NJDOE Promising Practices Project: Executive Summary Report
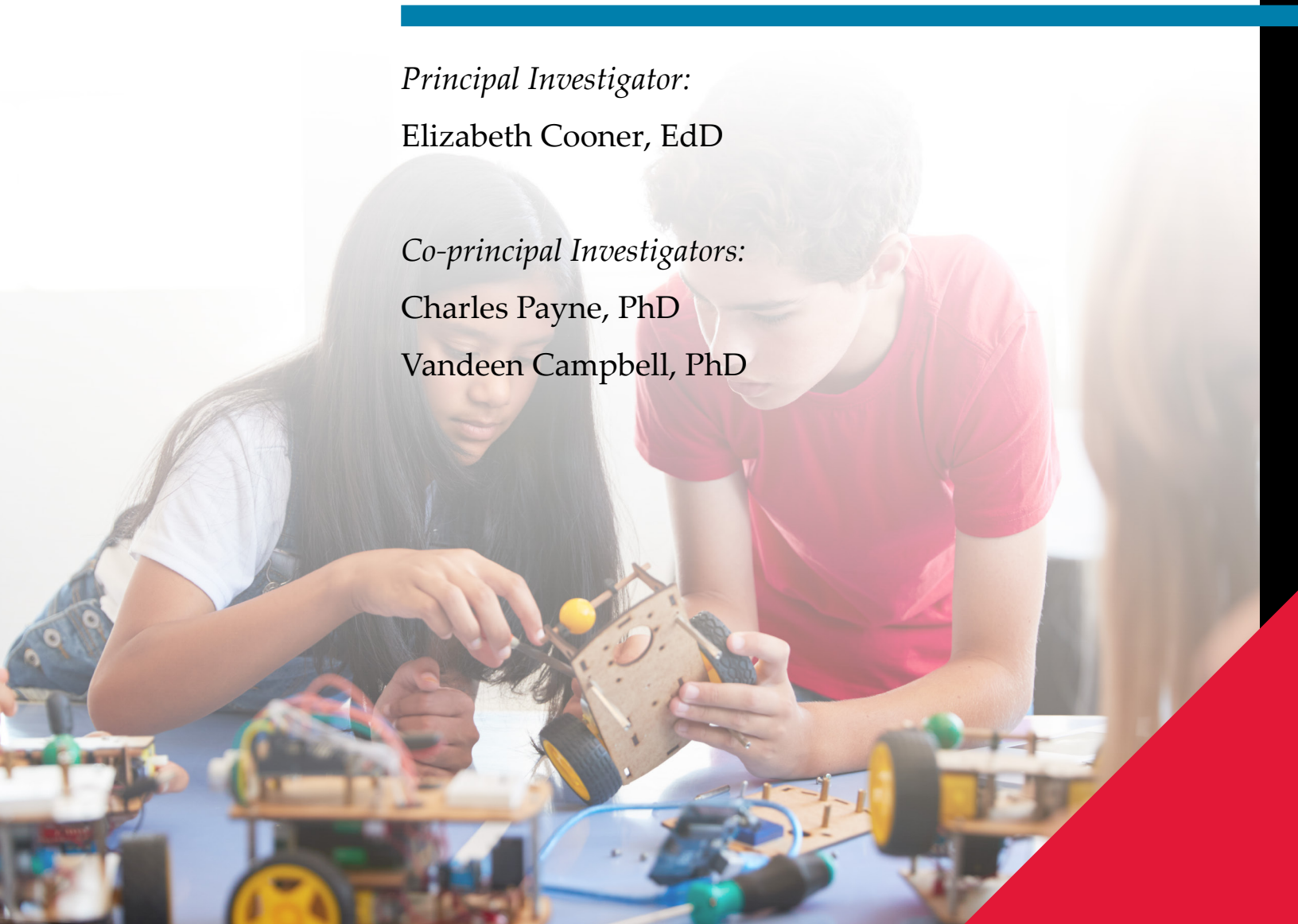
Principal Investigator:

Elizabeth Cooner, EdD

Co-principal Investigators:

Charles Payne, PhD

Vandeen Campbell, PhD

Promising Practices Project: Executive Summary Report
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Since its establishment in 2000, the Joseph C. Cornwall Center for Metropolitan Studies has been a signature component of Rutgers University–Newark's commitment to be an anchor institution for the metropolitan area. We strive to be neutral ground, where people of disparate views and interests can come together around questions of mutual interests. The Cornwall Center sponsors research projects, publications, conferences, symposia, seminars, workshops, and public forums, and incubates projects translating research into effective practice with the end result of revitalizing Newark and similar communities in the region and state.

