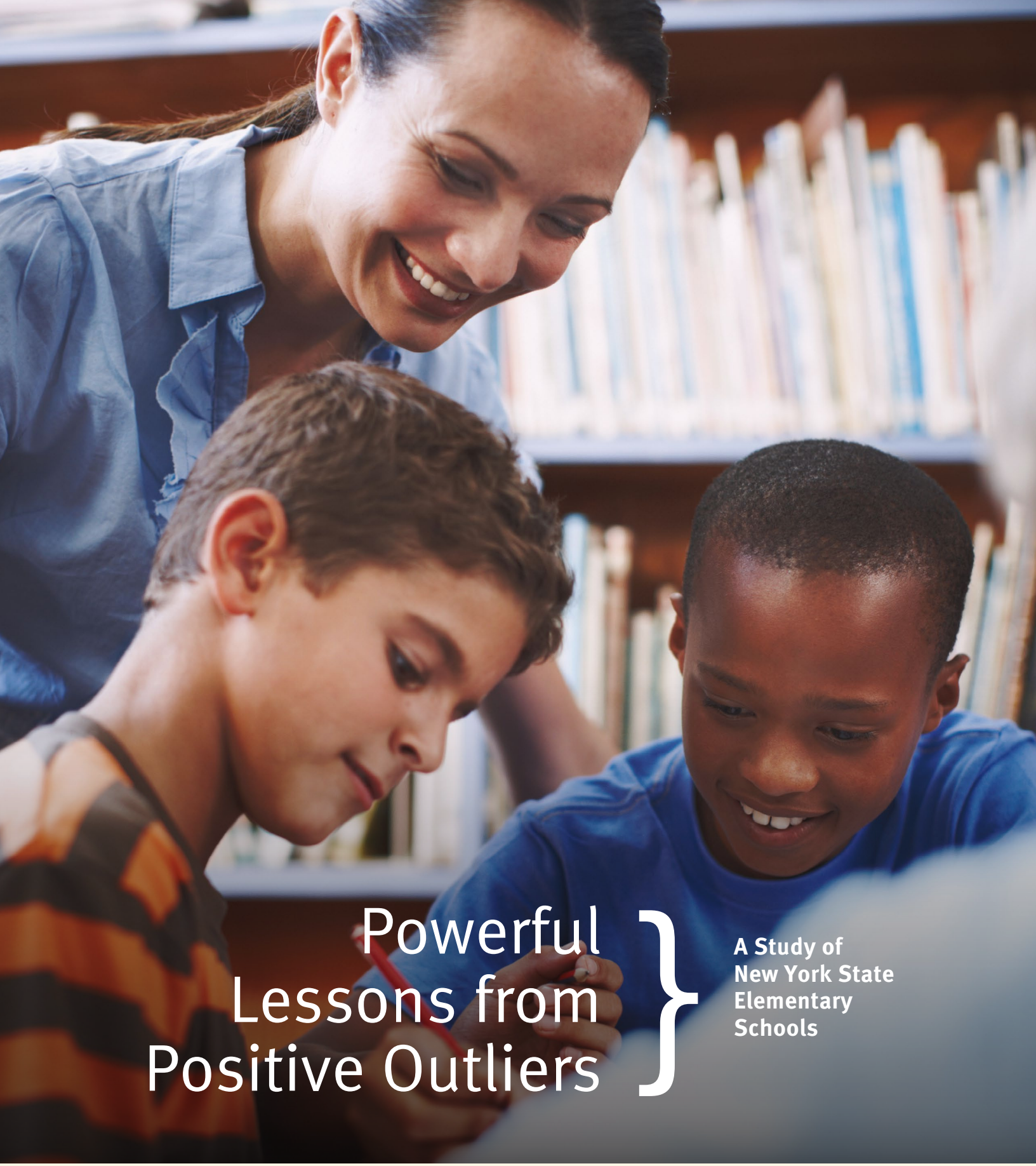

Powerful Lessons from Positive Outliers

A Study of New York State Elementary Schools

NYKids

School of Education
University at Albany State University of New York



About NYKids

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.

Since its inception in 2004, NYKids has focused on helping educators learn about promising practices from other educators to ultimately improve their own policies, processes, and practices. NYKids has identified promising practices across elementary, middle, and high school levels, with special attention to schools achieving above-predicted outcomes among socioeconomically, culturally, and linguistically diverse youth.

Findings from all studies are available in reports like this one, case studies, articles, books, and presentations in the research library. To download other NYKids resources, to learn more about NYKids, or to use our school performance tracker database go to: www.ny-kids.org.

The NYKids Advisory Board includes representatives from public and private regional and statewide organizations representing an array of community members. 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

NYKids has conducted several studies since the 2004-05 school year, with the most recent study at the elementary level dating back to 2015. Since 2015, elementary school leaders and educators in New York State (NYS) have needed to adapt to technological advancements, align curriculum to the latest standards and policy frameworks, address increased pressures to secure qualified and talented staff, and renew efforts to engage children, families, and community members in a post-pandemic era (Wilcox et al., 2017).

In light of these challenges, the New York State Blue Ribbon Commission on Graduation Measures (New York State Education Department [NYSED], 2023) identified four priority areas for transforming education:

1) Multiple pathways leading to one high school diploma
2) Assessment flexibility
3) Understanding of meaningful life-ready credentials
4) Culturally responsive curriculum, instruction, and assessment

Alongside these priority areas, NYSED also published its "Portrait of a Graduate" (PoG), which lays the foundation for a vision of "what students should know, be able to do, and embody upon graduation" (2023, p. 6). Elements of the PoG are:

- A Critical Thinker
- Culturally Competent
- An Effective Communicator
- A Global Citizen
- An Innovative Problem Solver
- Literate Across Content Areas
- Socially-Emotionally Competent

These priorities and the PoG framework hold several implications for elementary school educators. For one, educators may need to develop new skills and strategies as they attempt to develop PoG skills and knowledge. This may require significant curriculum and instructional shifts, resource allocations for professional learning to make those shifts, and new systems of child and family support, which, in turn, necessitate leadership and school- and districtwide capacity-building needs.

This study's purpose was to generate new knowledge about promising practices from a diverse sample of New York State's positive outlier elementary schools that have been identified for their above-predicted student achievement and attendance outcomes.

The positive outlier schools shared a purposeful focus on the following. They:

1) Cultivate a Student-Centered Culture of Inclusion, Safety, and High Expectations
2) Make Learning Relevant, Responsive, and Empowering
3) Prioritize Student Well-Being and Whole-Child Development
4) Strengthen Educator Competencies and Build Organizational Capacity for Improvement
5) Engage Families and Strengthen Community Partnerships

What positive outlier schools prioritize



The Case Study Schools

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 36. A separate Methods and Procedures Report provides more information about the sampling method and conduct of this study.

POSITIVE OUTLIER ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

Albany School of Humanities



The Albany School of Humanities (ASH) is one of 12 elementary schools in the City School District of Albany, the capital of New York State. With nearly 400 students between kindergarten and fifth grade, it serves as a district magnet school with a focus on multicultural, holistic, and explorative education. Its magnet theming is upheld through a collaborative staff culture and dedication to exposing students to music and the arts. ASH also emphasizes helping students develop social emotional skills, which is reflected in practices such as values-based award systems, restorative approaches to behavior, and its student-led student equity team. The Albany School of Humanities was selected for this study as a positive outlier school based on its exemplary student attendance and above-expected academic outcomes. As a high-need, midsized urban elementary school, it provides a useful context for understanding promising practices in similar environments.

Chautauqua Lake Elementary School



Chautauqua Lake Elementary is located in the town of Mayville on the shores of Chautauqua Lake in Western New York. Nearby is the Chautauqua Institution, an historic educational and conference center that draws in a distinct seasonal population and provides a unique relationship with the economically modest year-round population. This relationship, alongside the multi-district merger that created Chautauqua School District 25 years ago, creates an unusual economic profile for the school. The district now reports relatively high property values but average year-round family income. Despite its unique environment and circumstances, Chautauqua Lake Elementary establishes itself as a high-expectations environment supported with data-driven instruction, curriculum consistency and quality controls, and a culture of student recognition. With its culture of partnership and highly ambitious staff, the school has demonstrated strong performance in academics and attendance for its average-need, small-town context.

Cuba-Rushford Elementary School



Cuba-Rushford Elementary School (CRE) is a rural school serving 327 students in grades K-5. The district encompasses over 150 square miles and thirteen small towns since a 1991 merger between the districts of Cuba and Rushford in Allegany County, along New York's southern border with Pennsylvania. The elementary school is known for close connections between faculty and families, both of which collaborate to support students' academics, sports, community events, and extracurricular activities. As poverty is a concern in the district, educators at Cuba-Rushford Elementary take a holistic approach to supporting students through providing social-emotional learning programming and mental health resources. CRE was selected as a positive outlier school for its exceptionally strong rates of academic achievement and student attendance within a high-need, rural context.

POSITIVE OUTLIER ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

Kendall Elementary School



Kendall Elementary is a rural school with just under 350 students located minutes away from the shores of Lake Ontario. It has a distinct small-town vibe, with a small close-knit community and limited access to staff and resources. Because of this, Kendall's dedicated staff are known to "wear many hats" and put extra effort into making learning fun, celebrating students, and creating an environment that supports academic growth and achievement. This attitude of collaboration and teamwork is also exemplified by the district's slogan, "One Family, One School, One Community," a statement that highlights its innovation and improvement-based environment. Additionally, Kendall Elementary, as an average-need rural school, has had strong attendance rates and academic achievement scores significantly higher than other schools in a similar context.

Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School



Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School (MLK) is one of ten elementary schools in the city of Utica, which lies on the Mohawk River and at the foot of the Adirondacks. MLK's population of just over 300 students reflects the economic and demographic composition of the city, as nearly one-quarter are multilingual learners, and virtually all are considered economically disadvantaged. Educators at MLK work hard to create a supportive, caring environment where all students are held to high expectations. Describing the school as a "family," educators welcome all students and their families no matter where they are from, emphasize project-based learning, and encourage all students to embody the values of the man the school is named after. MLK Elementary was selected for this study because of its higher-than-average academic and attendance rates, substantial demographic diversity, and its location in a high-need urban community.

New Visions Elementary School



New Visions Elementary School is one of five elementary schools in the Freeport Public School District, located just outside of New York City on Long Island. New Visions has 433 students and is a racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse school. Faculty, staff, and school leaders go out of their way to create an open, collaborative community environment while using culturally responsive curricula, welcoming family engagement strategies, and an engaging and joyful energy to connect with students and the wider community. With high academic and attendance performance compared with other schools serving similar student populations, New Visions is an exemplary selection for understanding effective practices in high-need, linguistically diverse suburban settings.

The Case Study Schools

POSITIVE OUTLIER ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

Philadelphia Primary School



Philadelphia Primary School (Philly) is situated within the Indian River Central School District, which borders Canada and includes the Fort Drum military base. Because it includes the base, students who may have traveled the world with their families attend school with families from Indian River, creating a uniquely diverse environment for just over 120 students. Philly's educators are supported by an array of professional development and career growth opportunities offered through the district and by their regional BOCES. Philadelphia Primary School was selected as a positive outlier for its relatively higher performance within a high-need rural school district.

Poland Elementary School



Despite being the third largest school district in New York by land area, Poland Central School District's student population is small, with just over 500 students split between its two schools. Located in Herkimer County, the school sits along the southwestern edge of Adirondack Park. Poland Elementary serves a student population that has declined modestly over time and includes a substantial proportion of students who are economically disadvantaged. Poland Elementary School was selected as a positive outlier for its consistent levels of success in academics and attendance in not only a high-need rural context, but also in an area that is geographically isolated.

Van Schaick Grade School

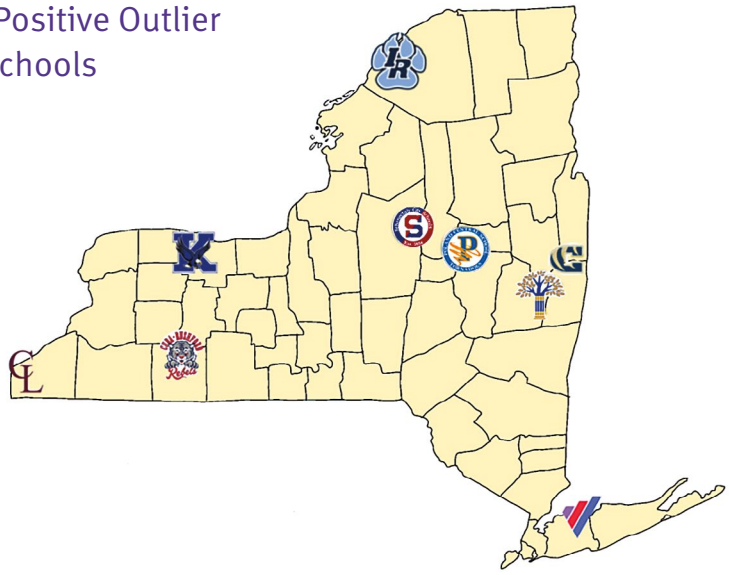


Van Schaick Grade School is located on Van Schaick Island in the city of Cohoes, just ten miles north of Albany. The school is the smallest of three elementary schools in its district and serves 124 students from kindergarten through fifth grade. Amid increased levels of need facing their community in recent years, Van Schaick Grade School educators have stepped up to the plate by creating a culture of consistency, teamwork, and communication to best support their students and their families. With their use of data-informed decision making and programs dedicated to helping students build good character and social-emotional skills, Van Schaick has made itself a standout among elementary schools in the state. Van Schaick Grade School was selected because of its strong and balanced performance across both academic achievement and student attendance compared to other schools within a similar high-need context.

