this theme).

## Learning through Electives and Extracurriculars

This section explores how educators in positive outlier schools approached learning holistically by developing an array of electives and extracurricular choices to engage students and foster well-rounded learners. At Malverne, for instance, students can choose from a range of electives, extracurriculars, and sports that pique their interests. Consistent with the value of student agency at Malverne, the principal shared that the school has over two dozen clubs that are all “student initiated.” “They’re engaged in making decisions. Students have an active role and voice in what they want in here,” she explained.

**I would describe Malverne as an inclusive environment. I think it’s an environment where . . . everyone knows the students by name and [knows] their needs and their strengths and how to help them academically, and athletically, and socially.** – Parent (Malverne)

Educators shared that the electives, clubs, and extracurriculars offered to students at Malverne are so popular that it is challenging to fit all the activities they are interested in into the students’ schedules. To address this need, educators at Malverne employ new technologies to track the rosters of clubs and activities to prevent scheduling conflicts. They have also created an additional 11th period so that students can have more flexibility in setting up their schedules. As one parent put it, “The students have ownership over their schedules.”

As in Malverne, students at Alfred-Almond are also of-



Native American literature section in LaFayette Jr/Sr HS library

Several schools in this study also strove to develop curriculum that was relevant to the diverse cultural backgrounds of their student populations. For instance, at LaFayette, a Native American liaison and My Brothers’ Keeper Coordinator worked to ensure that the sizeable population of students from the Onondaga Nation were provided with culturally relevant activities and were represented in the school’s activities, appearance, and values. At Malverne, educators described efforts to engage their African American students through projects and coursework that highlighted significant historical events in the surrounding community. One example described by school leaders was a student-led effort to change the elementary school’s street name, which had previously borne the name of a Ku Klux Klan leader. In addition to community-based projects, the school also continues to provide students with a Black Studies course and uses curricular elements that center on themes of social justice, such as the book *Martin and Anne*, which is a fictionalized story of a conversation between Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Anne Frank.

In the following section, we discuss how educators at positive outlier schools created a range of electives and



Malverne student projects highlight diverse figures in science

ferred an array of extracurricular activities and electives ranging from Drones, Home Repair, Intro to Keyboarding, Student Success-Computer Literacy, to Core Fitness. The

school showcases products created in these programs such as in tiles displayed on the cafeteria walls and murals in the hallways. Alfred-Almond operates on a “year-long, modified block” schedule that – in the words of one teacher – “allows students to have more electives.” As a teacher at Alfred-Almond explained, the schedule has “on days” as well as “off days” that provide longer periods of instructional time in content classes while also allowing students time to participate in extracurriculars and clubs.

Extracurriculars also provide additional opportunities for educators to further strengthen positive relationships with families and students, as discussed in Theme 1. For instance, educators in many of the schools that participated in this study often referred to the school as the “hub” or “center” of the community, often attracting large crowds for sporting events, plays, and art exhibits. As a teacher from LaFayette commented:

*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.*

Likewise, at Fillmore and Crown Point, educators explained that their small size meant that teachers and other school staff often took on coaching duties that allowed them to connect with students and their families in different ways. “Those connections are able to be built so much easier,” said one Crown Point teacher, reflecting on how their role as a coach helped them foster positive relationships with students. A teacher at Fillmore echoed a similar idea, explaining, “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.” Another Fillmore teacher added that their roles in extracurriculars allowed them to “reach” students and families in additional ways: “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.”

The final section in this theme describes the ways educators in positive outlier schools understood success for their students and how they were getting students prepared for life beyond high school.

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

– Superintendent (Fillmore)

## Forming Good Citizens after High School

In positive outlier schools, educators viewed success for their students in broad terms, more expansive than students getting good grades and enrolling at a college – they defined success to also include students gaining “soft skills” such as teamwork, respect, and civic-mindedness alongside academic learning. Many educators spoke about the need to prepare students to be active members of their communities. A teacher, for instance, described her goals for students as to “be a good citizen, a productive citizen.” “We are trying to prepare life skills for beyond these walls. We want them [students] to be successful as adults,” said another teacher. A Roxbury teacher had a similar message when asked about goals for their students: “My most important role is to be a good role model for students . . . just helping students become better human beings.”

As described above, the emphasis on extracurricular activities, electives, and nonacademic programs provided various ways for students to be “successful” at school besides getting a good grade in class or on an exam. “It’s not just looking at a number on a test,” explained a Fillmore teacher. A LaFayette teacher articulated a similar view of success: “Are you a teacher because of your curriculum and your content, or are you a teacher because you want to create opportunities for students?” A Brookfield support staff member articulated a similar message about student success: “Student-wise, we just like to create well-rounded students. You know, expose them to many, as many things as we can, academically, athletically, culturally.”

A focus on forming well-rounded students was also evident at Malverne where the “Portrait of a Graduate” for 2024 emphasized both academic skills as well as values such as collaboration, resilience, and civic-mindedness. In line with Malverne’s inclusive approach, the “Portrait” was created using school and community survey feedback. Malverne parents interviewed as part of this study recognized the holistic learning opportunities available to their students. One parent touted the “emphasis on culture, sports, music, theater, clubs, engaging children, teaching them how to work and be with one another.”

The fundamental view that students should be well-rounded individuals with a range of academic and nonacademic skills was also emphasized when educators at positive outlier schools were asked about preparing students for life after graduation. As a teacher from Roxbury put it, “I think that we want to make the kids successful in the real world. And it doesn’t matter if they’re going to college or the workforce, or it doesn’t matter what they’re doing. They’re going to be active participants, we hope, in their community and in life.” To support students’ various pathways after high school,



Alfred-Almond Jr/Sr HS workshop

educators at positive outlier schools ensured that students would be prepared for whatever they chose to do.

To this end, educators at positive outlier schools worked with their regional BOCES to enhance the Career and Technical Education (CTE) offerings available to students seeking to enter the workforce after high school. The superintendent of LaFayette, for instance, estimated that the number of students participating in CTE programs had quadrupled since

they began to be offered. Likewise, to ensure that students had a detailed and realistic plan after high school, Roxbury educators developed a “senior seminar” in which students create a project about their future desired career and shadow a community member who performs in their selected profession. As the principal of Roxbury explained, “Everybody [here] . . . wants what’s best for kids going forward so that when they graduate, they can go into the military, they can go into college, they can go ahead and get a job.” Similarly, educators at Fillmore reported a rising interest in CTE programs and responded by enhancing their programming along with the regional BOCES as well as a nonprofit agency called Literacy West. One project developed in partnership with the agency was a culinary program in which students work in a food truck and restaurant run by a chef associated with Gordon Ramsey.

While the growth in CTE opportunities was a salient feature of positive outlier schools’ instructional programming, college readiness remained a priority at all seven schools. To this end, positive outlier schools emphasized early college planning and developed partnerships with local colleges to offer credit-bearing courses. “I want our kids to enter college . . . because a college diploma is what a high school diploma used to be,” explained the superintendent of Malverne.

## On the Continuum

One of the ways to interpret similarities and differences between emergent and persistent outliers is on a continuum.

### Emergent Positive Outlier Schools

Curriculum contains elements of responsive and relevant forms of education alongside teacher-directed lessons. Students are encouraged to connect their learning to issues that they find important and interesting.

Electives and extracurriculars are available for students, but these may or may not be derived based on students’ interests. Educators view success holistically but emphasize academic skills as the main priority.

Educators seek to create well-rounded learners, although college after high school is seen as the primary goal. Workforce readiness programs exist to support students.

### Persistent Positive Outlier Schools

Educators inquire into students’ interests and knowledge bases and incorporate them into curricular elements. Issues that are relevant to students’ lives outside of school are connected to learning opportunities within classrooms.