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Executive Summary

Introduction and Overview

The COVID-19 pandemic drastically disrupted K–12 education. School staff across the country were faced with the unprecedented task of delivering high-quality instruction amidst a global health crisis. In New Jersey, approximately 15% of K–12 public schools managed to improve proficiency rates in math and/or English language arts (ELA) on the New Jersey Student Learning Assessment from 2018–19 (pre-pandemic) to 2021–22 (post-pandemic).

Study Methodology

Motivated by the evident resilience of these schools, the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) commissioned the New Jersey State Policy Lab at Rutgers University–New Brunswick, in partnership with the Joseph C. Cornwall Center for Metropolitan Studies at Rutgers University–Newark, to investigate the factors that may have led to such successes. The quantitative research team utilized models to identify schools that demonstrated exceptional performance in student learning outcomes, particularly among underserved student groups. This resulted in the identification of approximately 700 schools from which 78 schools were blindly selected (i.e., without school names identified) using a stratified approach based on geographic location (across New Jersey's 21 counties), school need level (high, moderate, and low need), and school type (elementary, middle, and high school). Of the 78 schools quantitatively selected, 52 schools consented at both the district and school level to participate, and welcomed teams of interviewers to conduct group interviews of their staff in response to this fundamental question:

- When you think of *impact*, *innovation*, and *replication*, which practices at your school do you think of first?

The research team was particularly interested in learning about concrete steps towards implementation of those practices, relevant challenges to implementation and strategies for overcoming those challenges, effectiveness of those practices for specific student groups, and advice for schools attempting to engage in similar work.

Findings

Innovative and Promising Practices. The research team identified several practices across the sample that are "innovative" or "promising," either because the educators labeled them as such, or because their descriptions struck the research team as relatively distinctive, exemplary, and of benefit to peer schools. This collection of practices addresses various topics:

- **Accelerating instruction** through math and ELA intervention programs designed to identify and remediate learning gaps.

- **Supporting multilingual learners and students with disabilities** through expanding access to curricula, employing strategic staff allocation, leveraging external partnerships, and fostering community within and beyond the school building.

- **Partnering with parents** to plan for and support their students' ongoing success throughout the school year.

- **De-privatizing teaching and administration** through staff collaboration, teacher leadership, and professional development.

- **Intentionally building relationships and implementing social-emotional supports** that aim to promote a favorable learning environment for students and staff members.

- **Centering equity and justice** by bolstering initiatives that support historically underserved student groups and their families.

- **Promoting college and career readiness** by exposing students to postsecondary academic and professional pathways, maximizing public-private partnerships, and prioritizing dual enrollment and dual-credit opportunities.

Pandemic Impacts. While the primary research questions aimed to uncover innovative, impactful, and replicable teaching and learning practices in schools today, Promising Practices educators also shared their insights about peak pandemic-era education. School staff discussed concerns about individual and collective trauma, ensuring access to technological resources, and bolstering students' mental and physical health. In some cases, educators remarked that the COVID-19 pandemic catalyzed intense professional collaboration that produced a lasting positive impact on their school. Likewise, many schools reported long-term benefits of deepened relationships with students and families, and an increased prioritization of social-emotional learning. These insights contextualize the approaches to teaching and learning in Promising Practices schools (detailed below) as they continue moving towards pandemic recovery.

What Matters Most in the Eyes of Educators? Five overarching topics emerged as being particularly important for fostering positive student learning outcomes from the perspective of Promising Practices educators. One or more of these fundamental themes is intertwined with the success of nearly every practice mentioned by school staff during this study.