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
Albany School of Humanities	377	K-5	58%	11%	5%	0%	39%	20%	10%	20%	11%	City, Midsize
Chautauqua Lake Elementary School	285	K-5	46%	16%	0%	0%	1%	4%	0%	93%	2%	Town, Distant
Cuba-Rushford Elementary School	327	K-5	61%	23%	0%	0%	4%	0%	0%	94%	2%	Rural, Distant
Kendall Elementary School	346	K-6	52%	17%	0%	0%	6%	0%	0%	88%	5%	Rural, Distant
Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School	302	K-6	97%	18%	24%	0%	34%	24%	25%	10%	7%	City, Small
New Visions Elementary School	433	K-4	70%	15%	29%	1%	22%	71%	2%	3%	2%	Suburban, Large
Philadelphia Primary School	122	K-3	64%	20%	0%	2%	5%	8%	0%	78%	7%	Rural, Distant
Poland Elementary School	216	K-6	43%	12%	0%	0%	0%	3%	0%	95%	2%	Rural, Distant
Van Schaick Grade School	124	K-5	78%	35%	1%	0%	13%	9%	2%	62%	18%	Suburban, Large
NYS Average	2,421,491	K-12	60%	20%	12%	1%	15%	31%	11%	39%	4%	N/A

Locations of Positive Outlier Elementary Schools



SCHOOL LOGO	SCHOOL NAME
	Albany School of Humanities
	Chautauqua Lake Elementary School
	Cuba-Rushford Elementary School
	Kendall Elementary School
	Martin Luther King Jr Elementary School
	New Visions Elementary School
	Philadelphia Primary School
	Poland Elementary School
	Van Schaick Grade School

The Study Context

Elementary education serves as the foundation for children's academic trajectories and long-term well-being. Despite ongoing educational reform efforts and increased attention to early intervention strategies in U.S. public schools, academic learning and social-emotional development gaps across socioeconomic, racial, linguistic, and other demographic background characteristics have persisted (Learning Policy Institute, 2025b; Shirley & Hargreaves, 2022; Soldner, 2025; Weber, 2025).

Recent research has shown that the COVID-19 pandemic affected children and families in a myriad of ways, with the vulnerable and marginalized experiencing the most negative impacts (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2025; Fox et al., 2021; Mazrekaj & De Witte, 2024; Wolf & Schmitz, 2024). New York State, for example, has experienced widening gaps in elementary student academic performance across rural, suburban, and urban communities as well as along lines of race and class since the pandemic (EdTrust-New York, 2025; Gusdorf, 2025).

Researchers have also revealed a disturbing trend nationwide: elementary schools across the country have experienced unprecedented levels of child emotional dysregulation (Backes et al., 2023; CDC, 2025; Stephens, 2025). While initially observed in kindergarten classrooms with increased tantrums and behavioral outbursts (Heubeck, 2025), researchers report that self-regulation challenges now persist throughout the elementary years, affecting the learning environment across all elementary grade levels.

These challenges have been correlated with difficulties in recruiting and retaining qualified elementary educators—adding to an already growing educator workforce shortage crisis (Barone, 2024; Diliberti & Schwartz, 2025; Learning Policy Institute, 2025a; National Education Association [NEA], 2022; Will, 2022).

This scenario raises important questions that informed this study: What can we learn from schools with above-predicted student outcomes and serving demographically diverse communities about 1) important aspects of school culture and climate, 2) approaches to teaching and learning, 3) interventions and innovations to support child mental health and social-emotional development, 4) strategies for recruiting and retaining staff and building organizational capacity, and 5) practices that encourage positive school-family relationships and community partnerships? The pages that follow present each key finding, followed by a Case in Point example and a Self-Assessment Tool to support reflection and application.

1.

Cultivate a Student-Centered Culture of Inclusion, Safety, and High Expectations

The first finding in this study concerns the features of school culture and climate that were common across our nine positive outlier elementary schools. We asked educators a series of questions seeking to determine, ***What aspects of school culture and climate do positive outlier schools share?***

Scholars understand school culture as encompassing the shared norms, values, and beliefs that influence educators' practices and policies both inside and outside the classroom (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2023). Although related, school climate generally refers to how a school is experienced by those who enter the building, including the extent to which it is perceived as welcoming, friendly, and comfortable (Thapa et al., 2013). Both culture and climate can have important implications for students' experiences at school. For instance, school cultures characterized by collaboration, trust, and a sense of belonging, as well as climates characterized by safety and inclusion, have been found to correlate with stronger academic performance and social-emotional learning skills among students (Castro et al., 2025; Erdem & Kaya, 2024).

The schools featured in this study have cultivated cultures rooted in high expectations and strong relationships. As the findings below illustrate, the close relationships that staff members at positive outlier schools have built with students are not only an important feature of these schools' cultures, but they also contribute to a school climate that, as many of the educators we interviewed described it, feels like "family." Educators also described the intentional ways they create environments in which students feel safe, included, and supported, while maintaining high expectations for their learning and behavior. Together, these practices contribute to school cultures and climates in which students are encouraged to attend school, engage in learning, and enjoy their experience while they are there.

This section describes how educators at positive outlier schools work to develop positive school cultures and climates. Three dimensions of this finding emerged from our analysis:

- Building a positive and meaningful relationship with every student
- Promoting attendance through incentives and supports
- Creating a school culture built on safety, inclusion, and high expectations for all learners

Building a Positive and Meaningful Relationship with Every Student

Developing strong relationships with each and every student was described by educators across the nine elementary schools in this study as a foundational element of their school culture and a key contributor to the strong outcomes of their students. Numerous educators described deliberate efforts to know each and every student personally by name and make them feel seen. A support staff member from ASH, for instance, explained the personalized approach that she and her colleagues take towards student relationships, "I think one of the most important things you can do is build a relationship with those kids. The most important thing is they need to know that you're there and that you care."



Wall display at Philadelphia Primary School

Relationships with students in positive outlier schools were not built sporadically; instead, educators described the deliberate and sustained efforts they made to get to know students personally each and every day. A teacher from MLK noted how staff members are "taking that time to really know students and develop that relationship with them and not just treat them as bodies in the classroom." Many participants also described the efforts they made to personally greet students by name each morning, taking note of their mood and body language. A support staff member from Cuba-Rushford explained how she noticed "those little things" in her students and sought to brighten their day: "If they kind of had a cruddy day at home, they're here and they see that positive face saying,

'I'm glad you're here. . . . What's your favorite thing about your breakfast this morning?'" The consistent, one-on-one interactions between staff and students ensured—as a support staff member from MLK put it—"kids don't get lost in the shuffle."

> The biggest key all the way around is relationship, relationship, relationship, relationship. – support staff member (Cuba-Rushford)

Educators at the positive outlier schools in this study felt that creating individual relationships with students was not done solely to improve students' well-being but also served as an important prerequisite to academic learning. A district leader in Poland explained the need to "get to know" students before they "jump right into academics." A teacher at ASH similarly commented, "You have to have that connection with [students] before they can even have that success in the classroom." Importantly, relationship-building was not seen by educators at these schools as a responsibility isolated to teachers; all adults in the school were viewed as individuals with whom students could connect. "It doesn't matter if you're a teacher, principal, custodian . . . every single adult in this building" takes part in creating relationships with students, explained a support staff member from Philly who described the school as a "family."

> All the kids are all of our kids. We all know them very well. – teacher (Van Schaick)

While the impetus to cultivate positive relationships with every student was embedded in each school's culture, many positive outlier schools also had created specific initiatives to ensure that all students are provided with the support they need. For instance, at Kendall Elementary School, students participated in a program called "I Chose You" in which, according to a support staff member, students pick an adult at the school that they can "come to and speak freely with on any situation." Similarly, at MLK, the principal explained how educators drew on insights from the "One Trusted Adult" program to address behavioral challenges that began to surface among the fifth graders. This initiative ensured that educators conducted daily check-ins and check-outs as well as weekly meetings and monthly breakfasts with individual students to bolster connections between students and staff while addressing the difficulties that many students had been experiencing.

Promoting Attendance with Incentives and Supports

To address chronic absenteeism exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, positive outlier educators sought to make their schools places where students wanted to be. Rather than relying on a single attendance incentive, schools used a variety of creative and student-centered approaches. Schoolwide goals also encouraged students to attend school by creating a sense of shared responsibility.

At Van Schaick, for example, the classroom with the highest monthly attendance wins "Paws," a traveling stuffed tiger mascot. Classes that reach 95% attendance or higher also earn mayor-sponsored pizza and ice cream parties. "Seeing the kids happy and excited to come to school . . . means that we're doing something right here," said one teacher. At ASH, teachers collect paper snowflakes to indicate days students are present, with completed attendance goals celebrated by extra recess or class parties. MLK educators also utilize incentives such as quarterly prize-wheel opportunities for students with perfect individual attendance and hold surprise "MLK Days," which involve prizes like ice cream, visits from the local museum and planetarium, and a school carnival. Many educators also found ways to capitalize on activities that students already enjoy, thus incentivizing school attendance. For example, at New Visions, students come to school early for morning basketball and bucket drumming, while at Cuba-Rushford, students have access to a state-of-the-art Esports (electronic sports) and robotics room. Kendall educators similarly offer events like chaperoned bike rides to school on the busy rural road leading to the school as well as trips to Lake Ontario to strengthen students' connection to school. "Kids want to be here," said a Kendall teacher.

Educators at positive outlier schools also work closely with families, recognizing that work schedules, transportation, health, and other circumstances can have a significant impact on children's attendance. At Cuba-Rushford, for example, staff would use school vans to pick students up at home when transportation problems or other immediate circumstances—such as a missed bus or frozen household pipes—prevented them from getting to school. As the superintendent explained, "When a kid is not here, we go get them. . . . By doing that, we're telling parents we care. We're telling the kid, 'We can't live without you.'" School leaders at Van Schaick worked with the PTO to introduce a trimester raffle, offering a $100 gift card to families whose children maintain attendance of 95% or higher. According to school leaders, the incentive gave families another reason to encourage their children to attend, including in the mornings when children were reluctant to go to school. Educators across each school also send letters home to inquire into absences before they begin to accumulate. At Kendall, teachers send handwritten postcards home to thank families for their children's consistent attendance, while at Van Schaick, educators use "stoplight" reports during parent-teacher conferences that categorize students' attendance as green, yellow, or red.

Each school had staff members or a team dedicated specifically to tracking attendance and developing interventions for students who are missing school consistently. For instance, at Cuba-Rushford, student absences are met with an automatic phone call home, letters, and, if needed, home visits conducted by the School Resource Officer. Similarly, MLK works with an "attendance teacher" from the regional BOCES who monitors attendance twice per week and reaches out to

families when students are missing school. Combined with the additional efforts described above, a support staff member at MLK explained that the additional staff member has "definitely improved our attendance quite a bit."

Emphasizing Safety, Inclusion, and High Expectations for All Learners

Educators in this study developed a school climate that ensured children felt safe and included. At schools serving linguistically diverse populations (MLK, New Visions, and ASH), educators portrayed all students' and families' languages and cultures as unique features of their schools and actively celebrate them. "Our kids come from all over the world, and they love each other, and they support each other, and they support us," said an MLK teacher. Likewise, at New Visions, students' cultures are actively represented throughout the school through displays, activities, and events designed to be culturally relevant and meaningful. "Our philosophy is inclusive," said a New Visions district leader.

> I would say we have a lot of students that count on coming to school every day to be their safe place . . . to be their place of uplifting and smiling, and that's really our role as teachers. – teacher (Kendall)

In Cuba-Rushford, educators also exhibited inclusivity under their district motto of "Every Child, Every Day." For example, eight years ago, the district brought back students with special needs who had been in programs at a BOCES and built an entire wing to support students with autism. "I think Cuba does a good job of trying to say, 'You're ours. You're our student,'" said a support staff member. Other schools exemplified inclusivity for students with special needs by ensuring that these students are included in daily activities, events, and programs. For instance, at ASH, the school has an adaptive playground that—according to a district leader—"allows for students with and without disabilities to play alongside one another."