A range of electives and extracurriculars are provided to students and often based on students’ interests. These opportunities allow students to pursue success in valued ways beyond academics and often serve as a way to engage families and the community.

Students are supported in their pursuits after high school – whether this involves college or entering the workforce. Robust CTE programs prepare students for a range of careers in which they may be interested while credit-bearing college courses are available to students seeking postsecondary education. Educators’ goal for students is for them to be active members of their communities.

## WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE IN

# Brookfield Central School

This excerpt from the Brookfield case study<sup>2</sup> highlights findings related to Theme 2.

## Preparing Students for Life after High School

Students at Brookfield were provided a range of learning opportunities designed to provide them with knowledge that would be applicable to their lives after school. Underlying these efforts, educators stressed, was the overarching goal for students to become active members of their community and be well-rounded, conscientious individuals. A teacher commented on the way Brookfield students were prepared for what would come after graduation, saying, “I feel like we have such a good way of getting them through high school that they graduate from here knowing that they can and will take on anything that comes their way, and they can do whatever they want to do.”

These efforts were reflected in the curricula at Brookfield, which offered students career and technical education through the local BOCES as well as credit-bearing college courses. A teacher explained how students were supported in their post-graduation pursuits with the guiding principle being to prepare “people” and not just students:

*Whatever the student wants to be . . . we’ve given them the tools to do that when they leave. And whether it’s work-force, whether it’s college, whether it’s a gap year, whatever it is, we’ve given them the tools to do what they want to do, in the building when they’re here and when they leave. And I think, at the end of the day, we’re not preparing students to be students, we need to prepare students to be people.*

## Using Responsive Curricula to Engage Students

At Brookfield, educators across content areas described their efforts to make their curriculum relevant and engaging to their students through hands-on learning opportunities. The principal elaborated on what she hoped to see in Brookfield classrooms: “We don’t want the teacher in the front lecturing and the students in their seats passively engaging with maybe note-taking or whatever it is they’re passively doing. That’s not engagement. That’s not real learning.” Many educators echoed this view in interviews, explaining how they integrated students’ interests and needs into their pedagogical approaches. One teacher, for instance, said, “For me, high quality teaching always starts with the kids.”

To develop responsive and relevant curricula, educators at Brookfield often asked students about their interests in classrooms or through a survey, which was mentioned by a parent as

having been sent out in recent years. One teacher, for example, explained his efforts to be “more responsive” by “asking what [students] need, or what [they] think could have gone better.” Another teacher explained the process of integrating students’ choice of topics into curricular content:

*We’d gotten through the content, and toward the end of the year, we asked them, “What would you like to learn for the remainder of the year?” We gave them a list of topics, you know, pick your top two, and just give us a brief explanation why you might want to learn it.*

This approach, educators explained, was ultimately more engaging to students. One teacher described the value of “knowing your students, so you can figure out what interests them.” He continued, “And if you know what interests them, it’s easier to teach them. You can tie in their interests to the content and focus on that and refer back to it.”

One prominent example of the responsive approach taken at Brookfield is the reinstatement of the Future Farmers of America (FFA) agricultural program. The program involves a range of hands-on activities including caring for plants and animals in classrooms and attending a conference in Buffalo. The principal explained the value the FFA program brought to the school and wider community, “We are one of the only schools left in the area that has a really big agricultural base. So we wanted to really capitalize on that. It’s what kids are interested in, they love it.” A parent explained how important agriculture is to students and their families: “That [FFA [program]] really intrigues [them], sparks their learning.”

## Teaching through Hands-On Learning

Another important feature described by educators at Brookfield – and complementing the responsive and engaging curricula – is an emphasis on hands-on approaches to learning that can be applied in real-world situations. Many educators explained their desire to move beyond state exams as measures of students’ success or teaching effectiveness. The superintendent asserted that students’ success “shouldn’t be about a test score. We want to see what you’re able to do in so many different ways. And we want to be able [to see] how you’re working with people and projects you’re working on.” A teacher described their goals for students as defined by how the knowledge learned in school could be used outside of the classroom.

<sup>2</sup> See complete case study at [https://ny-kids.org/wp-content/uploads/Brookfield-Case-Study-23\\_24-Study.FINAL\\_.pdf](https://ny-kids.org/wp-content/uploads/Brookfield-Case-Study-23_24-Study.FINAL_.pdf)

# 3.

## Flattening, Steadying, and Stabilizing Leadership

**They [leaders] push that philosophy [of high levels of professionalism], and . . . everyone is agreeable to it because . . . I wouldn't say we're all on the same page—that would be probably not true. But we're close to being on the same page.** – Teacher (Alfred-Almond Jr/Sr HS)

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, school and district leaders faced a variety of new challenges including their own and their staff's abilities to manage complex challenges. For one, the pandemic created, and in some cases widened, gaps in youth academic and social-emotional learning; it also increased the frequency and severity of youth mental health issues. These adversities were not experienced equally; the most vulnerable youth and families tended to experience the most severe negative impacts (Ashcroft et al., 2024; Jopling & Harness, 2021). Such challenges required leaders to ensure that adequate and timely resources – human and material – were provided in the near-term and that those resources would be sustainable once federal COVID relief funds dried up. These challenges also expanded the scope of leaders' work, which required re-envisioning how work would be distributed and how staff would be protected from overload.

As a NYKids study of the pandemic's impacts on the educator workforce (Wilcox et al., 2022) revealed, schools whose leaders empowered staff to make decisions around, and take collective responsibility for addressing, challenges tended to be associated with greater staff job satisfaction (Schiller et al., 2023). NYKids' and other research in recent years has also shown (Lawson et al., 2017) that schools and districts staffed by educators who are more satisfied with their jobs tend to be associated with lower workforce turnover and a number of better student outcomes (Tropova et al., 2020).

As we inquired into what patterns we might find in persistent and emergent positive outlier schools, findings around leadership rose to the top of the most consequential in explaining the conditions and factors related to better than predicted student outcomes. While we found some marked differences in leaders' individual styles in terms of how they balance school and district administrative responsibilities, engage with community members and their Boards of Education, and offer the care and material resources their staff and students need, we also noted some clear patterns across the

leaders in this study in terms what they prioritize and do.

Patterns related to leadership in this study are:

- Flattening leadership and sharing responsibilities
- Lending a steady hand with a dose of care
- Stabilizing the leadership pipeline

### Flattening Leadership and Sharing Responsibilities

As much of the research on school and district leadership in recent years has found, the roles and responsibilities of school and district leaders have shifted along with changing youth and community expectations and needs, available resources, and policies impacting the what, how, how much, and when of instructional and noninstructional services (Cheng, 2024; Wilcox et al., 2024). One pattern we noted among school and district leaders in persistent positive outlier schools is the way they distribute power for problem identification, problem solving, and innovation.

The idea of “flattening leadership” involves reducing the power differential between staff closest to kids and families and those in designated leadership positions and sharing responsibilities across a wide range of staff. While the concept of “flattening” came directly from a district leader in our study, it captured a pattern across leaders in persistent positive outliers and was also evident to some extent in the emergent positive outliers.

**I feel that we have a leadership team that is flat. . . . Everybody has a part to play. And I think that that's really important. I'm the superintendent, but I want you to take me on. . . . I feel like I want an organization where they [staff] will be able to push back on me.** – Superintendent (Malverne)

Flattening power structures requires affording staff a balanced degree of autonomy, which goes hand in hand with beliefs and associated behaviors that rest on recognizing staff as professionals with valuable skills and knowledge. As one example, in Crown Point, teachers reported being treated “as equals” (support staff member) and being trusted by those in designated leadership positions to use their professional judgment in their practice. As one teacher explained,



Crown Point's mission statement, vision, and core values on display in the school hallway

*I think the administration has always been really understanding and not very rigid on . . . “the rules.” I mean, yes, there are rules or policies that need to be followed, but . . . I think people appreciate that [understanding and flexibility].*

Importantly, this approach is accompanied by clear messaging about 1) who the point people are to support the work at hand (or who are “in the know” to facilitate the work), 2) expectations for staying focused on what is best for youth and families, and 3) roles and responsibilities for staff in helping achieve the school mission, advance toward its vision, and address current priorities.