- **School culture as a pillar of effectiveness.** A majority of staff at Promising Practices schools affirmed the role of relationships, expectations, and beliefs—school culture — in promoting positive student learning outcomes. Educators discussed intentional practices, attitudes, and philosophies toward learning that they believe contribute to their school's academic success. Particularly impactful characteristics of school culture in many Promising Practices schools include:

  - □ Establishing *caring relationships* among staff, students, and their families.

  - □ Facilitating opportunities for extensive *collaboration* among teachers and administrators.

  - □ Providing professional opportunities and other supports to develop and empower *teacher leaders*.

  - □ Maintaining *consistently high expectations* for all members of the school community and the *intellectual safety to take risks* to meet these expectations.

- **Social-emotional learning.** Staff at Promising Practices schools overwhelmingly emphasized the importance of effective social-emotional learning practices. Many educators believe a positive social and emotional climate wherein school staff support each child's holistic development—a "whole child" approach to education—is a pre-condition for strong learning. Promising Practices schools operationalize this belief by implementing:

  - □ Curricular and cocurricular activities aimed at holistic development, frequently organized around the core competencies articulated by the Center for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL).

  - □ Schoolwide *positive behavior intervention and supports* (PBIS) that operate in tandem with Intervention and Referral Services (I&RS) or as part of a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS). Many schools reported success using Tier 1 interventions such as student recognition programs and scheduling mental health breaks, among others.

  - □ Individual counseling, group counseling, and wellness activities, at times through a trauma-informed or restorative justice lens.

- **Tiered instructional supports and the dynamic use of data to inform instruction.** Several Promising Practices schools implement an MTSS or New Jersey Tiered System of Support (NJTSS) to ensure their academic and behavioral intervention and enrichment practices are as effective as possible. These models, rooted in Response to Intervention (RTI) thinking, support a clear plan for establishing high expectations for all students

while implementing escalating levels of support based on individual needs. The Promising Practices schools and research from the NJDOE find that well-implemented tiered systems lead to expanded learning, fewer referrals, and greater collegiality. Several conversations with Promising Practices schools suggested a level of sophistication around implementing data insights to inform instructional planning. Key features of impactful tiered supports and data-informed instruction include:

- □ Utilizing *multiple student-level data points* to determine intervention and instruction enrichment in the context of extensive teacher collaboration.

- □ Employing numerous *commercial software programs* to support the collection, organization, and analysis of student-level proficiency data, and the optimization of *data management systems*.

- □ Implementing *flexible small group instruction* informed by frequent student progress monitoring and regrouping throughout the school year.

- □ Creating *subgroups within the three-tier system* to best support students' needs.

- □ Facilitating opportunities for *data-focused professional development*.

- **Supporting historically underserved student populations.** On average, Promising Practices schools are performing approximately one half of a standard deviation better than expected when compared to the typical New Jersey school in terms of the performance of historically underserved students: students with disabilities (SWDs), economically disadvantaged (ECD) students, multilingual learners (MLs), Black students, and Hispanic students. While some school staff reported that they operate without much deliberate focus on student groups, others explained their successes with historically underserved students as the result of explicitly addressing both the values and tensions that arise from social and economic diversity. Some of the approaches taken by such schools include:

- □ Building *supportive environments rich in social-emotional learning and cultural affirmation* that tell students it is safe to bring their whole selves to school.

- □ Leveraging *diversity in curricular and cocurricular activities* by incorporating multicultural, multilingual themes.

- □ Committing to have *hard conversations about social issues with staff and students, and providing professional development* oriented toward increasing comfort with such topics.

- □ Institutionalizing high expectations for all students including *robust inclusion for students with disabilities as well as broad access to advanced coursework* and postsecondary opportunities.

Case Studies of High Leverage Strategies. These case studies are intended to expand on how some of the important themes from Promising Practices interviews look on the ground. In some cases, it is most instructive to consider approaches across several schools. In others, they can be illustrated by the work of educators a single school. Such strategies include:

- **Engaging families and communities** through intentional academic and relationship-building efforts.