In addition to the emphasis on inclusivity, positive outlier schools exhibited a school climate that prioritized students' safety. As the Cuba-Rushford principal put it, "Above all else is making sure the kids feel safe." A Kendall support staff member similarly commented that "making [students] feel safe and secure is my number one priority." For many educators, however, school safety did not mean simply the protection of students from physical and emotional harm but also referred to the establishment of a safe classroom environment where students could challenge themselves academically and make mistakes without feeling like they would be punished or embarrassed. A district leader at Kendall, for instance, explained how students are willing to try new things and take risks with their learning because of the "safe learning environment" that has been created. Likewise, a teacher at Van Schaick explained how their safe and inclusive classroom helps students understand "we all make mistakes, but we learn through mistakes."

> I think always the number one goal is inclusiveness. – district leader (ASH)

A third characteristic evident in positive outlier elementary schools in this study is the emphasis on high expectations for all students. A district leader at MLK, for example, explained how her goal is for "[all] our kids to graduate [and be] as competitive as any other student in the state and have the same opportunities available to them." And at Kendall, the principal explained how the "high expectations for students" were not only academic but behavioral; the "Kendall Way"—as he put it—ensured that students were held to high standards of behavior and that discipline was rarely needed.



Van Schaick students place their yearly goals around the school seal

Educators at Van Schaick also elaborated on the importance of maintaining high expectations for all students, even for those who encounter challenges in school. "Just because [students] are struggling doesn't mean that we don't expect them to make progress and to make goals and reach those goals," noted one teacher. While maintaining high expectations for all students, educators at Van Schaick nonetheless recognized that those expectations may look different for each student. "[We] keep the expectation high but then accommodate for those kids that still might need the accommodations," said one teacher. Another Van Schaick teacher likewise reported that she sought to "meet [students] where they are but still hold those high expectations for them."

Through intentional relationship-building, proactive attendance supports, and a commitment to safety, inclusion, and high expectations, positive outlier elementary schools create environments where students not only come to school regularly but also enjoy their time while they are there.

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE IN

Cuba-Rushford Elementary School

This excerpt is adapted from the Cuba-Rushford Elementary (CRE) School case study[1] and highlights practices related to this finding.

Supporting the "Whole Child" by Building Strong Relationships

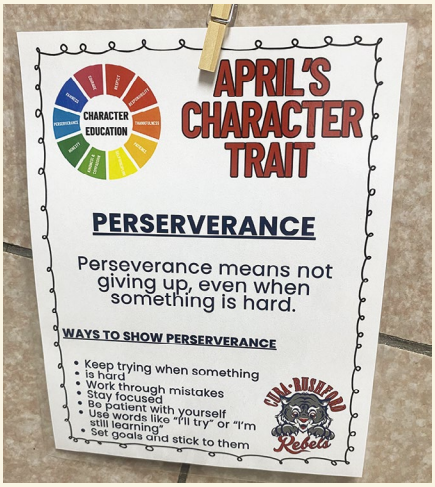
At Cuba-Rushford, relationships are at the root of the district and school culture. Situated in a close-knit, rural setting where—as a teacher put it—"everybody tends to know everyone, and looks out for everyone," CRE serves as a hub for students, their families, and the community. Educators capitalize on these strong ties between the school and community in their efforts to strengthen relationships with students. As a teacher noted, "I would say one thing about this school district is just the relationships [with students] . . . the relationships are something that stands out to me."

Strong relationships serve as a foundation for another main goal of educators at CRE: to support children holistically, rather than simply focusing on their academic progress. The principal, for instance, described the main goal of educators at CRE as "providing kids with the foundations in order to succeed, even after school. . . . What can we do to support the whole child and their family?"

Prioritizing Attendance through Early Intervention

Attendance at Cuba-Rushford is treated as an expression of care and a substantial priority for administrators and staff. For that reason, reducing absenteeism is treated as an intentional, data-driven process anchored in a tiered system. Recurring absences, for instance, trigger immediate responses from educators ranging from an automatic phone call home, letters, and finally home visits conducted by the School Resource Officer.

Yet, instead of a punitive approach, educators at Cuba-Rushford treat the issue of absenteeism with care and empathy and seek to figure out underlying causes of absences before taking additional steps. For example, the school counselor has worked with groups of students who might be having trouble preparing for school or making it through an entire school day. Teachers adopted the same approach in their classrooms. As one teacher put it, "I try to create a classroom community, and I want them to want to come into my classroom." A support staff member similarly noted how students can be encouraged to come to school with simple acknowledgements such as "It's so good to see you today. Oh, I'm glad to see your smile." The superintendent also emphasized the importance of making students feel missed when they are not at school and noted that they regularly go and pick up students who may have missed the bus in the morning.



Monthly Character Traits at Cuba-Rushford

Creating a Culture of Inclusion

Educators at Cuba-Rushford take the motto of "Every Child, Every Day" seriously, believing that each and every student should be seen, valued, and counted regardless of their needs. For example, eight years ago, students with specialized needs who had previously been in programs at the regional BOCES were brought back to the district, and an entire wing to support students with autism was created. The superintendent explained the benefits for students and families to be brought back into the district community so that they could take a greater part in activities and programs:

> *I just had this vision, as a parent. I see kids being dropped off here on the bus, and they have another 30-minute ride to another program. They're getting very little programming, and those parents can't be part of the community. Those kids can't join in Drama Club, because they're not here . . . they feel sort of detached. And so, we brought all those kids in.*

The district includes students with special needs in other meaningful ways. For example, educators described how students with special needs are included in schoolwide activities and clubs, and that special events, such as a "Sports Spectacular" held at Houghton University, provide additional enrichment. "We want to provide a very inclusive environment . . . so [we're] making sure they're aware of those events [and are] providing those supports to those parents, to those teachers, so that their students are able to participate and can be involved," explained a district leader.

1 See complete case study at https://ny-kids.org/research/cuba-rushford-elementary-school-case-study/

On the Continuum

One of the ways to use these findings is by assessing your school on a continuum.

Finding	Not at all (0)	Somewhat (1)	Very Much (2)
1. All staff members at our school view it as part of their responsibility to nurture personalized relationships with students, ensuring that each student has a connection with at least one trusted adult that checks in on them daily.			
2. The culture at my school is characterized by safety and inclusion. Special considerations are made to ensure that students with diverse backgrounds and/or abilities are included in school activities and events, and diversity is celebrated as an important feature of the school.			
3. Educators and leaders at my school maintain high expectations for all students while understanding that students may require individualized support and interventions to ensure that they all can be successful.			
4. At my school, staff members monitor student attendance and implement escalating steps to address repeated absences. Students are encouraged to come to school directly by teachers and through prizes, activities, and treats that incentivize attendance.			

2.

Make Learning Relevant, Responsive, and Empowering

> The curriculum has to be responsive to student needs. We don't want anything that's a one-size-fits-all. — district leader (New Visions)

One of the questions guiding this study was ***What policies, processes, and practices are used to support youth academic success in positive outlier elementary schools?*** As described in the introduction to this report, The New York State Education Department (NYSED) initiated the NYSED Literacy and Numeracy Initiatives (NYSED, 2024, 2025), both of which are designed to ensure that classroom instruction reflects what research has consistently shown to work.

The New York State Literacy Initiative emphasizes alignment with the Science of Reading literature (NYSED, 2024) and sets the backdrop for what programs and instructional approaches educators in this study were taking toward language programming and instruction. Similarly, the New York State Numeracy Initiative supports building conceptual understanding, procedural fluency, and problem-solving skills, and its influence can also be seen in data collected in this study (NYSED, 2024).

Set in this context, we found that across the case study schools a consistent theme emerged: Academic success is inseparable from how relevant, responsive, and empowering the learning experience feels to students. Rather than treating academic learning and engagement in school as competing priorities, educators in this study described deliberately adopting programs and implementing instruction so that students see themselves in their learning, understand its purpose, and have a genuine stake in shaping their learning experiences. Such an approach relies on academic enrichment and intervention services that are data informed, timely, and responsive to individual student needs and interests. The latter point is taken up here and further explored in finding four, since a well-designed and implemented academic enrichment and support system relies upon individual educator competencies and organizational capacities.

The three dimensions found in positive outlier schools related to academic success are:

- Using engaging programs and practices that prioritize solid foundational skills, agency and voice
- Nurturing future-ready learners
- Prioritizing culturally responsive and sustaining curriculum

Using Engaging Programs and Practices That Prioritize Solid Foundational Skills, Agency and Voice

The first dimension of this finding relates to the ways educators have adopted programs that prioritize solid foundational skill development. One example comes from the Albany School of Humanities (ASH). A few years since the adoption of a new math program has given time for reflection and to take stock of results. A school leader explained that the rollout of the program was done in a way that provided teachers who might be a little more "math phobic" with support through model lesson study complemented by ongoing "CPT [common planning time] work" and math instructional coaching. The program itself was described as requiring a "shift" from envisioning teaching as "set them [students] up and the teachers doing more of the work" to "really allowing the students to have a productive struggle and . . . really front load . . . the 'you do'" (of the I do, we do, you do cycle). ASH and Van Schaick, along with several other schools, had also recently adopted new language arts programs or were in the process of doing so, striving to nurture "solid readers," said a district leader of Van Schaick, with attention to "not los[ing] sight of foundational literacy in a way that was really unhealthy [in the past]," as noted by a district leader for ASH.

At Chautauqua Lake ES, student agency and voice in learning have been amplified outside of core literacy and numeracy time through the opening up of the "Enrichment Lab" to all students. This lab time protects space for student-driven projects, and teachers there described "reverse engineering" students' own projects back to standards and learning objectives, thus driving core instruction. New Visions educators similarly prioritize student agency and voice by restructuring the schedule so that enrichment activities like robotics and music never compete with academic intervention time.

Back at ASH, district and school leaders summed up the emphasis on agency and voice for both students and staff, arguing that cultivating creativity and ownership of learning requires shifting classroom discourse and asking hard questions about relevance. A district leader explained:

When I think about student-led discourse . . . [it's] really an emphasis on reducing teacher talk and increasing student talk. That has been a districtwide

GLEAM Components: Albany School of Humanities

Grade-Level	Provide texts, tasks, and materials aligned to the appropriate college and career standards
Engaging	Foster persistence in grade-level work that builds students' interests tied to knowledge and culture without disrupting their beliefs about who they are, their origins, and their potential
Affirming	Honor and acknowledge students' ethnic, racial, and linguistic identities and their current and historical experiences within the context of grade-level work
Meaningful	Understand and critique dominant cultural norms and examine their community's social position to foster a sense of advocacy and change

focus, for sure, and that manifests itself in different protocols, and in different ways. . . .When I go into a classroom, I try to ask kids . . . . What are you learning today? For a student to be able to articulate in their own words, what the lesson objective is . . . why are you learning it? Why does it matter? What is the purpose of this? How does it relate to the lesson at hand, as well as why does this matter to you? And ultimately, How will you know that you learned what your teacher intends you to learn today?

Nurturing Future-Ready Learners

In this study, future readiness refers to preparing students with the skills, knowledge, and competencies needed to actively participate, succeed, and thrive in academic, civic, and community life. In this sense, the concept of "future-ready" aligns with the New York State Portrait of a Graduate (PoG) framework, particularly its emphasis on developing effective communicators, critical thinkers, creative innovators, global citizens, and reflective and future-focused learners.

> Some people don't believe that kids can help the world . . . it makes us, like, stand a little higher. — student (Chautauqua Lake)

What caught our attention is that educators in positive outlier elementary schools provide examples of how they have adopted and adapted the concept of "future-ready" to their local contexts, and in response to both challenges and needs. At New Visions, PoG has become visible throughout the building: "It's in every classroom; it's in the hallways, it's in the cafeteria, it's in all common spaces," a district leader explained. Likewise, MLK educators used the PoG framework to create their own version, the "Portrait of a Learner," which describes a student as "a good communicator," "able to critically think," and "able to problem solve to find a solution." Educators at Kendall, Cuba-Rushford, and Van Schaick have also developed local variants of the framework. Taken together, these ways of adapting the State's PoG framework suggest that positive outlier school educators are using PoG as an opportunity to rethink policies and practices and move toward a vision of an educational system that prepares students to act as citizens able to address the challenges facing their communities with responsibility and care now and into the future.

> Why are you learning it? Why does it matter? . . . What is the purpose of this? — district leader (Albany School of Humanities)

Another relevant pattern is the way that educators approach real-world and community-anchored learning. Many educators spoke to treating real-world problem solving as core to the curriculum itself, rather than as preparation for the world students will enter later. At Van Schaick, a school leader argued that the district's mission is "preparing our students for success in tomorrow's world," building "linkages to real problems, real-world things." At Chautauqua Lake teachers and leaders have not only backwards-designed the curriculum from students' projects but also adapted PoG through Chautauqua Kids Care, where children work in partnership with County representatives on solving real-world problems. As a teacher explained, this collaboration allows students to "tie back to the community with real, authentic learning and civic leadership." In another example of applied learning, Kendall educators partnered with a local roastery to develop a Coffee Club where children brew coffee, measure beans, and invest the proceeds in a schoolwide snack fund. As one school leader put it, "I want kids to learn about business. I want kids to learn about service, and I want kids to have a real experience with a real business." Likewise, in Cuba-Rushford's STEAM room, a teacher explained that the goal is to give children a "taste of jobs" and "make a connection to the real world."