While Malverne district leaders, as exemplified in the quotation above, talk about “flattening” leadership and sharing responsibilities for enacting changes, it is not a free-for-all for anyone to do anything. Instead, the various people who take leadership roles are clear about what those roles are and who the point people are to take the reins when an action needs to be taken. In other words, it is “balanced.” The Malverne principal explained,

*So if I really know I need something for assessments, I'm gonna go see [dean of students] about it. If [dean*

*of students] is unavailable, though, I know I can always go to [assistant principal] about it. If [assistant principal]'s not available, they [teachers] can always come to me . . . but they know who the point person is. And that's what it really comes down to.*

Fillmore, one of the emergent positive outliers, showed evidence of this leadership approach by not “micro-managing,” and both the principal and superintendent spoke to deliberate acts in relation to communications and staffing to support this kind of leadership (both of which are implicated in Theme 4 and will be explored more below). As the Fillmore Superintendent explained,

*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.*

## Lending a Steady Hand with a Dose of Care

Two of the responsibilities that fall upon those in designated leadership positions, especially during challenging times, are to relieve staff of some of the anxiety that can come with potential for failure in the face of challenge and to ensure that new hires are both the right fit for the school and community and are provided support as they adapt to the school.



Poster highlighting the meaning of “teamwork” at Roxbury

Prior research on adaptive leadership (e.g., Heifitz et al., 2009) is instructive in this regard. In this line of research, leaders who can distinguish between 1) technical problems (those with clear solutions that are within the scope of authority for a leader or set of leaders to address) and 2) complex and dynamic problems (that require coordinated efforts among a variety of people across units within an organiza-

tion, across organizations, or across a community and in “real time”), have been found to have important impacts on the functioning of a school or district.

**We also encourage teachers, if they see something they would like to do, bring it to us, and we'll let you. . . . I don't think I've turned anybody down for professional development. You know, we've had some teachers go out of state for some stuff. And as long as it goes along to help them grow, we are all for it.**

– Superintendent (Brookfield)

Persistent positive outlier school leaders showed evidence of approaching challenges with a steady hand and dose of care. As one Crown Point teacher attested, “I think we've had the most caring and compassionate leaders and administrators.” Educators there described their leaders as “supportive and understanding” and “open and honest.” This steady and caring foundation supports educators as they encounter complex and dynamic problems. As one Crown Point teacher explained, “I feel like if there's an issue with another staff member or student that I can come to our administrator and be like, ‘I need help with this’ or ‘This is what's going on.’”

Importantly, leaders being able and willing to lend this steady hand with a dose of care did not come by accident in the schools in this study. Rather, as described in more detail below, those in leadership positions, as well as other staff and community members, took steps to ensure that challenges, including turnover, did not cause discord among staff or disrupt the way the school functions.

People including staff and those in designated leadership positions in the positive outlier schools we examined showed evidence of being purposeful in their hiring practices to encourage the right fit of hires to their school culture and community and provide a supportive entry into the school. As one example, in Brookfield, the superintendent spoke to the care taken when hiring and onboarding new staff:

*[New teachers] appreciate how coworkers support them. And they also love the kids. It's a friendly community and everybody's supportive. And they have taught at other districts and they just said, “This school has a family feel,” and it makes a big difference.*

## Stabilizing the Leadership Pipeline

While lending a steady hand with a dose of care sets an essential tone to encourage collaboration and persistence in the face of challenges, “stabilizing” a leadership pipeline through active efforts to support staff in taking on leadership roles and responsibilities emerged as another consequential pattern across the schools in this study. Brookfield, a persistent positive outlier school, provides a salient example. Both the superintendent and principal were among the many

staff changes Brookfield had experienced since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Though new to their positions, both leaders were veterans in the district and had participated in building, and benefitted from, Brookfield's collaborative culture. When asked about the future of Brookfield, the principal explained how Brookfield's culture (characterized by “trust”) not only keeps the school and district afloat during staff changes, but moves them toward flourishing:

*We lost a third of our staff. . . . a superintendent, a principal and a guidance counselor – in one fell swoop. . . . We're still standing and we're not only standing. We are amazing. Being able to trust each other and have each other's back I think is paramount.*

Stabilizing the leadership pipeline by nurturing a culture of trust and mutual support is coupled with a second stabilizing strategy in persistent positive outlier schools: growing your own leaders. Crown Point veteran staff members explained that they have benefitted from decades under a chain of leaders who have passed the baton one to another. As one Crown Point teacher explained, “I think we've had a lot of consistency over the last 10 years or so with administration and teachers. And I think that's huge.” Malverne provides another example. There, while educators and community members have sought out and hired experienced superintendents from outside the district who have a track record of success in serving diverse communities, they have also nurtured leaders from within the district to take on leadership roles. As the Malverne principal explained:

*When he [the assistant superintendent] was the principal and I was the assistant principal, . . . we had our weekly meetings . . . we were in tandem. We knew exactly lockstep what was to happen. I think at some point, I could probably finish his sentences because I know what his expectations are. There're these things that he has done that I would say prepared me for the principalship. . . . I think that's how we naturally work.*

**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. – Principal**

(Fillmore)

Many of “these things” to prepare potential future leaders for their roles and responsibilities are common across the persistent positive outlier schools and are either in the making or already in place in the emergent positive outlier schools. LaFayette as an emergent positive outlier school, for example, shares with other schools in the study awareness of the importance of seeking out future leaders and providing them resources in time, mentoring, and opportunity to flex their leadership muscles. As the LaFayette principal reported,

“I would say professionally, the district does a nice job of supporting anything that we feel we want to use to advance our professionalism, and we do have mentors.” And the Dean of Students there spoke to the use of BOCES institutes and certificates of advanced studies in helping him learn to take on new responsibilities and to divvy up responsibilities with the principal.

**I think everybody is so open to that chat and that communication, and if I'm having this issue with the students, I feel confident to bring it up to my boss or to bring it up to the principal or to bring it up to another coworker. And so what are you thinking? How can we deal with this? And so the camaraderie and the ability to share as a group is tremendous. We have a very cohesive and caring group of staff here determined that we won't let the student fail.**

– Teacher (Malverne)

## On the Continuum

One of the ways to interpret similarities and differences between emergent and persistent outliers is on a continuum.

### Emergent Positive Outlier Schools

Staff, including instructional and noninstructional staff, experience broad discretion over what they focus attention on and how they do their work. They may or may not see their work as being associated with the school or district mission or vision or its current priorities. Staff are inconsistent in their understandings about what the mission and vision is for the school and district and/or what their roles and responsibilities for achieving the mission, advancing toward the vision, and focusing attention on current priorities are.

Staff, including instructional and noninstructional staff, are heavily reliant on school and district leaders to maintain or improve their school or district culture and climate. In the absence of school and district leader modeling and guidance, especially during leader turnover, staff have few norms, structures, or resources to rely upon to work collaboratively on already-begun initiatives or pursue new ones to meet youth and family needs. Staff have little confidence that the school or district will thrive under new leadership and new hires are unclear about their roles and responsibilities in advancing toward the school vision.

Staff, including instructional and noninstructional staff, do not share the belief or associated experiences of having their knowledge and skills honored by leaders. From staff member to staff member having needs met and resources allocated to help them grown in their practice is inconsistent and/or insufficient to support a pipeline of people able and willing to take on leadership roles and responsibilities.