- **Arts integration across the curriculum** facilitated by a range of approaches including project-based learning, teacher collaboration, and after-school enrichment opportunities.

- **Developing student work habits and leadership** through schoolwide programs that promote the development of executive functioning and a growth mindset.

- **Flexible periods for individualized supports and enrichment** that designate time within the school schedule to meet each student's academic and/or behavioral needs.

- **Robust postsecondary pathways anchored by high expectations** to promote a college-going culture through school-based academic offerings and postsecondary planning support.

- **Furthering math excellence through an innovative tiered approach rooted in critical thinking**, student self-awareness, and fluid, dynamic grouping that allows for sub-tiers within tiers.

- **Facilitating student self-directed learning through a multifaceted approach to technology integration** bolstered by corporate partnerships, targeted financial supports, staff and student coaching, and professional development.

- **Supporting early literacy in a predominantly low-income, Hispanic, immigrant-serving district** through an emphasis on early childhood education, a word-soaked curriculum, arts integration within a framework of multiple intelligences, and a tailored bilingual instructional program.

- **Postsecondary success in a high-poverty high school setting** through a strong culture of love, support, and accountability for high expectations, a focus on literacy across the curriculum, and access to college-level coursework for all students.

Conclusion

The State of New Jersey recently introduced new initiatives designed to promote early literacy instruction and more broadly advance learning equity through improvements in data-driven decisionmaking, enhanced professional development, and the implementation of research-based best practices for learning acceleration. The Promising Practices Project offers insights that can inform such efforts from the vantage point of what successful schools across the state are already doing.

As evaluated by metrics such as demographics, per pupil expenditures, and chronic absenteeism, Promising Practices schools are relatively similar to those across the state. However, their positive impact on test scores is almost half a standard deviation larger than the state average and slightly larger than that for historically underserved groups. Therefore, these schools can be considered positive outliers that demonstrate the possibilities of success under conditions that other schools have found difficult to navigate. Given the added measure that Promising Practices schools demonstrated relative success over the course of the stresses of the COVID-19 pandemic, these schools offer at minimum inspiration, and perhaps even some relatively concrete pathways, that peer schools (and districts) may find useful in their own efforts to educate all of New Jersey's students.

The variation in practices discussed in this report suggests that there is no single pathway toward ensuring student achievement. Instead, the themes embedded in this report suggest that recipes for success are likely to include some combination of emphasis on school culture (relationships, beliefs, and expectations), social-emotional learning, tiered supports, data-informed decision making, and attention to persistent achievement gaps. Additional ingredients likely to contribute to academic achievement include family and community engagement, integration of the arts and technology, development of student self-efficacy, and providing robust postsecondary pathways.

In short, some of the state's most effective educators have shared expertise that is quite germane to the mandate of the NJDOE's new Office of Learning Equity and Academic Recovery. This report contributes to this critical work the voices and wisdom of educators across a range of grade levels, disciplines, ranks, and roles.

Innovative and Promising Practices

Innovation is in the eye of the beholder. What feels new and fresh in one context could be perceived as an old story in another. Thus, this analysis takes a broad view of the term, including practices that interviewees considered to be innovative as well as some ideas not labeled "innovative" by the schools but which struck the research team as relatively distinctive. This section captures some of the creativity and energy New Jersey educators bring to their work, and shares some ideas that educators around the state might want to adopt. Educators may have been too modest to call their ideas "innovative," as they did not seem "big" enough. In some cases, school staff are implementing programs they did not uniquely develop but which could be worthy of wider dissemination and replication. Even ideas which may not seem directly connected to measurable outcomes can be important because they embody the values of a school.