Enrichment classroom at Chautauqua Lake ES

As mentioned above, Chautauqua Lake offers an Enrichment Lab, which gives every child access to a scheduled period for experiential, student-driven projects. As one student described it, "We kind of get to guide our own learning," and teachers scaffold rather than direct the process: As one student explained, "She's [teacher] not gonna say 'No,' she's gonna help you." Together, these educators develop programs that conceive future readiness not in a distant post-graduation manner, but in daily practice where applying learning to real-world problems is built into the experience.

Prioritizing Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Curriculum

As seen in THE GLEAM figure (top of p. 15), the GLEAM components that are meant to guide curriculum and instruction at ASH include attention to "affirming the ethnic, linguistic, and cultural identities" of students, and this emphasis carries across multiple schools in this study. At MLK, for example, one way to ensure that curriculum and instruction are affirming student identities and are inclusive is by leaning into data: At MLK, data drive what teachers call "cohort analysis," which involves comparing the academic progress of multilingual learners who share a linguistic background and arrival in country timeline; through that, students with potential disabilities are identified accurately rather than being confused with typical English-learning trajectories. Likewise, at Poland, the principal explained that data were used to redesign intervention programming, "adding more universal screeners" and moving from a single screener (STAR) to DIBELS, to build a better picture of what students need. Similarly, Philadelphia Primary and Chautauqua Lake rely on structured benchmarking cycles and data-team meetings to analyze student progress and plan to meet individual student needs.

> Every instructional move that we make comes with an equity lens. — teacher (ASH)

While what exactly was being done in each school to ensure that curriculum and instruction is culturally responsive and sustaining differed by context, all relied on a collaborative inquiry process of one form or another that prioritized getting a diversity of people's input. At Chautauqua Lake, for example, the principal explained that she formed a committee that started with a wish list of what a quality curriculum should include. She explained, "It's only going to be successful if I have them [a diverse array of educators] all on board and if I have their input." In a similar way, at Cuba-Rushford, one teacher described the process for making curricular changes as one where "there's always a committee for choosing things, making sure that teachers are part of that process," and another teacher added that "it's not like the district came down and said, 'This is your new ELA curriculum.'" At ASH, the curriculum is strongly community informed and developed by a group of educators and staff with input from families and students; as a district leader explained, "We pulled together a large stakeholder group of our instructional coaches, our teachers, our administrators. She [a school leader] did a family survey; she did a student survey. So, it was really a rich stakeholder conversation." Altogether, these processes illustrate that positive outlier school educators treat curriculum and instruction decisions as opportunities to be child, family-member, and broader school-community informed.

The three dimensions of this finding capture ways positive outlier school educators work to ensure that what students learn, how they learn it, and who and what they see reflected in their learning experiences all reinforce one another and their community.

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE IN

Albany School of Humanities

This excerpt from the ASH case study[2] highlights practices related to this finding.

Instructional Recalibration

> They [teachers] make the kids do the actual work and not let them just lollygag around. – student

ASH can be characterized as in the midst of a significant instructional recalibration, particularly around early literacy. District and school leaders described a renewed attention to the science of reading, noting that "hundreds . . . of our teachers [have completed] the Science of Reading micro credential" (a State University of New York compact academic credential taught by SUNY faculty) to reinforce evidence-based practices. CSDA and ASH school leaders reflected on a period during the rollout of the Common Core of Learning in the mid 2010s when an "overemphasis on . . . balanced literacy" contributed to the district "los[ing] sight of foundational literacy in a way that was really unhealthy." Current efforts, led especially by the instructional supervisor for elementary education, focus on reestablishing strong foundational skills in the primary grades and addressing long-standing challenges in supporting students who enter school without early literacy readiness.

Pre-K Access and Setting a Good Foundation for Learning

The second finding in this section underscores the role of early learning access and engagement in supporting academic readiness and persistence. The district's pre-K model blends in-house classrooms with community-based satellite partnerships, extending reach while maintaining curricular oversight. Participants emphasized the importance of providing rich, engaging learning experiences that foster early skill development and positive dispositions toward learning. These findings reinforce the idea that academic readiness is not only about discrete skills, but also about ensuring that young children have consistent, high-quality early educational experiences that prepare them socially, emotionally, and academically for the demands of elementary school.



ASH Wall Display Celebrates Perfect Attendance

Data to Enrich, Attain, and Intervene

> Everyone should be with kids as much as possible. – principal

A final finding in this section features ASH educators' deliberate use of data to drive equitable, student-centered instructional decisions. Data are used to ensure that the right support from the right person or people is offered at the right time as much as possible (as the quotation above exemplifies). Leaders and teachers described heavy reliance on multiple data sources, including NWEA assessments, paired with clear routines for data interpretation that move from Building Leadership Teams to classroom teachers. These structures ensure that data are not merely collected but actively used to identify each child's needs and target timely support so that the right adults are with the right students as much as possible. The EAI block—also referred to as "Dragon Hour"—operationalizes this philosophy by embedding daily time for enrichment, attainment, and intervention, allowing students to receive instruction matched to their current needs without stigma. This system reflects a broader shift from remediation to grade level instruction, captured by the superintendent's framing of grade level expectations as "the floor, not the ceiling." Together, these practices demonstrate how coherent data systems, aligned instructional routines, and a relentless focus on knowing every child can advance equity while keeping students—rather than programs—at the center of decision making.

2 See complete case study at https://ny-kids.org/research/albany-school-of-humanities-case-study/

On the Continuum

One of the ways to use these findings is by assessing your school on a continuum.

Finding	Not at all (0)	Somewhat (1)	Very Much (2)
1. In our school we carefully examine the research behind core instructional and enrichment programs we are considering adopting and once adopted ensure that instructional practices emphasize student choice and voice—backwards designing to student interest to the greatest extent possible.			
2. In our school we are engaging children in real-world problem solving and this is integrated into the curriculum and in extracurricular/enrichment activities.			
3. In our school we seek out and use information from students, family members, teachers, and other staff as we continuously revise our curriculum for the specific goal of ensuring it is culturally responsive and sustaining.			



3.

Prioritize Student Well-Being and Whole-Child Development

> Mental health is on the forefront for every school district, and it should be because we're seeing increasing needs. . . . It is a huge undertaking that's needed right now, and you've got to put resources there. – district leader (Kendall)

Another question guiding this study was, ***What policies, processes, and practices are used to support youth mental health and social-emotional well-being?***

Children throughout the U.S. have been experiencing growing challenges related to their mental health and social-emotional well-being, including a rise in anxiety and depression over the last decade (Lebrun-Harris et al., 2022; World Health Organization, 2026). Researchers contend that the adverse impacts of the global COVID-19 pandemic continue to pose challenges for youth mental health and well-being in addition to the rapid advancement of technologies and the implications of increased screen time on children's behavioral progression (Jourdren et al., 2023; Zolopa et al., 2022).

In response to these difficulties, educators have expanded and strengthened mental health resources available to students in schools while refining intervention frameworks to ensure that the supports provided to students are timely and meet diverse needs (Leo et al., 2026; Wiedermann et al., 2023). Additionally, social-emotional learning (SEL) programming has been implemented in schools to help students develop skills such as self-efficacy, sociability, adaptability, and self-confidence (Choi, 2018). SEL can also help strengthen children's ability to regulate emotions and promote positive behaviors (Shek et al., 2019). Such efforts are crucial given that schools continue to be a primary site where children can access mental health services and develop social-emotional skills (Duong et al., 2021).

The schools in our study reveal consistent patterns that speak to the ways in which the educators in this study have responded to burgeoning issues related to young students' well-being while they adapt to related policy initiatives. Across the nine elementary schools studied, educators described the meaningful practices utilized in their classrooms, schools, and districts to systematically support children's mental health needs, proactively and equitably manage behaviors, and foster children's healthy development through intentional social-emotional learning. An overarching theme that emerges and brings together the patterns explored in this finding is the intentional prioritization of children's mental health and social-emotional well-being as a core requisite for learning. This is conveyed through positive outlier schools' shift towards holistic and relational practices that are equity driven, nurture children's strengths, and are bolstered by school and community collaboration.

The three dimensions we focus on within this finding are:

- Providing targeted support to address students' mental health needs
- Implementing restorative and empathetic approaches to discipline
- Fostering student well-being through social-emotional learning

Providing Targeted Support to Address Students' Mental Health Needs

In positive outlier elementary schools, meeting children's mental health needs is viewed by educators as foundational to positive learning outcomes and healthy development. With this philosophy at the forefront of schooling, leaders have intentionally expanded institutional support and integrated resources that prioritize the psychological growth and overall well-being of students.

One way this is evident is in the strategic hiring of necessary support staff members to meet evolving objectives for children's well-being. At New Visions, for instance, school leaders have made sure a range of personnel—including social workers, psychologists, behaviorists, and support staff members—are accessible for children who may need support. A district leader explained how this network of "good people on the ground" is part of creating an emotionally safe environment for children. Likewise, leaders in Van Schaick have systematically ensured support is present for students throughout the entire district. "We're very lucky to have a social worker in every building," noted a district leader. And at Cuba-Rushford, the superintendent explained how mental health supports were bolstered after witnessing the impacts to students' well-being after the COVID-19 pandemic. In response, the district hired a social worker and behavior specialist while also providing additional counseling services through the regional BOCES.

Consistent collaboration and data sharing among educators in positive outlier schools drive preventive and responsive interventions. Continuously assessing children's immediate needs through collective planning and action steps is also exemplified in Poland, where the small, tight-knit atmosphere enables flexible yet consistent opportunities for staff to coordinate personalized care for children. For schools like Van Schaick, the implementation of a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), a comprehensive and data-focused framework for differentiated services based on children's needs, was catalyzed by pandemic-related federal funding for mental health services. Moving forward from the height of pandemic disruptions, school leaders across positive outliers continue to implement and refine multi-level communication and intervention frameworks, including MTSS or similar strategies. Cuba-Rushford educators also utilize MTSS and structured meeting times that bring support staff members and teachers together to plan strategies for improving learning and development outcomes. A school leader explained how "all the people impacting that child's life . . . get together, look at data, talk about students. You get your school psych involved, you get your principal, director of special ed."

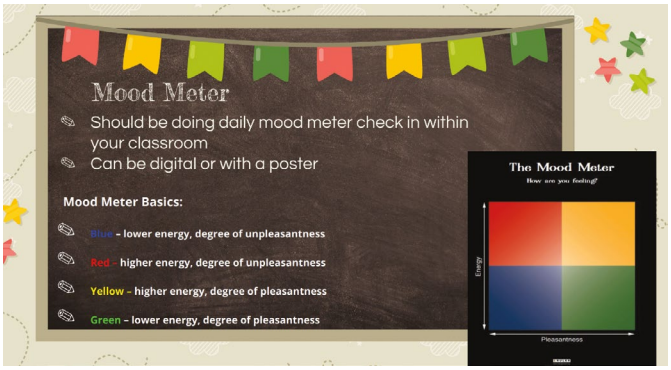
Throughout the schools in this study, these approaches involve a variety of holistic supports that specifically target children's mental well-being and bring in the guidance of well-versed practitioners. Collaborative strategies extend to outside networks, as partnerships with community-based organizations and agencies assist with intervention and crisis support within the schools studied. In Philly, a support staff member explained that there is a "whole slew of support services" through organizations in the surrounding region that connect with the district to meet additional needs such as counseling, case management, or home interventions. Philly educators also partner with local school crisis assistance programs and in addition use a mobile integration team to support students in school. New Visions educators similarly collaborate with local organizations such as hospitals and children's mental health centers to ensure children's needs are met outside of school. At MLK, students' needs are addressed through a "System of Care" model that embeds outside agencies within the school to address challenges related to mental health or trauma. This includes coordinated collaboration with staff via organizations like ICAN (Integrated Community Alternatives Network) and Safe Schools, whose staff work directly with building support staff to provide wrap-around mental health supports.

Implementing Restorative and Empathetic Approaches to Discipline

Another common thread throughout schools in this study is the way educators implement policies and practices designed to nurture children's positive behavioral development. These schools have shifted away from punitive and exclusionary discipline to prioritize relational and restorative approaches that center compassion, empathy, and student agency. Rather than treating challenging behavior only as misconduct, positive outlier school staff and leaders view behavior as forms of communication and deeper need while they deliberately encourage healthy interactions.