### Persistent Positive Outlier Schools

Staff, including instructional and noninstructional staff, understand what the mission and vision of the school and district are and know what their roles and responsibilities in achieving the mission, advancing toward the vision and addressing current priorities are. They understand that they are co-decision makers and empowered agents in advancing toward the school and district vision and addressing current priorities.

Staff, including instructional and noninstructional staff, trust that regardless of who is in a designated leadership role, they are able to follow through with already-begun initiatives and pursue new ones. Staff understand that those in designated leadership roles are in their positions for good reasons, one of the most important of which is that they share beliefs and values about the school and the community and have a vision for the school and district that aligns with their own. Staff understand that leader changes may be disruptive, but they have confidence that the school and district culture and climate will stay steady regardless of leader changes. New hires are clear about their roles and responsibilities in advancing toward the school vision and feel cared for by their colleagues.

Staff, including instructional and noninstructional staff, know that every staff member's knowledge and skills are essential to identifying and addressing priorities for youth and families. Staff trust that if they have made a strong case for a change or a request for a resource, including professional learning resources, that those in designated leadership positions will advocate for having their needs met and resources allocated. Generally, if staff members seek opportunities to grow in their practice and take on leadership roles and responsibilities, they are supported in doing so.



## WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE IN

# Alfred-Almond Jr/Sr High School

The excerpt from the Alfred-Almond Jr/Sr High School case study<sup>3</sup> highlights findings related to Theme 3.

**I think the most valuable and best part about this district is the autonomy you're given.** – Teacher

A deep-seated academic culture animated by teachers has, in the words of one teacher, lent whole departments the latitude to “get left alone. And that’s a good thing for us.” This teacher autonomy could lead to discord, misalignment, lowered standards, and a multitude of other ill effects in a different context, but in Alfred-Almond, teacher after teacher spoke to how much their autonomy is treasured. Teachers associated this autonomy with inspiring them to innovate around the curriculum and their teaching, as well as positively impacting their own stress levels and commitments to going the extra mile in their work. As one teacher quipped, “They [administrators] haven’t annoyed us.”

A teacher echoed the sentiments of several others on this point:

*We [teachers] have high standards for ourselves; we want to do well. And we love what we teach. And we kind of baby it . . . and we want it to be ours. And I think the administration has left us alone in a lot of ways, but I also think schoolwide that there . . . was always an expectation that we do well.*

While teachers spoke to varying degrees about “pressure” from school and district leaders over the years, most reported being supported by administrators to make their own professional judgments; they also spoke of being relatively unaffected by administrative turnover, which they attributed, in part, to their autonomy.

## Culture Eats Top-Down Leadership for Breakfast

As the saying goes, “Culture eats strategy for breakfast,” and a key lesson about leadership we found in Alfred-Almond is what a culture of professional autonomy and teacher collaboration does to minimize the impacts of leader turnover. At Alfred-Almond teachers and support staff spoke of few negative impacts of district and school leader turnover in recent years. They attributed this to having a strong culture of professionalism and mutual respect and collaboration among the teaching staff, who take responsibility for keeping their standards high. Importantly, teachers attested to having leaders who listen to them and this being part of what one teacher called leadership “philosophies” that are a good fit in Alfred-Almond. One teacher echoed others in reporting that “it [a culture of professional autonomy and

teacher collaboration] kind of makes us a family . . . and our administration does listen to us.” While individual leaders have come with their own unique priorities and approaches, these leadership “philosophies” have carried through from one district leader to the next and have kept the Alfred-Almond ship on a steady course.

## Culture Eats Strategic Planning for Breakfast, Too

While leaders at Alfred-Almond did not identify having a detailed or complex strategic planning process, this is buffered by having a strong academic reputation and wide community support to lean on. However, in the wake of the pandemic, Alfred-Almond leaders have recognized the need to revisit their communication strategies, as they had been largely unidirectional – with outgoing messages from the schools and district to the community being the dominant approach. Recently they have looked for more community input, including conducting student surveys to gauge kids’ interests in classes and co-curriculars.



View from new ropes course overlooking Alfred-Almond campus

## Fiscally Sound and Responsibly Led

The Alfred-Almond school district has benefitted from what the superintendent characterized as a consistently “fiscally sound” platform from which to lead. This attention to financial health has extended from the Board of Education to the classroom, with the recent Board request for a financial literacy class to become a requirement at the school. The superintendent noted that this move “falls in line with the Blue-Ribbon Commission” as well as a shared concern in the community that the school provide a variety of pathways for graduates to attain well-paying jobs with or without a college degree.

<sup>3</sup>See complete case study at [https://ny-kids.org/wp-content/uploads/Alfred\\_Almond-Case-Study-23\\_24.FINAL\\_.pdf](https://ny-kids.org/wp-content/uploads/Alfred_Almond-Case-Study-23_24.FINAL_.pdf)

# 4.

## Structuring Components of a Learning Organization into the Fabric of the School

A decade before NYKids' genesis (2004), Peter Senge's (1990) popular book *The Fifth Discipline* focused attention on "systems thinking" – or recognizing the interconnectedness of people and functions in and beyond schools. In an article based on a 1995 interview about his book Senge discussed principles of what he termed "a learning organization," which he defined as "an organization in which people at all levels are collectively, and continually, enhancing their capacity to create things they really want to create" (O'Neil, 1995, p. 20). In this same article, a few of Senge's statements were highlighted: "You cannot implement 'learning-directed learning' . . . in one classroom and not others. It would drive kids nuts"; "I don't think a principal can 'establish an environment' in a vacuum"; and "actually having shared visions is so profoundly different from writing a vision statement that it's really night and day." In the roughly three decades since Senge's book, research has indicated again and again how important systems approaches to improving schools are, yet why don't more schools establish better systems that can help them produce better student outcomes consistently? In this theme we explore the question: What have we learned about how to build components of a learning organization into the fabric of a school from persistent positive outlier schools?

**I think we always look at the data. I mean data, data, ... the data sing.** – School Leader (Malverne)

One of the frameworks informing this study and helpful in this theme is performance adaptation theory (Baard et al., 2014), which focuses our attention on three adaptive process mechanisms triggered during change: cognitive, affective, and behavioral. Simply put, thinking/learning are cognitive mechanisms, feeling/relating are affective mechanisms, and doing/acting are behavioral mechanisms. Interpreting our findings through the lens of these mechanisms draws our attention to how educators build into the fabric of their schools particular ways of 1) thinking/learning about adaptation and change or what might contribute to them, 2) feeling/relating to adaptation and change, both as individuals and as a collective of individuals, and 3) doing/acting through the use of processes, tools, and resources that facilitate adaptation and change.

This framework also draws attention to the challenges posed by tasks of different complexities that range from only one component of a system (e.g., a department working on a

task) to coordinative (e.g., cross-departmental teams working on a sequence of tasks), to dynamic (e.g., people across units and/or across functions working on multiple in-flux tasks). This typology helps us interpret patterns we noted across persistent positive outlier schools regarding how they approach different types of challenges among and between people within the school and between the school and district and the larger community.

Patterns related to building components of a learning organization into the fabric of the school from this study are:

- Nurturing innovative mindsets, processes, and practices
- Using teams, applying resources, and leveraging an array of data

### Nurturing Innovative Mindsets, Processes, and Practices

In persistent positive outlier schools, we found patterns related to how leaders and instructional and noninstructional staff approached making sense of their current and "on the horizon" challenges and what consequently would need to be taught and learned to tackle those challenges. Sometimes this related to supporting caregivers or community members in learning about a process, practice, or new approach and other times, to educators' own professional learning needs.