This section is intended to call attention to a broad range of ideas and strategies without going into much detail on any one practice. In some cases, more detail can be found in subsequent sections. It would be beneficial to think of these ideas not so much as stand-alone interventions, but rather as strategies that can be successful if well-implemented and aligned with other work in the school's environment. When relevant, quantitative outcomes that may be correlated with the described practice are included. These outcomes are largely based on the VAM and HLM models (see above Quantitative Methods section). There is not a direct causal relationship between these outcomes and practices; however, when asked broadly what accounts for their successes as measured by such outcomes, educators offered the following practices:

Accelerating Instruction:

- **A Tiered Model for Math Intervention**, Caroline L. Reutter School (5–6, Township of Franklin School District, Gloucester Co.)
- **Supporting Early Learners**, Marie Durand Elementary School (K–5, Vineland Public School District, Cumberland Co.)

A Tiered Model for Math Intervention

Caroline L. Reutter School (5–6, Township of Franklin School District, Gloucester Co.)

- Caroline L. Reutter School's students ranked in the top 10% of middle and high school math performance statewide. When asked what accounts for such success, Reutter educators pointed to a model for teaching math developed by a district math coach that provides tiered

intervention and remediation across grades K–6 (offered in three different schools in this district: K–2, 3–4, and Reutter's 5–6). Student placements are determined by universal screeners that detect each learner's math fluency and skills (i.e., rapid recall of math facts and appropriate strategies). Identified students are enrolled in Tier 2 and Tier 3 classrooms that follow a structured daily plan: (1) a strategy-based lesson determined by the students' diagnostic assessment scores, (2) a standard-based lesson from the grade-level curriculum, and (3) fundamental fluency goals, or goal groups, during which each student receives targeted instruction based on their goals. This school also developed a Tier 1.5 for "*bubble kids*" who receive push-in math support to prevent them from needing Tier 2 instruction in the future.

- Resources: MTSS Math Intervention Model - Caroline L. Reutter School

Supporting Early Learners

Marie Durand Elementary School (K–5, Vineland Public School District, Cumberland Co.)

- Marie Durand Elementary School improved its ELA and math proficiency rates over the tumultuous 2018–19 to 2021–22 pandemic period. Durand supported rising first-grade students who "*knew their letters and their sounds ... but they were not emerging readers yet. ... They knew the basics, but we knew they were going to struggle in first grade.*" The basic skills teacher assesses students using aimsweb tests of nonsense words, among other assessments, to determine whether they qualify for the program. Most students in this program "*make a year plus growth in reading and … finish the year on the same math levels as the rest of first grade.*" To accomplish this, the students study grade-level math and ELA curricula mostly through small group instruction with a carefully selected educator trained in basic skills and one classroom aide. The program begins before the start of the school year; selected families can opt their students into summer instruction with the basic skills teacher, which supports relationship-building and "*getting the ball rolling*" in September. Students in this program operate on the same first-grade schedule as the rest of the building. Although these students receive more targeted academic support than their grade-level peers, their classroom is still considered "*a first-grade room.*" This program, called Developmental First, began during the 2017–18 school year and the district opted to eliminate the program after the 2022–23 school year.

Supporting Multilingual Learners (MLs):

- **Departmentalized Bilingual Instruction**, Frederic W. Cook Elementary School (K–5, Plainfield Public School District, Union Co.)

- **Bilingual Teacher Associates**, Community Middle School (7–8, Bound Brook School District, Somerset Co.)

- **Latino Family Literacy Project**, Reeds Road Elementary School (K–6, Galloway Township Public School District, Atlantic Co.); Robert Morris School (PK–8, South Bound Brook Public School District, Somerset Co.)

- **Bridge Course for Multilingual Learners**, Sara M. Gilmore Academy (1–8, Union City School District, Hudson Co.)

- **Hispanics Inspiring Students' Performance and Achievements (HISPA)**, Passaic Preparatory Academy (6–12, Passaic City School District, Passaic Co.)

Departmentalized Bilingual Instruction

Frederic W. Cook Elementary School, (K–5, Plainfield Public School District, Union Co.)

- Frederic W. Cook Elementary School's MLs ranked in the top 20% of all New Jersey elementary and middle schools on the NJSLA for the 2021–22 school year. Though the district typically delivers bilingual instruction in alternating two-week periods, Cook educators decided "*to do 50% of the instructional day. So, we did all the reading, math, and English, and then we did the science and social studies for our bilingual classes. This model reinforces students' academic and linguistic skills in both languages every day.*"

Bilingual Teacher Associates

Community Middle School (7–8, Bound Brook School District, Somerset Co.)