> All behavior is communication. - school leader (ASH)

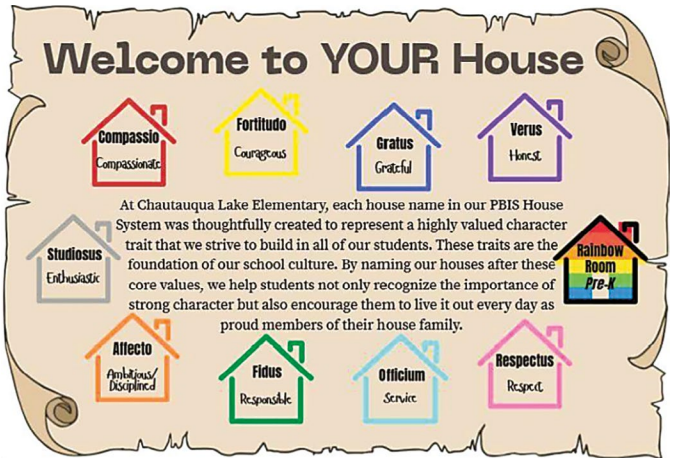
Some positive outlier school educators are prioritizing restorative justice principles, which involve community-driven tools to repair harm, encourage reflection, cultivate trust, and provide opportunities to be accountable in safe settings (Darling-Hammond, 2023). In MLK, a teacher spoke of the ways their school and classroom-wide restorative practices are influencing children's social development: "They're learning how to be a person, how to be a friend. I think that's a really important thing." Comparably, educators and leaders in ASH emphasize a schoolwide restorative approach towards empowering children to process and express their feelings. This can be observed through ASH's classroom "Mood Meter" protocol that helps students identify and communicate their emotions.



ASH Mood Meter Check-in Protocol

Another central pattern among the schools in this study is the innovative adoption and implementation of PBIS (Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports) or analogous models. Through these systematic behavioral support strategies, educators are encouraging positive character development and instilling high expectations. A prominent example appears in Chautauqua Lake, where the whole school community is invested in the PBIS framework that anchors their school climate. The school also utilizes a "house system" that groups students and staff across grade levels by different character traits. Students and staff from each "house" focus on building positive behavior skills associated with that trait and engage in gatherings designed to strengthen community and foster collaboration. Students who illustrate their house trait are also rewarded with fun incentives.

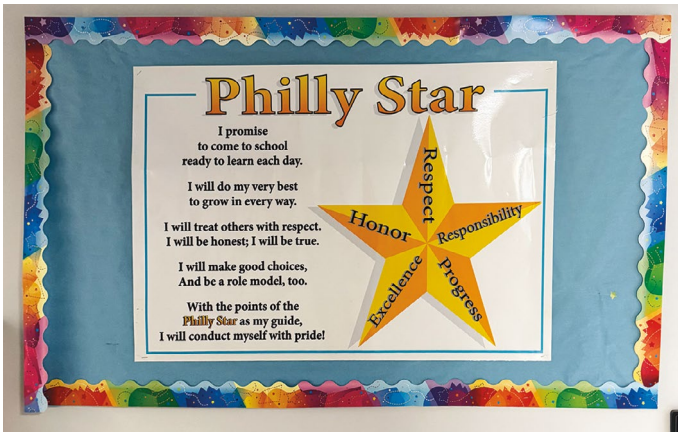
Van Schaick similarly upholds their PBIS policies with strategies that promote consistently good behavior among children. This includes their "3 B's: Be Safe, Be Responsible,



Flyer at Chautauqua Lake explaining the House System

Be Respectful" motto that is promoted through morning announcements. And at Philly, positive behavior is reinforced through their "Philly Star" program. Through this system, children's character strengths and progress toward behavioral goals are highlighted and rewarded.

Enhancing trust and relational connections is at the heart of effectively addressing behaviors, fostering healthy behavior development, and implementing coinciding interventions throughout the schools studied. Educators and leaders in positive outlier elementaries illustrate how collaborative relationships between students and staff foster caring environments that support children's feelings of safety, respect, and belonging. In line with these schools' culture shift away from punitive discipline responses to children's behavior, one support staff member from Poland acknowledged how developing connections with children first and foremost is fundamental to making progress in multiple facets of learning: "Building rapport has been like my biggest focus this year . . . just making sure that the kids know that I'm a safe space for them . . . because without rapport, you have nothing."



Philly Star Guide

Lastly, a core part of this work involves providing children with opportunities to regulate their emotions with dignity. In positive outlier schools, educators underscored the value in helping children process their emotions without relying on exclusionary policies that disrupt their learning (e.g., removal from the classroom). As one Philly leader commented, "We don't have to send [a student] out every time she does this. How about we just let her stay in the back of the classroom and wiggle." Other schools utilized designated calming areas or refocus rooms, as well as places to work on breathing such as sensory rooms.

This perspective illuminates the ways educators and leaders across participating schools thoughtfully approach their responses to children's behaviors. Simultaneously, educators are aware that children's needs are variable—so they prepare for circumstances that may require additional innovative measures.

Fostering Student Well-Being Through Social-Emotional Learning

Educators across the schools studied integrated Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) curriculum into daily programming in order to help students improve interpersonal relationships, regulate challenging emotions, and fully engage in academic learning. SEL implementation, as many educators noted, is largely a response to the increasing behavioral needs of students. The principal from ASH reflected on how SEL provides teachers with a way to attend to emerging student needs: "The [SEL] curriculum has really helped to address some of those [behaviors], allowing our students to kind of learn how they're feeling and how they can express that feeling to a staff member or to a student." In addition, a teacher from Kendall reflected on how SEL can help students relate to each other through guided discussions: "It gave them kind of a 'Oh, yeah, I feel like that, too. That's how I feel when I feel like that. . . . That's what I can do to deal with that.'"

> I look at kids being able to express what's their struggle, or what they, you know, experienced last night at home, I think that kind of gives it validity, support, and takes it off the immediate frontal lobe of the kids, so you can concentrate more on, like school. - superintendent (Cuba-Rushford)

Each of the nine elementary schools in this study has adopted and adapted the NYS guidelines for SEL initiatives to serve their unique populations of students and school communities. Multiple schools used elements from an SEL program called "Second Step." While not every school implemented it the same way, all who used this program reported seeing positive effects on student behavior and well-being. At Poland, support staff members reported how the curriculum has acted as a response to an increase in behaviors that they suspect is driven by social media. "I think there's been an increase in behavior a bit, so there's been some more need for that. . . .I think social media [gives] access to things way above and beyond what they're developmentally ready for."

A teacher from Cuba-Rushford mentioned that repeated exposure to social-emotional skills helps change student behavior over time. "I think the kids need to keep hearing it over and over and over again, year after year. And it builds." At ASH, for example, a structured SEL curriculum (the RULER approach developed by the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence) is included in every classroom. That said, when situations arise that would benefit from a more direct approach, teachers are encouraged to create impromptu lessons to address them immediately. The principal of ASH explained how SEL is built into the schedule, yet "sometimes . . . we're coming back from recess, and we need a community circle."

SEL initiatives also show second-order effects, as a parent from Poland reported their children coming home to talk about emotion regulation and deep breathing exercises and to show off a new stress ball. At Van Schaick, the Devereux Student Strengths Assessment (DESSA) is used to screen all students in third, fourth, and fifth grade and assess SEL competency. The screener is completed three times per year. Once the results are attained, the school social worker, psychologist, and administration review the data and group students based on their areas of need. This allows targeted intervention and specific skill building based on data. As a district leader explained, "If [students] are having trouble with self-reflection or problem solving, then you could do a problem-solving group and, you know, utilize that data to tell you what specific SEL skill they need to work on, and then group them accordingly."

Across the positive outlier schools in this study, SEL emerged as a foundational component for promoting student well-being through the development of emotional awareness, self-regulation, communication, and relationship skills. One teacher from MLK stated, "Happy kids seem to learn better."

On the Continuum

One of the ways to use these findings is by assessing your school on a continuum.

Finding	Not at all (0)	Somewhat (1)	Very Much (2)
1. We attend to children's mental health through coordinated partnerships that provide wraparound and crisis support, while ensuring capable professionals are on the ground.			
2. In our school, we apply restorative, relationship-centered policies to address behaviors while proactively responding to underlying needs—pairing consistent classroom and schoolwide positive behavioral supports with trusted staff and opportunities for safe and dignified emotional regulation.			
3. Our staff members utilize SEL programs and strategies to foster student well-being—focusing on building emotional awareness, self-regulation, communication, and relationship skills.			
4. At our school, we collect and utilize data to effectively address the mental health needs of our students.			

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE IN

New Visions Elementary School

This excerpt from the New Visions case study[3] highlights practices related to this finding.

> Students have to feel and know that schools are a safe place. – district leader

Building a Culture of Emotional Safety

At New Visions, mental health is not viewed as a responsibility handled solely by counselors and psychologists but is embedded in everyday school life. School staff described emotional safety as the foundation of the district's approach to mental health and behavioral support. Across interviews, staff emphasized that many students arrive at school carrying stress from home and need adults who can help them feel safe and supported before they can fully engage in learning. This commitment to relationship-building was visible in everyday practices such as administrators riding school buses to support students and families, wellness spaces where students can decompress, and a schoolwide emphasis on helping students feel "seen" as one teacher put it. Together, these efforts reflect a belief that strong relationships are not separate from academic success but essential to it.

That culture of emotional safety is also reinforced through explicit instruction and staff development. Social workers were reported to regularly teach classroom lessons using programs such as Sources of Strength to promote student mental health, while initiatives such as Sky Schools help students learn emotional regulation strategies and give them language for identifying and communicating feelings. Staff described these skills as being taught proactively rather than only in response to behavioral concerns, signaling that social-emotional learning is embedded in the district's daily practice. Participants also noted that staff receive ongoing professional learning in restorative practices, de-escalation, power struggles, suicidal ideation, and difficult conversations, along with coaching from specialists who model strategies in classrooms. In this way, the district treats emotional safety as something that must be intentionally taught, practiced, and sustained across adults and settings.

Replacing Punishment with Restoration, Regulation, and Student Agency

District leaders described a clear shift away from punitive discipline toward approaches that prioritize restoration, regulation, and student ownership. Administrators reported substantial declines in suspensions after implementing restorative practices, including one school moving from approximately 30 suspensions in a year to zero. Rather than removing students from school, staff use restorative conversations to help students reflect on the impact of their actions, hear others' perspectives, and participate in "repairing harm," as a district leader put it. This approach reflects a broader philosophy that behavioral concerns should be addressed through accountability and relationship-building rather than exclusion. A school leader explained how restorative practices move away from "punitive behavior management" and instead put "kids at the center of . . . resolving their conflict."

This philosophy also shaped how the district responds when students become emotionally or behaviorally dysregulated. Wellness rooms, calming spaces, and classroom-based regulation supports give students a place to pause, process, and return to instruction when ready instead of being sent out of class as punishment. Staff described these spaces as places where students can "regulate emotions" with dignity—as one teacher put it—and receive support from trained adults. The district also extends this restorative approach by positioning students as problem solvers and leaders. Participants described peer mediation programs in which trained fourth-grade students help younger peers navigate minor conflicts, reinforcing the idea that students can take active roles in resolving problems, building empathy, and strengthening school climate.

Serving as a Community Mental Health Hub

Participants portrayed the district as functioning as a hub for student and family mental health needs, not just as a place of instruction. Schools employ social workers, psychologists, behaviorists, and support staff members who provide counseling, consultation, crisis response, and classroom-based services, and participants noted that additional social workers had been added to elementary schools in recent years. These internal supports allow the district to respond quickly to a wide range of needs while also helping teachers and families navigate concerns. In this sense, the district's role extends beyond academics to include direct support for student well-being.

At the same time, the district relies on partnerships with outside providers to extend care beyond what schools can offer internally. Collaborations with organizations such as family and children's health centers create what a district leader described as a "direct pipeline to services," helping families connect to treatment more quickly and reducing delays in care. Participants also emphasized the importance of proactive identification systems, including Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) processes, ongoing data review, multidisciplinary teams, and technology monitoring that alerts staff when students search for self-harm or suicide-related content on school devices. Together, these systems reflect a preventive approach in which early identification, coordinated response, and access to external treatment are treated as essential parts of supporting student well-being.

3 See complete case study at https://ny-kids.org/research/new-visions-elementary-school-case-study/

4.

Strengthen Educator Competencies and Build Organizational Capacity for Improvement

> We believe in the power and genius of our teachers. So when they have a really amazing idea, . . . we are all in with "What we can do to help?" And a lot of that is just supporting strategic planning, professional development, getting the connections made within the community. –school leader (Chautauqua Lake ES)

Another question guiding this study was ***What policies, processes, and practices are used to recruit and retain educators and build organizational capacity?*** Recent research indicates that school districts across the country have been grappling with teacher shortages caused by increasing rates of turnover and attrition as well as a dearth of candidates to replace those who have left (Learning Policy Institute, 2025a). Although concerns over workforce shortages were salient prior to 2019 (e.g., Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017), the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to increases in educators' stress levels and rates of turnover (Collie, 2023; Hirshberg et al., 2023; Leo & Wilcox, 2025).