In relation to advancing caregiver and community member understanding, we found that how persistent positive outlier school educators communicated, and about what they communicated, with caregivers and community members tended to be purposeful and designed for mutual understanding. In Alfred-Almond Jr/Sr High School, for example, support staff members showed awareness of the common divide between "educator speak" and what parents and caregivers needed to know and understand about what supports were being offered to their children and why. A veteran teacher described the approach they take in bridging this divide by helping new teachers understand the importance of communicating clearly with caregivers of students identified for special education services:

*Making sure that the way that [newer teachers] are writing [quarterly progress notes] makes sense for families, and showing the data, reminding them [newer teachers] that if a parent comes back and says like, "Well, how'd you figure that out?" Do we have the*

resource just to show them? They're really good teachers. So, I feel like once they know what to do, they have the capacity to do it.

As this quotation shows, two components of communication for mutual understanding are key: The first is that part of the work of an educator is bearing the responsibility of using language to bridge potential gaps in understanding between educators and students' families. A second element relates to what is communicated; in this regard, data and their interpretation are essential, as is discussed more in the section that follows.

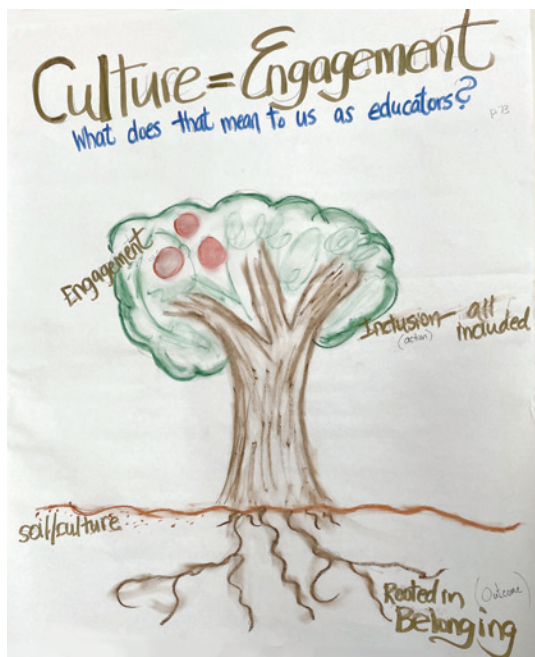


Image depicting Fillmore as a learning organization: What engagement means to educators

Regarding educators' own professional learning needs, in Brookfield, for example, educators spoke to the variety of professional learning opportunities they are offered and how they see their own professional learning as a requisite for walking the talk of being a "lifelong learner." A teacher explained,

*And administration is good about having us go [to professional learning opportunities]. Even if . . . we can't have five people out of the building, they kind of have one person go, and then can you bring it back and turn-key, and be prepared to be able to do that? Whatever I hear at my monthly meetings with BOCES, I bring it back and say, "Hey, there's a training on this, this is what we need. Find a sub[statute]." And the sub is always a trick. We don't have a ton of subs. But we make it work. Because I think . . . if we want our kids to be lifelong learners, we need to set that example.*

While we noted some contrasts, we also identified considerable overlap between persistent and emergent positive

outlier schools regarding what can be described as "problem-based and solutions-oriented" professional learning. For instance, in emergent positive outlier LaFayette, educators adapted to ensure their students were supported in the post-pandemic period, as some students had familial or work responsibilities, or other constraints (e.g., lack of electricity) preventing them from completing homework, which affected their grades — sometimes significantly. One solution brought to the table was to shift the "What I Need" (WIN) intervention program (designed to target learning gaps) from after school to during the school day so that students could get assistance without missing sports, extracurriculars, or other work-related and family obligations after school. "It's an opportunity for teachers to get their eyes on kids more," explained one LaFayette leader. How this evolved is instructive about steps toward nurturing innovation: After identifying a problem, offering professional learning around the problem, and generating solutions, LaFayette educators used trials and data from the trial periods to test a change (e.g., WIN being offered during the school day rather than after school). A support staff member recounted their 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.*

## Using Teams, Applying Resources, and Leveraging an Array of Data

Turning from findings related to the thinking/learning aspects of change, we shift to findings related to the affective (feeling/relating) and behavioral (doing/acting) pieces of the puzzle that are closely intertwined. In this regard, we found that persistent positive outlier schools shared a similar emphasis on supporting staff in managing the various demands of their jobs by applying a dose of care (see Theme 3) and using teams and both human and technological resources strategically.

As one example of how teams are used to tackle complex problems, in Crown Point, the School Based Inquiry Team (SBIT) monitors data and assists educators in creating action plans designed to identify and address academic gaps that emerge in evaluation data. A teacher described the benefits these plans provide her:

*But I know that the next year that I teach that, I need to spend a little bit more time on that [skill or content] because maybe I didn't spend enough time on it this year. So it kind of drives my instruction for the whole year. I make a plan. I can go down and find in my room what my plan is for this year for my class, so I know where I should be, where I'm going to hopefully end, and how much time I'm going to have for reviews, and all that.*

In this way the SBIT provides an important sense-making function for individual teachers and also helps “hold the whole” of what is occurring across classrooms – thus performing an important coordinative function. The Crown Point Dean of Students and Superintendent explained that, in addition to SBIT meetings, the Building Leadership Team (BLT) convenes monthly to analyze student data and strategize about how to address academic gaps:

*We sit down and we say, “Okay, what is the need?” And so we typically build into them [BLT meetings] a time where our staff are able to get together. We're able to look at interims, we're able to look at SLOs [Student Learning Objectives], we're able to look throughout the year to keep always reassessing: How are the students progressing? Is there a group of students that need more instruction, that need more time? That need smaller groups? And we constantly reassess to find out, what do they need? You can't wait until the end of the year.*

### Analyzing data is really a skill in and of itself.

– School Leader (LaFayette)

In some schools, like emergent positive outlier, Fillmore, new positions have been created tapping veteran teachers to help coordinate and lead improvements to intervention systems. Using teachers on special assignment (TOSA) is one strategy to apply necessary resources to alleviate strain on staff and enhance their abilities to tackle dynamic and complex challenges. In Crown Point as well as Alfred-Almond funds were allocated to enhance support staffing in part due to rising concern and issues related to youth mental health. A Crown Point teacher explained the positive impacts and relief these new staff provided:

*But it was so nice to hire people this year, like so nice. It just felt like a huge weight – it was like, ahhh. And you have people in your room again. I definitely think we're on the rebound and just feeling that like, “Oh, we're tired. Oh, we need help. Oh, we wish we could hire staff” – like that's starting to alleviate now this year. And that's been nice because I just think, as a whole, morale is higher this year. Because we've got more people and we've got more help. And it's nice to see new people and new faces in the building and just to have more help and to get our kids – you know that they're going to be the most successful if there's enough of us to go around and help them.*

Importantly, many of the schools in this study, including both persistent and emergent positive outlier schools, have learned to leverage technologies to make sense of the large amounts of data available to them. As in emergent positive outlier LaFayette, the trajectory toward a learning organization appears to move from having data to making sense of data as evidence of something important to using that evidence to change practices and processes. While this evolutionary track seems obvious, it is with concerted effort that the schools in this study navigate the individual and collective need for stability and the imperative to keep pace with the changing nature and needs of youth. A LaFayette 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.*

These schools – as developing “learning organizations” (Senge, 1990) – provide useful examples of how educators in various contexts and serving diverse student populations may adapt to challenging circumstances. Crucial to the successful outcomes documented over time in these schools is an innovative mindset as well as the shared emphasis on leveraging data and other resources to inform innovations.



A poster of useful tips for using social media exemplifies the ways Roxbury prioritizes and fosters communication skills

## On the Continuum

One of the ways to interpret similarities and differences between emergent and persistent outliers is on a continuum.