- Community Middle School's MLs' performance on the New Jersey Student Learning Assessments for English Language Arts (NJSLA-ELA) was in the top 10% of middle and high schools. One practice that educators pointed to as "*invaluable*" for their MLs is the district-funded position of "*teacher associates,*" who are not only bilingual in English and Spanish but also members of the local community. Two of the three teacher associates currently working at Community Middle are graduates of the school. Their primary responsibility is to support MLs in the classes "*where there's the highest need*" (i.e., social studies and science).

Latino Family Literacy Project

Reeds Road Elementary School (K–6, Galloway Township Public School District, Atlantic Co.)
Robert Morris School (PK–8, South Bound Brook Public School District, Somerset Co.)

- Reeds Road Elementary School's MLs ranked in the top 20% of elementary and middle schools on the NJSLA for the 2021–22 school year. Both Reeds Road and Robert Morris School implemented the Latino Family Literacy Project to provide additional support for MLs and their families. Reeds Road educators developed a 10-week program that invites MLs and their parents to deepen their connections to the school while improving their English literacy. Meeting every Thursday evening for about 2 hours, parents and students first eat a variety of home-baked and catered food while socializing with each other and the ML teacher. Childcare is provided so the students can play while the ML teacher leads English literacy instruction for the parents. Families take the workbooks and resources home so parents can continue practicing their English skills alongside their children. At Robert Morris School, educators implemented a similar Latino Literacy Night "*where we talk to parents, give them books, and help them to understand some of the standards and themes that their students will be learning in school and teach them how to help their students.*"

Bridge Course for Multilingual Learners

Sara M. Gilmore Academy (1–8, Union City School District, Hudson Co.)

- Union City School District has tailored a bilingual instruction program to better meet the needs of its primarily multilingual student population. The program was designed to be culturally responsive and linguistically inclusive, offering students instruction in both their native language and in English. The goal was not just to teach English as a second language, but to support bilingualism as an asset, allowing students to develop literacy in both languages simultaneously. Newcomers with minimal English language proficiency are placed in a "port of entry" program, where instruction is provided entirely in Spanish. Students are then placed in an ML course. As opposed to some other districts, Union City has developed a bridge course where the general education curriculum is taught by a bilingual instructor instead of directly placing students into English language mainstream courses or solely relying on ML courses. The bilingual instructor of the bridge course is skilled in monitoring and addressing students' linguistic challenges, making the content accessible while gradually integrating English language learning.

Hispanics Inspiring Students' Performance and Achievements (HISPA)

Passaic Preparatory Academy (6–12, Passaic City School District, Passaic Co.)

- Passaic Preparatory Academy boasts a 90% 4-year high school graduation rate among its student body that is 97% Hispanic, 85% non-native English speakers, and nearly 100% economically disadvantaged. One of Passaic Prep's practices that caters specifically to its Hispanic population is a partnership with an organization called Hispanics Inspiring Students' Performance and Achievements (HISPA), through which "*professionals that are Hispanic come to [the] school and share stories when it comes to challenges [and] successes.*" One teacher thinks this program is "*a great way to inspire [the] kids to go to school.*"

Supporting Students with Disabilities (SWDs):

- **Supporting Students with Disabilities (SWDs) with Peer Leadership**, Cedar Creek Elementary School (K–4, Lacey Township School District, Ocean Co.)
- **Daily Pull-out Support for Inclusion Students**, Robert Mascenik School (K–5, Woodbridge Township School District, Middlesex Co.)
- **Access to Algebra for All**, Rosa International Middle School (6–8, Cherry Hill School District, Camden Co.)
- **Letting Students Fidget while Learning**, Harrison Elementary School (PK–4, Roselle Public School District, Union Co.)

Supporting Students with Disabilities (SWDs) with Peer Leadership

Cedar Creek Elementary School (K–4, Lacey Township School District, Ocean Co.)