While the Learning Policy Institute (2025a) found New York to rank high on teacher "attractiveness," the state has not been immune from educator workforce struggles. For instance, New York State is expected to need 180,000 new teachers in the next decade, yet enrollment in teacher education programs has declined over the last decade (Office of the New York State Comptroller, 2026). Shortages are most acute in the subjects of career and technical education, health science, English language arts, science, special education, and library media specialist (New York State School Boards Association, 2025). In addition, the state's teacher turnover rate was higher than the national average during the pandemic and remains above 10 percent, and this rate is double for teachers with fewer than five years of experience (Heiser, 2025). According to the New York Equity Coalition (2023), rates of retention are nine percentage points lower for teachers of color.

Set in this context, we found a consistent theme emerge: Just as with children, adults thrive where they are intentionally cared for as people, given the right amount of new learning with the right kind and amount of information, and opportunity to apply that learning at the right time and for a clear purpose. How a school functions as a learning organization -- "an organization that is continually expanding its capacity to create its future" (Senge, 1990, p.14) -- and how doing that entices talent to come and staff to stay, is reliant upon several practices.

The most prominent practices emerging in positive outlier schools in this finding from the study are:

- Strategic Recruiting and Retaining through Growth Opportunities and Relational Ties
- Leveraging Data to Inform Decision Making and Drive Action
- Leading a Vision for a Continuous Improvement Journey

Strategic Recruiting and Retaining through Growth Opportunities and Relational Ties

Across the nine schools, educator workforce challenges were tackled through a combination of strategic recruitment and engaging professional learning opportunities, and these were situated in strong relational cultures. Evidence suggests that effective recruitment and retention were less related to salary, school location or population of students served and more a product of purposeful professional growth opportunities and the nurturing of a sense of belonging and commitment to colleagues, children, families, and leaders. Importantly, these schools' hard-earned reputations for being good places to work then act as a flywheel, enticing new talent to come and commit to the school longer term.

Strategic recruitment emphasizes fit and draws upon curated local pipelines. Fit can be defined in many ways, yet one consistency across positive outlier schools was fit to desirable individual characteristics. One example comes from Chautauqua Lake, highlighted as a case in point in this section. There, members of search committees specifically look for qualities such as trustworthiness, kindness, openness to collaboration, and flexibility to increase the probability that new hires stay and contribute to the existing culture. At Cuba-Rushford, leaders intentionally broadened recruitment by attending job fairs and seeking "the best wherever that finds us," as one district leader put it. At ASH, recruitment often occurs through professional reputation and word-of-mouth, and, as the superintendent of Van Schaick explained, the district relies on student-teachers as a "pipeline to attracting staff." Finally, Philadelphia leaders balance internal promotions with external recruitment, intentionally bringing in "an influx of new ideas."

Another consistent pattern we found across several positive outlier schools was the importance of providing an engaging professional learning environment via structured mentoring, coaching, and embedded professional learning. Strong evidence of this appeared in Van Schaick, Kendall, Cuba-Rushford, Philadelphia, and ASH. At Van Schaick, new teachers participate in a "New Professionals Program," receive individualized mentors, and have access to an array of building-level professional learning opportunities. At Kendall, leaders have implemented "Mentoring that Matters," providing trained mentors for both first- and second-year teachers because, as a district leader noted, "That's been really important to retaining teachers." At Cuba-Rushford, a leader explained that new teachers meet monthly and receive coaching on everything from communicating with parents to classroom management. At Philadelphia, district leaders highlighted the value of literacy, math, science, and technology coaches who "serve as a mentor and expert" and model lessons in classrooms. At ASH, instructional coaches routinely model lessons, coteach, and support implementation of new curricula, with one teacher noting that the coach had been preparing staff for a new math curriculum "for probably two years before that [its full implementation]."

Many educators linked their retention to the engaging professional learning environment that offers ample opportunities for developing leadership skills and elevates teachers' voices in changes and decisions made about those changes. At ASH, district leaders stressed the need to "grow instructional leaders" and proactively recruit future leaders from among their strong teacher staff. At Philadelphia, the superintendent emphasized providing "ladders of opportunity and ladders of leadership" for frontline educators. At Kendall, teachers reported that they "do have a pretty significant voice" in decisions affecting their work.



Kendall keeps morale high by celebrating their teachers' successes

Across sites, educators were more likely to join a school team and remain where they were given opportunities to grow professionally and assume leadership roles.

Leveraging Data to Inform Decision Making and Drive Action

A second dimension of this finding relates to data collection and use. Positive outlier school educators consistently reported that collecting and analyzing data was not simply a compliance activity but a central mechanism for instructional improvement, intervention planning, resource allocation decision making, and, more broadly, individual and organizational learning.

Three schools in particular, ASH, Van Schaick, and Cuba-Rushford, demonstrated especially robust systems for collecting, discussing, and acting on multiple forms of student data. Importantly, these schools all showed evidence of the purposeful reframing of data sets so that they would not be associated with blame or shame. At ASH, educators described data as openly shared and discussed. One ASH teacher explained, "Data is not a weapon . . . it tells us information," while a school leader noted, "We know our data, we really look at our data at BLT [Building Leadership Team], at CPTs [Common Planning Times], at principal PD [Professional Development], and it's not shameful. We put it out there." Teachers are expected to analyze data themselves and interpret what they mean for improving their practices or processes: "We [school and district leaders] don't give them [teachers] the data anymore . . . now they work on it, so they own it," said one ASH leader.

A second pattern related to data use was the systematic use of data to drive intervention decisions and provide differentiated support. At ASH, teachers use NWEA results and classroom data to regroup students and adjust supports. One said, "We start to move kids into different groups based on that NWEA data" and added that support personnel were reassigned when testing indicated changing student needs. At Van Schaick, staff described six-week progress-monitoring meetings where teams asked, "Is the student making progress? Do they need a different group?" and reviewed multiple sources because "one data point doesn't tell you everything." Cuba-Rushford similarly uses progress monitoring program (AIMSweb) benchmarks, classroom assessments, and MTSS reviews to make placement decisions, with one leader

explaining that teams "look at all the scores across the board and make decisions about which setting may work best"; another noted that intervention goals are selected based on specific skill deficits identified through data.

Many of the educators described using increasingly sophisticated multi-source data systems. Van Schaick, Kendall, and New Visions all reported efforts to integrate multiple indicators rather than relying on single assessments. Van Schaick's MTSS director emphasized that "iReady is one tool . . . that's only one data point" and described combining academic, attendance, and social-emotional data. Kendall educators create dashboards designed to be easily accessible to teachers and provide snapshots of students' standards-level performance and longitudinal trends, with leaders explaining that "we have pretty much created our own program where we keep all of our scores" and can now "see trends" across years. At New Visions, administrators described drawing on state assessments, NWEA or iReady benchmarks, teacher feedback, attendance, and MTSS documentation.



Cuba-Rushford leaders provide staff with an MTSS "Cheat Sheet" to ensure the appropriate interventions are applied

Finally, many educators in this study linked ongoing data analysis to both individual and organizational improvement. Kendall, Cuba-Rushford, Poland, and New Visions educators reported structured opportunities to analyze assessment trends and adapt curriculum, instruction, or staffing accordingly. Cuba-Rushford staff reported that benchmark meetings, congruence meetings, and MTSS reviews help ensure that students do not "fall by the wayside." And at Poland, teachers described weekly and monthly data meetings focused on identifying instructional gaps and planning responses, while New Visions leaders credited data analysis and collaborative planning with substantial increases in achievement, noting that educators continuously asked, "What are we doing and what's working and how to sustain it?"

Overall, one clear pattern among positive outlier schools in this study is that they moved beyond data collection as a compliance activity toward collecting data relevant to making timely adjustments based on individual children's needs. Data were openly shared, collaboratively analyzed, triangulated across multiple sources, and routinely used to inform instructional, intervention, and organizational decisions.

Leading a Vision for a Continuous Improvement Journey

Just as with any successful journey, what we see in positive outlier schools is attention to laying the groundwork for continuous improvement to take hold as the norm. As described above, the schools in our study shared some practices and processes (although nuanced for their own contexts) to ensure that the team going on the journey felt like a team, including that each individual was a good fit to the context and each was prepared (or would be prepared) to make the long haul together. Second, leaders put significant effort into ensuring that their team had the tools, skills, and routines to increase the likelihood that the journey would be successful. This included access to relevant data, skills to make sense of data, and routines like data review protocols and communication channels to move from data interpretation to action. Just as a journey is more likely to be successful if it has a clearly defined journey map, we found that positive outlier schools shared the gift of a vision of what the school stands for or is striving to be, with a clear why and a way.

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

In Poland, for example, long-standing relationships between educators, many of whom have close ties to the area and to each other, reinforce a clear sense of what the school stands for as "the hub of the community," as described by a parent. Long tenures of staff, including the superintendent, who has come up through the ranks in the district, reinforce staff commitments to "rock and roll with our administration," as a staff member put it, to achieve a vision. Stability in leadership, as in this case, reduces the strain on staff as they navigate challenges like pandemics and state policy shifts to continue on the journey toward fulfilling their vision.

In addition to the clear "what" we stand for or strive to be, at ASH, the principal described the why behind redoubling the effort to create opportunities to tap students' passions and increase their sense of belonging. As she explained, "Because we wanted to make sure that if a kid loves something, we were making sure they had the chance to do it here." To achieve this vision took many years, with the principal and other leaders progressing from being visible in the building, developing trust, setting up systems and structures, getting instructionally focused and data informed, reflecting and getting and giving feedback to then continue to propel the school forward toward the vision. This progression was evidenced in some form in many of the positive outlier schools and breaks down into a sequenced leader-improvement strategy as follows:

- Build Trust and Credibility ("We're all in this together.")
- Create or Refine Systems and Structures ("The school can function better with some consistencies.")
- Strengthen Instruction ("Teaching and learning become the focus.")
- Drive Achievement through Data ("Academic outcomes improve when informed by data that are shared, understood, and acted upon.")
- Listen and Rebalance Priorities ("Success is defined through feedback loops.")
- Advance Whole-Child Development ("Students thrive academically and personally when their passions are tapped.")

Once trust and systems and structures for improvement were solidified, positive outlier school leaders showed evidence of being responsive and reflective visionaries. These leaders actively translated high-level visions into manageable, school-specific priorities that preserved teacher agency and buffered staff from innovation overload and the all-too-common adopt-attack-abandon cycle (Rohanna, 2017).

On the Continuum

One of the ways to use these findings is by assessing your school on a continuum.

Finding	Not at all (0)	Somewhat (1)	Very Much (2)
1. In our school we are strategic about hiring people for needed expertise but also for personal characteristics that fit our school, and we provide new and veteran staff opportunities for professional growth that are relevant to their practice.			
2. In our school we see data and discussions around data as key to our abilities to adapt instruction, provide appropriate interventions, and support organizational improvements. We are provided adequate time and space (e.g., in PLCs or other structures) to make sense of data and continuously act on the data and discussions around them to improve.			
3. In our school we have a clear vision of what the school stands for or strives to be, accompanied by a clear why and a way to pursue improvements in our practice and in our systems.			

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE IN

Chautauqua Lake Elementary School

This excerpt from the Chautauqua Lake Elementary School case study[4] highlights practices related to this finding.

Selecting for Cultural "Fit" and Retaining through Shared Commitment

> The people who work here love it here and want to be here. – district leader

Chautauqua Lake's approach to recruitment and retention centers on protecting a specific cultural fit. According to staff involved in choosing candidates, hiring explicitly weighs "trustworthiness, kindness, openness to collaboration, and flexibility" alongside instructional skill. This intentional strategy extends into daily culture: Leadership team members describe themselves as "like a family," a framing that reinforces why turnover concerns rarely surface in the district or school, according to one school leader. Retiring staff further affirm the sustainability of this approach: One veteran teacher noted confidently that her replacement "will continue with what we have established. . . . I do not see anything changing, but improving," crediting this approach to sustaining staff commitment to "the philosophy of the district," not any one person.

Distributed Leadership Roles That Build Capacity and Prevent Burnout

> You're not going to be on them [committees] all. – teacher

Rather than concentrating responsibility in a handful of staff, school and district leaders deliberately spread decision making and workload across many teacher-led teams — the Building Leadership Team, PBIS, IST (Instructional Support Team), Safety Committee, and CLTs (Collaborative Learning Teams)—with every staff member expected to serve on at least one. Teachers described this distribution as an explicit, known expectation from the start: "When you came here, you knew you were going to be on something," said one teacher. Another teacher added that the approach is flexible enough to sustain over a career, since staff can rotate off a committee after a year or two and hand it to a colleague. This flexibility extends to the house-based PBIS system as well, where leaders noted deliberately mixing teachers who didn't already know each other into shared house teams. "We purposefully put people with people they don't know"—specifically to build cross-grade relationships that reduce isolation and burnout, reported a teacher. The result, staff said, is a workload that feels shared and sustainable rather than concentrated on a few overworked staff.