### Emergent Positive Outlier Schools

Staff, including instructional and noninstructional staff, tend to seek to learn something new because of personal interest or an emergent problem, not necessarily in alignment with the school and/or district priorities. Staff do not generally perceive a responsibility to, or know how to, communicate with caregivers and community members to close gaps in understanding. In general, professional learning opportunities tend to address current challenges rather than prepare for something in the future; and collaborative and inclusive approaches to making sense of current and future challenges and what to do about them are rare or nonexistent.

A variety of teams, PLCs, and/or committees exist, yet they may not provide individual teachers with “on time” data and/or data presented in ways that are easily interpreted.

Staff, including instructional and noninstructional staff, experience gaps in support (human and/or technological) they need to enhance their individual performance and coordinate their efforts with other staff. In general, the coordination of efforts to address complex and dynamic challenges may be uneven across functions, units within schools, and/or across schools.

### Persistent Positive Outlier Schools

Staff, including instructional and noninstructional staff, tend to align individual and group learning opportunities to school and/or district. Staff generally perceive a responsibility to, and know how to, communicate with caregivers and community members to close gaps in understanding. Staff in designated leadership roles nurture a “learning mindset” and do this in part by modeling a proactive and collaborative stance toward making sense of current and future challenges and what to do about them.

A variety of teams, PLCs, and/or committees make data and interpretations of data available to instructional and noninstructional staff, which inform necessary changes within or across classrooms or settings (e.g., extracurriculars) in the school.

Staff, including instructional and noninstructional staff, have sufficient human and technological support to do their work and coordinate their efforts with colleagues. In general, the coordination of efforts to address complex and dynamic challenges is purposeful and crosses functions, units within schools, and/or across schools.

## WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE IN

# Malverne Senior High School

This excerpt from the Malverne Senior High School case study<sup>4</sup> highlights findings related to Theme 4.

In Malverne Senior HS, leaders and educators showed evidence of positioning themselves in a way that is future oriented and ambitious. This was evident in the ways many of the leaders and educators participating in this study described embracing innovation and a “never done” stance to address current and future needs.

## Enhancing Systems of Support

As in many schools across the state and nation, educators in Malverne now need to address a wide and complex range of youth academic, SEL, behavioral, physical, and mental health needs. According to staff, Malverne has experienced an increase in the number of students identified with autism spectrum disorder, which has necessitated more youth on waitlists for services, stretching local resources thin. Meanwhile, in the school, efforts to fully implement Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) well, especially Tier 1 supports, has been a focus of professional learning in recent years. As the principal explained,

*We’re not just looking at the bottom third, we’re looking at every kid in the classroom, and how they’re getting academic intervention within the classroom. And I think that’s a huge component this year that we’re doing differently compared to in the past*

In efforts to work proactively on systems of support, Malverne educators initiated a Freshman Academy class to give incoming Senior HS students opportunities to develop the skills to succeed. A school leader described it this way:

*And it’s just a class to bridge the gap between middle school and high school; you know, kids come in and they’re like, “Oh, my God, I’m so overwhelmed.” This class, you know, teaches them about study habits, . . . about good habits in general, teaching them organizational skills, and stuff like that. And our teacher, who is like a mom to them, is such a pivotal person in their life.*

## Mastering the Master Schedule: “Kids Want to Do Everything”

An emphasis on high student involvement in extracurricular activities alongside academic rigor is part of the school’s culture. Through the years, the level of student eagerness to be involved in activities has increased as facilities have improved and relationships throughout the community have solidified. Meanwhile, school staff and leaders have sought to continuously improve students’ course options and have opened Advanced Placement (AP) courses to almost all students; this has necessitated adding

labs for students who might need them to succeed. Making such moves requires significant mastery at master scheduling. One teacher explained,

*I think what someone from the outside would be surprised by is how small we are and how all of our kids do everything. They want to do everything, and we do everything we can to make sure they can do everything, really. You know, a student yesterday had regular school ‘til three o’clock, and then musical rehearsal till six, and then they came to a winter percussion rehearsal until nine. And we said, “It’s too much; you don’t have to come.” [The student] said, “No, I’m not going to miss it, I’m gonna be there.”*

How do they make so much available for kids who want to “do everything?” First, it can’t all happen within a regular school day. As one school leader put it, “the school never closes,” and this requires extra effort and time on the part of educators and leaders. Second, on the academic side, the scheduling process starts in November and “everyone is involved,” said one school leader. Much discussion among guidance personnel and supervisors goes into a process that includes painstaking “hand scheduling,” taking into account individual student requests. As a school leader put it,

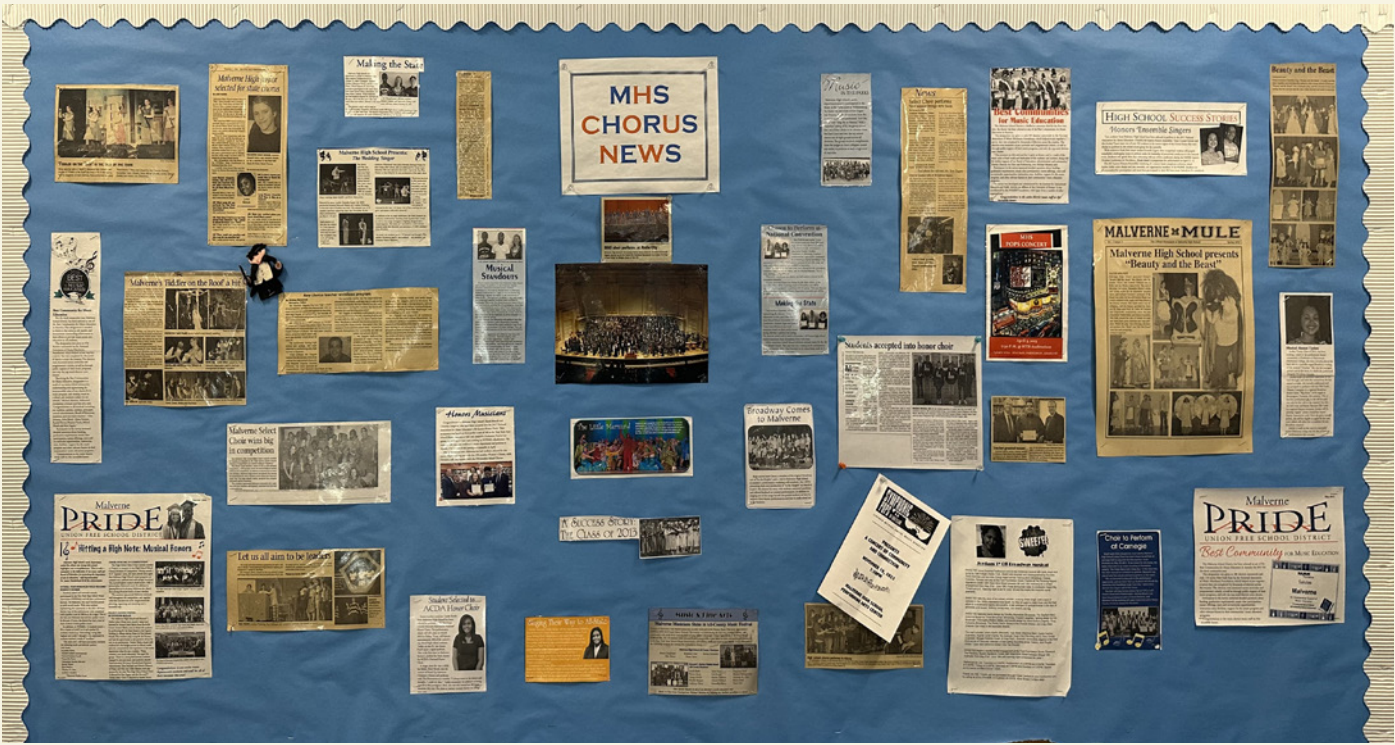
*The intimacy of us being a small school limits us, but it also enhances us because we could hand schedule 230 kids, just moving sections around to accommodate everyone.*

## Continuous Review of Academic and Nonacademic Data

Examining academic data at Malverne is done consistently, as staff and leaders proactively collect and assess data around student academic standing, as well as their overall well-being, throughout the year. Data around challenges such as student suspension rates and mental health are also closely monitored by educators and school leaders. For instance, staff use a mental health screening tool. A school leader explained how this process looks: “We do it through an online form and a paper form so that everybody has the opportunity to have their kids evaluated. And we do it through the health classes.”