- Performance of Cedar Creek Elementary School's SWDs ranked in the top 10% of elementary and middle schools on the NJSLA in both 2018–19 and 2021–22. One innovative practice Cedar Creek educators developed to serve this population is the Little Lion Helpers program. Little Lion Helpers is a peer leadership group of fourth- and fifth-grade students who "*help in [the] autism classes.*" Teachers try to recruit students "*who are more likely to be behavioral*" to serve as peer leaders. This initiative provides additional supports and mentorship to students with autism, as well as opportunities for leadership and increased attachment to school for the student "*helpers.*" An administrator explained that this program "*raises [students] up. … It makes them feel part of the school family.*"

Daily Pull-out Support for Inclusion Students

Robert Mascenik School (K–5, Woodbridge Township School District, Middlesex Co.)

- Robert Mascenik School ranked in the top 10% of elementary and middle schools on NJSLA scores for SWDs. Their results were particularly strong following the acute pandemic period. Mascenik educators spoke highly of their supports for in-class resource students, who benefit from supplemental practice with skills taught earlier in the school day. Vanessa Angelo, special education teacher, shared that this daily opportunity to "*decompress*" and "*catch up*" takes place after lunch. The small group meets with their special education teacher outside of the inclusion setting, which gives those students "*a break*" from "*trying to keep up*" with their peers in the general education setting. They "*look forward*" to this small group instruction and "*feel confident*" asking content-specific questions. The students who are eligible to participate benefit both "*academically*" and "*emotionally*" from "*this little study crew.*"

Access to Algebra for All

Rosa International Middle School (6–8, Cherry Hill School District, Camden Co.)

- Students at Rosa International Middle School outperformed both the district and state in the NJSLA for mathematics in 2018–19 and 2021–22; their performance placed them in the top 30% of middle and high schools for SWDs. Their students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) also performed better than expected in both years. Rosa educators shared their efforts to enroll eighth-grade students with IEPs in algebra, which has been difficult to offer in the past due to co-teaching needs. Students with IEPs are supported through a consultative model in which the algebra teacher meets with a special education teacher once per week to plan IEP-driven accommodations. The math department recently created a "*hybrid*" seventh- and eighth-grade inclusion class that "*compacts all of the seventh-grade curriculum and specific elements of the eighth-grade curriculum.*" According to Principal George Guy, this new course will "*help... with [making] recommendations for [in-class resource] students and potentially resource students to go into eighth-grade algebra.*"

Letting Students Fidget while Learning

Harrison Elementary School (PK–4, Roselle Public School District, Union Co.)

- Harrison Elementary School has flexible classroom seating arrangements that empower students to determine how to situate or move their bodies while learning. The school has invested in resources such as large rubber bands that students can attach to chair legs to tap their feet and "*wobble stools*" that allow for full body motion while seated.

Principal Melissa Nevarez shared her thinking that "*if a kid wants to do their work standing up, my teachers will allow it. I allow it. … By all means, if that's going to get them focused, why are we harping on that? They want to lay on the floor, sit in the back. Why are we harping on it? As long as they're learning and they're being productive, why not? We celebrate that. We all learn differently.*" This practice is not necessarily specific to students with IEPs; Harrison educators shared these resources when discussing their inclusive approach to working with SWDs.

Partnering with Parents

- **Data-driven Parent-Teacher Conferences**, Marie Durand Elementary School (K–5, Vineland Public School District, Cumberland Co.)

- **Parental Involvement in Developing Student Success Plans**, University High School (7–12, Newark Public School District, Essex Co.)

- **Briefing Parents on Classroom Reading**, Walter Hill School (6, Swedesboro-Woolwich School District, Gloucester Co.)

- **Parental Involvement in Student Placement**, Central School (PK–5, Haddonfield School District, Camden Co.)

Data-Driven Parent-Teacher Conferences

Marie Durand Elementary School (K–5, Vineland Public School District, Cumberland Co.)