Anti-Bullying Display at Chautauqua Lake

A Teacher-Driven Professional Learning Model That Builds Ownership

> I was blown away. – teacher

The quote above speaks to a newer teacher's impression on first encountering the district's goal-setting model. Perhaps the clearest retention driver at Chautauqua Lake is the district's shift away from traditional professional development opportunities offered by outside experts toward a staff-driven model (culminating in what is called "The Showcase"). The PD model is built on individual and Collaborative Learning Team (CLT) goals. Veteran staff acknowledged this wasn't an easy shift; one recalled that in year one, "It [The Showcase] wasn't well received . . . it felt like you were treated almost like a child being asked to set your own goal after twenty years of teaching." However, staff broadly described having come around once they saw payoffs: "We take ownership of what we're doing, and it's helping us," said one teacher. Newer teachers, notably, described this professional learning model as a genuine draw to staying in the district rather than an imposition; after comparing notes with family members who teach elsewhere and had "never even heard of" this model, one teacher said she found "real enjoyment . . . and love for it, because it [the learning through self- and CLT-initiated goal setting and showcasing effects] is something I can use." The annual May showcase — where every teacher presents their CLT work districtwide — reinforces this sense of investment, giving staff both public recognition and a structured, ongoing reason to keep growing their practice within the district rather than seeking it elsewhere.

4 See complete case study at https://ny-kids.org/research/chautauqua-lake-case-study/

5.
Engage Families and Strengthen Community Partnerships

> To have a school community where the emphasis and the focus is on embracing and celebrating cultures from around the world—that was important to me. – parent (ASH)

Our last research question queried, ***What policies, processes, and practices are used to engage families and develop partnerships with community organizations?***

Family engagement plays a key role in children's academic success and social-emotional development. Researchers have documented promising outcomes in attendance rates, academic performance, and social-emotional well-being when parents, caregivers, and educators work together (Fan & Williams, 2010; Garbacz et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2019). Notably, research also indicates that school-family relationships are optimal when they are driven by authentic attention to diversity of voice represented in shared decision making (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014; Henderson et al., 2007). Policymakers have also increasingly called for more attention to be paid to community partnerships to enhance children and youth civic engagement and increase their opportunities to apply knowledge and skill to real-world problems (NYSED, n.d.)

Connections between schools and families can be shaped by factors like social and economic contexts, geographic landscapes, community resources, cultural diversity, and significant global events. For instance, when COVID-19 disrupted the flow of daily school and work life, educators faced novel challenges as well as opportunities. School closures, evolving mandates, and public tensions inspired adaptations for building and rebuilding authentic and meaningful collaborations with families (Hartney & Finger, 2020; Hodge et al., 2022; Leo & Wilcox, 2026; Mapp & Bergman, 2021).

> When we say we want . . . parent voice, we have to be prepared to listen, even if it's not like, flattering for us, like, ooh, we really dropped the ball at Central registration, what can we do to fix it? Or, Wow, instructionally, we're really not meeting the needs of so and so in third grade at ASH, what can we do to fix it? And so it's always going to be a learning experience as we kind of move forward. – district leader (ASH)

As we approach 2027, a growing body of research on school-family engagement and community partnerships continues to show promise in supporting whole-child development (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2025). In the current study, we found that family engagement efforts and community partnerships were adapted to context and dynamic, but positive outlier school educators tended to share a few specific practices. In this section, we break down three patterns we found in positive outlier schools in relation to family and community partnerships:

- Engaging families as valued partners in student success
- Maintaining proactive, transparent, and consistent communication
- Leveraging community assets and responding to local needs

> So the parents and even teachers get involved too, bring a dish from their home country or their culture, and we have the entire gym lined up with all this different food. And you go around and you try food that you've never thought you were going to try before, from a culture you've never heard of, or you never would even imagine trying something from. And the kids get involved, and they dress up in their cultural heritage, and it's great. – parent (New Visions)

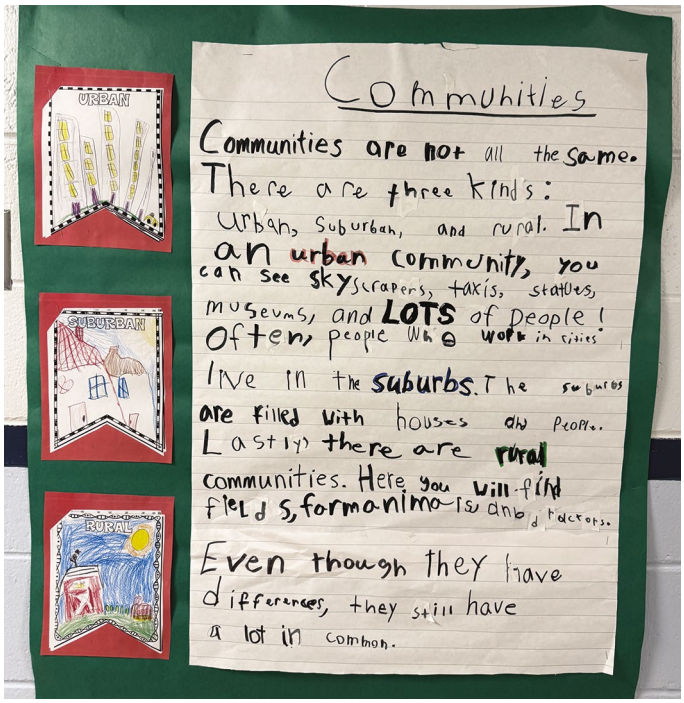
Engaging the Diversity of Families as Valued Partners in Student Success

Student success is deeply intertwined with family engagement in positive outlier elementary schools. Among the schools studied, connections built between school staff and parents and caregivers transcend the transactional and surface level. Educators' thoughtful attention and care towards families' variable needs is one notable contributor to parents and families feeling valued. Engagement practices are rooted in the understanding that valuing parents' and caregivers' needs take different forms depending on family backgrounds and experiences. Educators and leaders reported being consciously aware that factors such as economic burdens, geographic isolation, or transportation challenges can play a role in limiting family participation in events and in various ways they may be called upon to support their child's learning. In Van Schaick, this awareness involves thinking outside the box. As one district

leader explained, "So really, we have to look at what parent engagement means, and it's not necessarily what you might think, you know, in terms of PTA and opportunities where parents come in the school, but really looking at how we can engage parents in other ways that meet their needs."

> On a daily basis we use ParentSquare, which is a communication platform, across the district, so that's used all the time, and most of it is for positive messaging. Like, "Hey, here's what we're doing today. Here's pictures of your kiddo. Great job." – school leader (Chautauqua Lake)

Similar care and understanding towards building connections are reflected in Philly, where educators spoke about the disruptions the pandemic caused for consistent family interaction and participation—especially with families who may be harder to reach. Philly leaders deliberately worked to rebuild and strengthen partnerships through cherished community events like "Kids Night Out," which provides enrichment opportunities and childcare so that family members also have a night off.



Philly Student Communities Assignment

Connecting with families and being empathetic to circumstances also shows up in the ways positive outlier school educators welcome the diverse community around them into school activities. This is evident through events that celebrate multiculturalism as well as outreach mechanisms that break down language barriers and facilitate belongingness for families who do not speak English as their first language. For example, New Visions' multicultural event highlights and honors children's various backgrounds while promoting belonging and involvement from the entire community.

In MLK, educators actively work with multilingual families using translators or "nationality workers" to engage families and maintain relationships.

Maintaining Proactive, Transparent, and Consistent Communication

Communication is a salient aspect of school-family relationships. The ways in which educators and leaders in positive outlier elementary schools reach out to families shed light on dependable strategies to fortify relationships. A prevalent finding among the schools studied, which illustrates proactive, transparent, and consistent communication, is the implementation of frequent and reliable communication pathways.

Reflecting on their communication with parents and caregivers, staff across the schools studied shared their strategies of steadily and continuously updating families so they may stay informed on various subjects. In Cuba-Rushford, much of this communication is clear and straight to the point, as consistent approaches to inform parents focus on immediate matters. Speaking about their newsletter, a school leader from Cuba-Rushford acknowledged, "I think we're trying to really take the approach of, what do parents need and want to know? They want to know when state testing is. They want to know when the concerts are."

Among positive outliers, being direct and communicating in concrete, accessible ways is accompanied by efforts to regularly share highlights with families—focusing on useful feedback as well as positive highlights and appreciations. This is commonly done via the app ParentSquare. Considering teachers' communication approaches, one parent from Poland commented, "I find that the teachers are very responsive. ParentSquare . . . has been a great tool for communication . . . and it's very, very easy to get a hold of them [school staff]."

Ongoing, reliable communication is joined by a second pattern found in positive outlier schools: These communication channels are innovative, adaptive, and culturally responsive. Creative outreach tactics are found in Cuba-Rushford, where a support staff member produces a podcast for children's families and community members to spread insights on mental health resources and services. In Chautauqua Lake, adaptation shows up in the flexible, multichannel networks that staff use to interact with families, often depending on what their comfort levels are. As one staff member explained,

> *Some of my parents prefer ParentSquare or email. I have notes about families and their preferences for communication. And part of it is just making sure that I know my families. I have a couple families that are off grid right now, and so, you know, that person really values in-person conversations and wants to just come in, and so [I make] that time [so] that she can come in.*

The third commonly discussed pattern among educators in this finding highlights the ways communication with families is used to drive introspection and improvement. In Kendall, the influence of community and family voice is underscored through their use of a survey to garner feedback from stakeholders. One Kendall district leader shared details about their strategy:

> *We created a survey, sent it out to all staff and community. . . . It shows that investment in the community and that people want to have their voices heard. So we're going to take that information and really . . . break it down. . . . And that's the idea—how do we get better? You know, you can look at test scores, you can look at graduation rates. . . . You could say, "Wow, they're doing well." We're doing well, okay, but how do we get great? How do we become great? And I think that's just the input from kids, staff, community.*

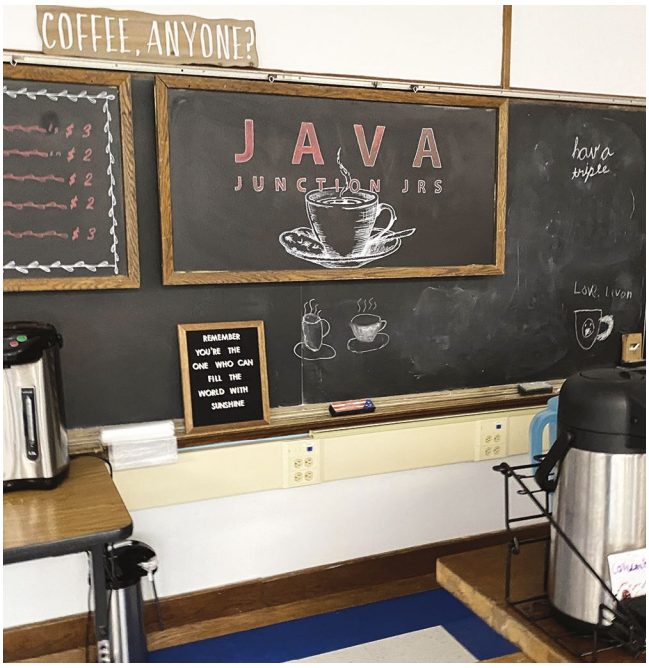
Eliciting families' input for continuous reflection and growth is evident in Philly as well, where school leaders maintain an open-door policy for parents. One Philly teacher elaborated, "We have an open-door policy at our school. I think parents do feel comfortable even talking about things that are very uncomfortable."

Leveraging Community Assets and Responding to Local Needs

A central theme among the nine positive outlier schools is the intentional utilization of community resources to meet children's and families' fundamental needs. To that end, we found that leaders and staff work with nearby organizations to meet children's needs for enrichment both inside and outside of the classroom. This stands out in Kendall, where, as described in Finding 2, educators teamed up with a local coffee business to provide opportunities for students to apply math and science skills while selling coffee to staff.

At Philly, professionals from various organizations are brought in to engage and inspire children. For example, Philly students work with experts from Indian River Lakes Conservancy, who share knowledge about the world around them, their nearby river, and its ecosystem, encouraging children to apply the skills they're learning beyond classroom walls. Similarly, New Visions maintains partnerships with local organizations, businesses, and museums that offer educational opportunities, resources, and materials. Operation Splash is one of these local initiatives, where professionals teach New Visions students about keeping drains and local water sources clean.

School-community partnerships are often focused specifically on providing critical mental health support. Leaders and educators among the schools studied have already or are establishing formal partnerships to bridge gaps in access to mental health services for students and their families.



Student-run coffee shop at Kendall called "Java Junction"

For example, Chautauqua leaders utilize community assets to mitigate some of the barriers to receiving mental health support that can emerge in their rural context. One support staff member from Chautauqua explained how mental health services are embedded into the school itself, as they offer physical spaces for mental health care professionals to work with children and their families, who would otherwise need to travel far distances to receive assistance: "We offer them [mental health providers] an office space in our building at no charge, and we will make referrals with the family's permission, so children can be seen here at the convenience of the family."