Additionally, Malverne school leaders continuously review data from the staff and the broader community in order to make improvements around areas such as school climate; a district leader reported using the digital platform “Thought Exchange” to find out what teachers or parents are thinking. In addition to

<sup>4</sup> See complete case study at [https://ny-kids.org/wp-content/uploads/Malverne-Case-Study-23\\_24-Study.FINAL\\_.pdf](https://ny-kids.org/wp-content/uploads/Malverne-Case-Study-23_24-Study.FINAL_.pdf)



Display of news articles highlighting the Malverne chorus depict some of the opportunities available to students

Thought Exchange, Malverne educators utilize a variety of technologies and software to generate data to make adjustments and address needs. One example is the software program mentioned earlier that monitors student involvement and engagement in extracurricular activities, not only to track active student involvement but to identify those who might be disengaged. A school leader explained:

*Throughout the course of the year, we're going to look at which students were involved and which students were not involved and see what we could do to next year when we have our club fair, and we get everything going at the beginning next year, how can we get those students involved in some kind of afterschool activity.*

Another technological innovation staff use to manage and assess data makes it possible to show trends and address goals. A teacher described how it “gives you a graph and shows you whether the trend is increasing or decreasing. And then you can basically alter your program to meet the needs of that student.”

# Conclusion

*We don't feel like we're there — like our work is ever done. We're looking at areas where we need to improve. And I think the second we sit back and say "We're good," we're going to have a lot of problems. – Persistent Positive Outlier District Leader (Malverne)*

In this study, we examined persistent and emergent positive outliers to yield insights into indicators of a developmental trajectory with two questions informing this approach: 1) What have persistent outliers achieved and sustained over time that emergent outliers are showing indications of moving toward? 2) What implications do these contrasts hold for educators in schools that are achieving suboptimal student outcomes and those that have typical outcomes and seek to improve those outcomes?

Since our study was not experimental, it presents limitations to making causal claims (i.e., this led to that). However, our study does allow us to identify patterns among schools that have sustained above-predicted or improved student outcomes and then offer some interpretations of what those patterns might mean.

As we engaged in analysis, we asked: Are there particular characteristics that persistent positive outliers share? Are there particular characteristics emergent positive outliers share? How do persistent and emergent positive outliers differ? Are there any unique circumstances or contextual aspects of persistent or emergent positive outlier schools or their host communities that help explain their outcomes? In the end, are there lessons from this study regarding a developmental trajectory for educators seeking to improve student outcomes and experiences including what danger signs to be aware of (and get ahead of) and what measures can or have been taken to improve over time?

One discovery from our analysis relates to how educators approach working outside a “comfort zone.” Working outside a comfort zone may be related to leadership, curriculum and instruction, professional learning, staffing, and family engagement (among many other components of school systems) that require educators to learn and do something differently and potentially novel. In designing this study we drew upon theories that help explain how people and organizations adapt (Baard et al., 2014; Rogers, 2010). From prior research and in light of these theories, we could expect that working outside a “comfort zone” could be anxiety producing for different individuals, could impact educators’ motivation and cohesion, and could

create, or contribute to, a number of leadership challenges, including erosion of trust (Lawson et al., 2017).

We found that the degree to which educators are able and willing to work outside a comfort zone was one contrast between persistent and emergent outliers. Following this finding a step further, we note a sort of tipping point where a school (and often host district) has developed sufficient anchoring to absorb threats; having reached this tipping point may indicate an important developmental milestone. Specifically, we noted that persistent positive outliers shared a pattern that working outside a comfort zone a) has become their mode of operation and b) is pursued and even embraced.

In the persistent positive outlier school contexts, leaders generally expressed less concern about educator “buy in” about making changes and educators expressed less skepticism about changes than their peers in the emergent positive outliers. While emergent positive outlier school leaders and educators may be either actively approaching working out of a comfort zone or may already be working outside of their comfort zone in certain ways and in relation to a few initiatives, they did not yet show evidence of intentionally pursuing and embracing this as a normative state school- and district-wide. They’re working on it.

Based on the data we collected, whether the emergent positive outliers can achieve a fundamental “renorming” vis-à-vis working outside a comfort zone (and whether the persistent positive outliers sustain their abilities to do so) is in part reliant on what they purposefully anchor themselves to. These anchors may provide the scaffolding necessary to establish and sustain better student outcomes over time.



Such anchors include:

- a) Developing and drawing on a pipeline of savvy change agents
- b) Leaning on, and into, traditions
- c) Moving out of a compliance orientation and into an innovation orientation

### Anchor One: Developing and Drawing on a Pipeline of Savvy Change Agents

**And we need to be moving away from sit and get because the kids are not getting what they need . . . So that's what the goal is for next year. What's a math classroom going to look like at the high school level? That's going to be out of their [some teachers'] comfort zone.** – Emergent Positive Outlier School Leader (LaFayette)

One anchor can be to people, specifically people who can act as savvy change agents. These people can a) envision necessary changes in a historically and culturally informed way (what is needed here now), b) navigate getting a wide array of stakeholder input to inform the how, when, and where of changes, and c) manage the discomfort that some staff and community members may experience during change.

A challenge these change agents may encounter is related to predictable resistance – at least from some and potentially from many in the school and community when a change is proposed or a challenge is encountered. Two lessons are evident about getting ahead of resistance from the persistent positive outlier schools. First, when people, especially in leadership roles (by title or function) share an authentic curiosity about youth, parent, community member, and staff experiences, priorities, and hopes for the future and gather that information and translate it into achievable changes that hold value, chances of positive change are boosted. Second, while seeking input and sharing it widely is an intuitive way to get ahead of and reduce potential resistance to change, the positive outlier school educators in this study showed evidence of not taking predictable resistance lightly – or discounting it (by forcing change regardless of resistance) – but rather investing significant effort into increasing understanding of the “why?” and the way.

### Anchor Two: Leaning on, and into, Traditions

Our study findings indicate that Anchor One is reliant upon Anchor Two in that change untethered to a foundation can put people and whole schools and districts at risk. Anchor Two points to the importance of school and district traditions. Histories and cultural ecologies come into play in this anchor. When traditions are coupled with a reputation – for being a certain kind of place and that place being special in some

desirable way – traditions can provide powerful supports that bind people to the school and district and lend necessary support (and even grace) when challenges and difficult decisions have to be made.

**The whole legacy dinner . . . was really phenomenal . . . the families were there and everything. What was really nice to see was the elementary school teachers who probably haven't seen them [their former student who picked them for the honor] in a very long time. [Teachers] felt so honored that they were picked like, “Wow, I made a difference with Johnny Smith in third grade.”** – Persistent Positive Outlier District Leader (Malverne)

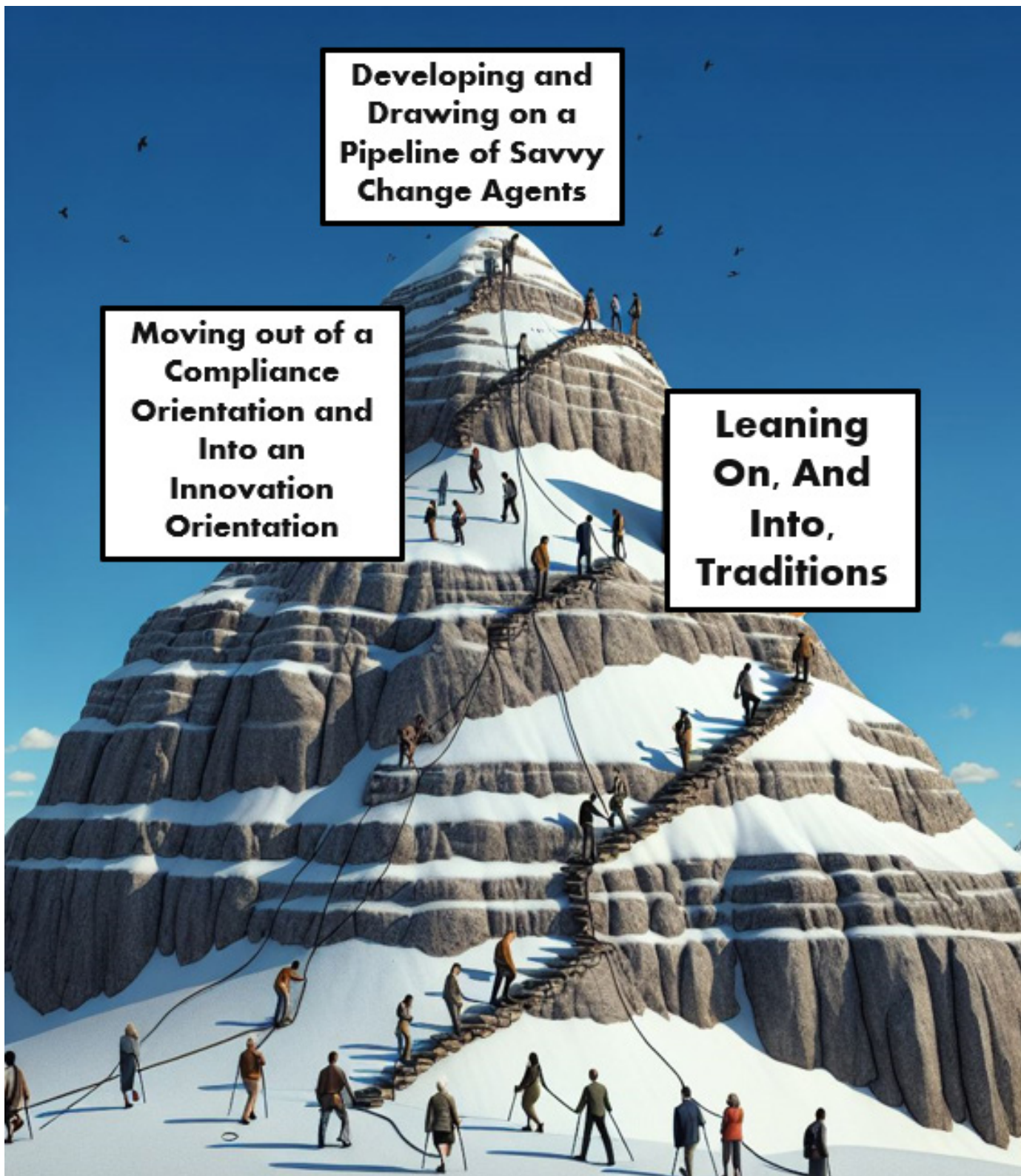
Take, for instance, traditions around sports, arts, or performance events; these can all reinforce community members' and educators' understandings of what the school and district offers and enhance feelings of connection. The persistent positive outliers in our study offered numerous examples of the ways traditions are leveraged to solidify and build community support and good will.

### Anchor Three: Moving out of a Compliance Orientation and into an Innovation Orientation

A final anchor can be to innovation-friendly orientations and their accompanying systems. Getting out of a compliance orientation (we do this because some group, entity or policy tells us we must) to an innovation orientation (we do this because we know that this is right and good for our youth and community) emerged as another anchor for persistent positive outliers. In our study, we found that working outside a “comfort zone,” is related to confronting some conundrums that P-12 systems set up for educators.

For instance, in many schools and districts doing what is deemed as evidence of success by a group, entity, or policy is the path taken over doing what is understood as better from a historically and contextually informed local understanding of what matters most by the people closest to students. We found that emergent positive outlier school and district leaders and educators showed evidence of developing confidence in moving out of a compliance orientation, yet this was so in pockets and not as widespread as their persistent positive outlier school peers.

This report aimed to describe what accounts for better student outcomes over time. The three-anchor framework generated from the findings in this study provide a partial roadmap for those seeking to move in the direction of achieving better student outcomes consistently.



Three Anchors for Adaptation and Innovation

# Methods

## Sampling

The sample for this study included seven schools previously studied by NYKids that maintained or emerged as positive outliers as early as the 2004-05 school year. While only high schools sampled by graduation rate were selected and analyzed in this study, our sample pool included elementary and middle schools that were previously identified and studied based on NYS ELA and Math scores and percentage of ELLs. Some of these schools were not available to participate in this study and more detail about the sampling results are available in the [Methods and Procedures Report](#).

For this study, our research team ran a series of regression analyses to identify schools that outperform on their graduation rate over what would be expected based on demographics. This “outperforming” is determined by computing the residual from a regression analysis for a subgroup of students. A positive residual indicates that the school performed better than predicted given these variables and a negative residual indicates the school performed worse. A total of seven schools that were previously studied in 2013 or 2018 were identified as performing statistically better than would be expected; four of these were positive outliers and three of these were “typically performing” schools.

## Recruitment, Data Collection, and Data Analysis

The NYKids research team used Institutional Review Board approved recruitment protocols throughout this study. Researchers first engaged the school principal and district superintendent for their consent. The principal was then asked to recruit teachers and other staff through distribution of flyers. Parents/caregivers were recruited via flyers distributed by the school liaison. Teachers, administrators, support staff, parents/caregivers, and district leaders who volunteered and fit criteria were invited to participate.

A team of two to three researchers visited schools for two days to conduct interviews and focus groups exploring classroom, school and district processes, practices, and policies with participants. Online documents and those collected on school sites were also used in the analysis. Using qualitative data reduction software and typical case analysis procedures, researchers crafted individual school case studies that included a description of the school selection criteria, demographics, and context (Yin, 2014). Next, the cross-case team utilized matrices and qualitative comparative analysis procedures to address the degree of salience of aspects of all schools studied (Rihoux & Ragin, 2008).

Multiple methods to attend to credibility threats (Maxwell, 2013) were used, including a) peer review/debrief of the data and process, b) source triangulation, c) identifying negative cases using tools such as data matrices, d) clarifying bias through investigator memoing and debriefing, and e) checking the accuracy of case study reports with superintendents and principals. If an inaccuracy was identified in the case report during member checking, the research team made the identified change.

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*This report is a result of the work of many, although ultimately only the authors are responsible for any omissions or misrepresentations. - Kristen C. Wilcox, Aaron Leo, Jessie Tobin, Maria I. Khan, Paul Guay*



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- Learn how to make sense of and share progress
- Learn how to use improvement processes and tools for system-wide and lasting improvements



“Check-ins and the [COMPASS] template itself really lends itself to making sure you are articulating responsibilities, the who, what, when and where of all things.”

—Principal, rural school

“This institute allowed us to think through and discuss where we are now and where we can go. The time with colleagues and time to focus on specific pieces of a school or two was invaluable.”

- Teacher, suburban school



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