> Our partners are invaluable to us. Our system of care partners over the last four years has really filled a void, I think, that we needed here. – district leader (MLK)

Creating partnerships for mental health support is likewise a focus at MLK, where leaders have spent years working to establish an interconnected system of partnerships to meet the multiple needs of children in their school, district, and larger community. This is evident through their System of Care network described in Finding 3, which reaches multiple organizations that bring staff directly into the schools to provide whole child support and respond to crisis situations.

The final pattern tying this finding together is the general way positive outlier elementary schools operate as community hubs for delivering services to relieve economic strains on students and their families. Along with drawing on community resources for mental health services, positive outlier school leaders collaborate with community members to develop partnerships or programs to help mitigate economic burdens and

provide children and their families with basic support (e.g., food, social services) they may struggle to receive at home.

For instance, like several other schools in the study, Philly offers a Backpack Program "to help supplement food for the weekends. And it's not income-based. It's based on what we see the needs [are]," said a support staff member. Poland educators similarly organize a food assistance system and also conduct clothing drives for students to help provide families with coats, gloves, and hats during the colder months. "[Staff] make extra effort. If [a] kid needs help with something . . . we do clothes drives for the kids, like the nurse will set up where [and announce], 'Hey, we need jackets, hats, gloves.' That means a lot to some of these kids," explained a support staff member.

On the Continuum

One of the ways to use these findings is by assessing your school on a continuum.

Finding	Not at all (0)	Somewhat (1)	Very Much (2)
1. In our school we ground our family outreach and engagement practices in empathy and adaptability to the various, diverse needs of our children and surrounding community; building authentic connections is supported by a whole school, whole community and egalitarian approach to student success.			
2. In our school we implement frequent and reliable communication pathways that are flexible, while inviting in community voice through innovative outlets and establishing open-door policies that inspire continuous improvement and reflection.			
3. In our school we are actively collaborating and reaching out to community organizations and forging partnerships with organizations that can provide school-based and school-linked supports to further children's enrichment, support mental and physical health, and mitigate economic barriers to child and family thriving.			

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE IN

Van Schaick Grade School

This excerpt from the Van Schaick Grade School case study[5] highlights practices related to this finding.

A Culture of Relational Communication

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

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

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

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

Leveraging Community Connections to Enrich Learning

> I feel like we have a lot of good, rooted connections – teacher

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

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



Door Display at Van Schaick Classroom

5 See complete case study at https://ny-kids.org/research/van-schaick-grade-school-case-study/

Conclusion

This study was designed to investigate the policies, processes, and practices shared across positive outlier elementary schools in New York State chosen for their above-predicted student achievement and attendance outcomes. Our findings suggest that positive outlier schools draw on a diverse range of individual, organizational, and community resources to meet children's academic learning and social-emotional development needs.

While some of the specifics differ across schools as outlined in more detail below, we identified several common patterns these schools share. Across schools, educators viewed their work with children and families as a collective responsibility, adapted their practices in response to evolving needs, and cultivated strong partnerships that extended beyond the school building.

These schools were not characterized by rigid adherence to a prescribed model but instead illustrate an orientation towards improving and adapting their practices in ways that reflect the unique strengths and challenges of their local contexts. Taken together, the findings outline key promising practices and illustrate how positive outlier school educators create conditions that support child academic success and engagement.

We identified three main priorities:

(1) Increasing Capacity Through an Improvement Mindset
(2) Responsiveness as a Core Feature
(3) Meeting Students' Needs Collectively

Increasing Capacity Through an Improvement Mindset

First, across the positive outlier schools, we noted the ways educators moved beyond a compliance mindset and adopted a stance of continuous improvement at all levels. In many schools, this orientation was sustained by a shared desire to make their schools better, with staff members across roles and statuses participating in improvement efforts. Although these efforts were, in some cases, driven by school leaders, the drive to improve was embedded more deeply within the school's culture. Rather than positioning themselves as the sole drivers of change, leaders welcomed staff members to act as agents of improvement and empowered them to innovate within their own spheres of influence by providing the necessary resources and support.

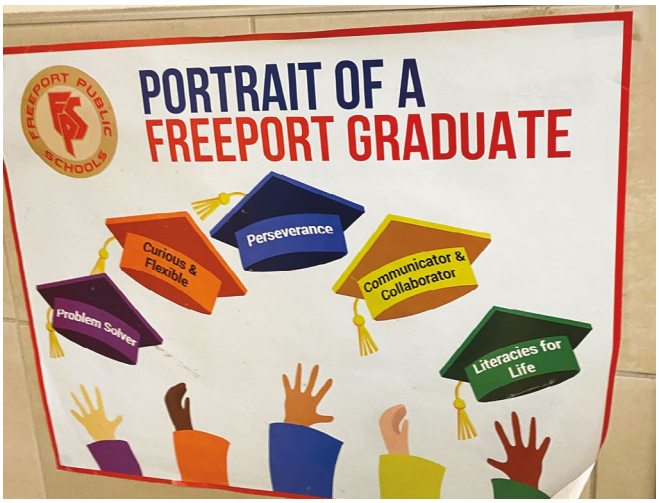
Responsiveness as a Core Feature

A second anchor underlying the efforts of positive outlier schools in this study is their responsiveness—not only to the changing needs and interests of the students they serve, but also to recent shifts in New York State education policy.

Rather than treating curriculum, professional learning, intervention systems, family engagement approaches or any other aspect of the school's functioning as fixed, educators at these schools continually adapted their approaches. This responsiveness signals an understanding that students are more likely to come to school and be engaged in their learning when school reflects their interests, identities, and experiences. As a companion to being responsive to student needs, we found that educators at positive outlier schools were also responsive to the changes coming from the state (e.g., Portrait of a Graduate) and were getting ahead of these changes by experimenting with new enrichment opportunities.

Meeting Students' Needs Collectively

Finally, our findings suggest that the positive outcomes observed in these schools are closely related to the collective efforts of educators, families, and community organizations working together to create responsive school communities that address students' academic, social, and emotional needs. Viewed through the lens of social-ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) that framed this study, these schools demonstrate how coordinated supports across multiple systems foster academic learning and social-emotional development. In this way, we found that educators intentionally aligned their efforts across the classroom, school, family, and community spheres, creating a network of support and resources that extend beyond the school walls.



Portrait of a Freeport Graduate poster hanging in New Visions Elementary School

As we conclude this report, we reiterate that we cannot claim that the policies, processes, and practices we identified are the causes of the above-predicted student outcomes. Instead, we see correlations among them and offer a few key contrasts we noted across school contexts including rural schools (Poland, Cuba-Rushford, Kendall, and Philadelphia); town or suburban schools (Van Schaick, Chautauqua Lake, and New Visions); and city schools (ASH and MLK).

Key Contrasts Across Contexts

The most notable contrast across contexts is that city schools exhibited the strongest and most consistent patterns, while rural schools showed the greatest variation. This may be due to city schools operating within larger districts that have adopted systemwide policies, processes, and practices related to equity, social-emotional learning (SEL), restorative practices, attendance, family engagement, and continuous improvement.

Second, while data use, mental health supports, student-adult relationships, and future-ready learning were consistently prioritized across all contexts, findings related to student agency, family engagement, and continuous improvement showed more contextual variation, particularly among rural schools.

The findings suggest that school context itself may not determine priorities as much as the degree of organizational coherence surrounding those priorities. The city schools appear to share a common improvement infrastructure that produces consistent emphasis. Rural schools, by contrast, appear to be exercising greater local adaptation, leading to more variation in what is viewed as most important. The variability in rural schools may also reflect differing beliefs about discipline, differences in available professional learning around restorative practices, or the perception that strong informal relationships already address many of the goals associated with restorative practices and SEL programming.

> It feels like . . . that word family, and we become a unit. Everybody just collaborates, and we all want the same thing for the kids. It's amazing. – support staff member (MLK)

Returning to our introduction, findings suggest that many of the promising practices evident in New York's positive outlier elementary schools are already aligned with the direction articulated by the New York State Education Department's Graduation Measures initiative and Portrait of a Graduate framework. Across rural, town/suburban, and city contexts, educators consistently emphasized data-informed decision making, strong student-adult relationships, mental health supports, future-ready learning, family relationships, and civic engagement.

At the same time, the variation observed in restorative discipline, social-emotional learning, student agency, family engagement, and continuous improvement infrastructure suggests that some dimensions of the Portrait of a Graduate may require additional capacity building and support to be implemented consistently across settings.

To conclude, we invite readers to use this report and particularly the "on the continuum" self-assessments to examine what is being done to ensure that New York State's youngest learners are prepared with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they need now and into the future.

Methods

Sampling

The nine positive outlier elementary schools included in this study were identified using data obtained from the New York State Education Department (NYSED) Report Card database. Academic outcomes used to identify positive outlier schools included English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics assessments for students in grades 3 through 6. In addition, our sampling strategy utilized rates of chronic absenteeism (i.e., the percentage of students who were absent more than 10% of enrolled instructional days during the school year) to measure student attendance. To ensure consistency in school performance over time, positive outlier schools were identified using data from three academic years: 2021-22, 2022-23, and 2023-24. To identify positive outliers, a series of regression analyses were conducted using ELA and Mathematics assessment data and rates of absenteeism across the three academic years mentioned above. Expected performance levels were estimated while controlling for demographic characteristics, including the proportion of students who were economically disadvantaged, proportion of English Language Learners (ELLs), and the proportion of students who were members of historically underserved racial and ethnic groups. Schools that performed above statistical expectations (more than one standard deviation) in both academic and attendance outcomes were identified as positive outliers. From this pool, we then excluded schools classified as "low need" by NYSED. Finally, we purposefully selected the cases in this study in order to include a diverse range of demographics, urbanicities, and regions across New York State.

Recruitment, Data Collection, and Data Analysis

We conducted the study in three stages guided by the study design and the central research questions under investigation. After securing Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for this research, we then contacted district superintendents and principals of positive outlier schools to invite them to participate.

After consent was obtained from each school, teams of University researchers, all certified in human subjects research, visited each school for two days. During site visits, researchers utilized IRB-approved protocols to conduct interviews and focus groups with a range of stakeholders including district and school leaders, teachers, support staff, students, and parents. Interviews and focus groups were conducted in a semi-structured format and based on the central lines of inquiry informing the study. Researchers audio-recorded interviews after obtaining informed consent from participants and later transcribed the recordings with identifying information removed to protect confidentiality. Audio recordings were then destroyed. School tours were conducted at each school, and researchers also collected documents and photos. Across the nine schools, our team conducted 49 interviews and 78 focus groups with a total of 282 participants; 470 documents and photos were collected.

In the third stage, we used NVivo 15 software to code interview and focus group transcripts through a combination of inductive and deductive coding strategies (Miles et al., 2018). Researchers then followed case analysis procedures to develop individual reports for each school that detail the school context, selection criteria, and findings related to the five lines of inquiry guiding the study (Yin, 2014). Following the completion of these individual case studies, and in preparation for writing this cross-case report, the research team utilized qualitative comparative analysis to identify patterns, similarities, and differences across the nine schools (Rihoux & Ragin, 2008). Several strategies were used to address threats to credibility including: team review of the data and interpretive memoing to clarify bias; source triangulation; consideration of disconfirming evidence; and member-checking case study reports with principals and superintendents to confirm the accuracy of our findings (Maxwell, 2013).

Study Limitations and Context Statement

We appreciate that community members may have experiences and perspectives that differ from those reflected in our study findings. As with all research, this study has important limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. The study's sampling approach was designed to identify schools with notable patterns in student achievement and attendance, while taking into account demographic characteristics (e.g., ethnic and linguistic diversity, economic disadvantage). However, the selection process did not account for all factors that may influence school experiences and outcomes, including funding streams, the availability and quality of specialized services, district/region resource availability, or other supports for specific student populations.

In addition, the perspectives included in the study were drawn from interviews and focus groups with participants identified and recruited through school and district contacts. As a result, the sample may not fully represent the range of experiences within the school community. Families, students, and staff who participated may have held views that differed from those who were not selected, were unavailable, or who did not participate for other reasons (including limitations with recruitment for studies that require school identification). Consequently, the findings should not be interpreted as reflecting the experiences or opinions of all members of the school community or addressing all issues the schools or districts may have faced in the past or at the time of the study.

The purpose of the study was to document practices and conditions associated with positive outcomes based on the available data and participant perspectives. It was not designed to evaluate all aspects of school operations, investigate specific community concerns, assess the adequacy of services, or determine whether particular groups of students or families experienced inequitable treatment, discrimination, unmet mental health or academic learning needs, or other concerns. Therefore, the absence of such findings in the report should not be interpreted as evidence that these issues do not exist.

We recognize that schools and communities are complex, and individual experiences can vary considerably. This is why our studies are designed with input from our Advisory Board who represent an array of community members. As NYKids seeks to design studies of value to the wide variety of community members in our state, we welcome input from community members about topics of interest at nykids@albany.edu.





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- Select high-leverage improvement ideas to test
- Set SMART goals and near-term aims
- Implement and monitor evidence-based action plans

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—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."
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