- Parent-teacher conferences at Marie Durand Elementary School are driven by student data highlighting achievement levels rather than more traditional report cards and grades. Per district guidelines, students at this school are permitted to retake classroom assessments. Consequently, Marie Durand administrators find that report card grades do not always accurately reflect students' progress toward content mastery. As an administrator noted, "*you [can] have kids getting As and Bs who are a year below the reading level.*" By anchoring parent-teacher conferences in skills-based data, teachers can have more exact conversations about students' reading and math levels, individual goals, and strategies for supporting academic growth at home.

Parental Involvement in Developing Student Success Plans

University High School (7–12, Newark Public School District, Essex Co.)

- University High School's chronic absenteeism rates are lower than the state average overall and among several historically underserved groups: Hispanic and Black students, economically disadvantaged students, MLs, and SWDs. One impactful practice University educators associate with their achievements is parental involvement in Student Success Plans, which delineate goals for students who are identified as needing support with behavior. While many schools use similar plans, University staff involve parents "*to a great extent*" in developing goals and action steps for each student. The staff feel that, despite parental involvement being "*an expectation of all schools,*" there is a "*deeper level of partnership with parent[s]*" at University High.

Briefing Parents on Classroom Reading

Walter Hill School (6, Swedesboro-Woolwich School District, Gloucester Co.)

- Walter Hill School's English department is committed to engaging parents in their students' learning. The teachers often "*send out letters and emails*" to parents before starting a new class novel, accompanied by a brief synopsis about the text, its genre, release date, and importance. These messages provide students and parents alike with a critical "*build up,*" increasing students' excitement and engagement in the novel study. Parents are welcome to "*come in and see what's going on in the class*" and have their questions and concerns addressed.

Parental Involvement in Student Placement

Central School (PK–5, Haddonfield School District, Camden Co.)

- Central School's students ranked in the top 20% of elementary and middle schools on the NJSLA Grades 3-8 in 2021–22. Central School educators shared about their practice of considering parent input when determining students' classroom placements for the following school year. Administrators send a letter home to families 3 to 4 months prior to the end of the school year asking parents to describe their child "*as a learner or as a person.*" Central School administrators then "*pore over*" the responses—along with classroom teachers, the school counselor, interventionists, and the school nurse—to determine the best fit for each student's placement.

De-privatizing Teaching and Administration

- **Pineapple for Pop-in Peer Observations**, Harrison Elementary School (PK–4, Roselle Public School District, Union Co.)

- **Consistency Committee**, North Plainfield Middle School (7–8, North Plainfield School District, Somerset Co.)

- **Leadership Training for All**, School 28 (PK-8, Paterson Public School District, Passaic Co.)

- **Professors in Residence**, School 28 (PK–8, Paterson Public School District, Passaic Co.)

- **Cross-network Collaboration**, College Achieve Central Charter School (K–12, Union Co.); College Achieve Greater Asbury Park Charter School (K–9, Monmouth Co.)

- **Labor Management Collaborative**, Rosa International Middle School (6–8, Cherry Hill School District, Camden Co.)

- **Engaging Administrators in Early Literacy Training**, Sara M. Gilmore Academy (1–8, Union City School District, Hudson Co.)

Pineapple for Pop-in Peer Observations

Harrison Elementary School (PK–4, Roselle Public School District, Union Co.)

- Harrison Elementary School's students ranked in the top 10% of elementary and middle schools in the NJSLA in 2021–22. When discussing their most impactful practices, Harrison educators shared that the principal encouraged teachers to develop a voluntary open-door peer-observation practice. If they were open to their colleagues coming in to see them teach, faculty members could place a picture of a pineapple outside their classroom door. At first, only a few teachers felt comfortable posting a pineapple. Now, third grade teacher Marybelle Espin shared, "*I think all hallways would be covered with pineapples.*" Teachers and specialists frequently took this opportunity to learn from their grade-level peers as well as their colleagues across grade levels. Harrison staff remarked that this practice "*made us our own little experts.*" Following classroom visits, teachers informally shared observations and provided feedback during professional learning community meetings.

Consistency Committee

North Plainfield Middle School (7–8, North Plainfield School District, Somerset Co.)

- North Plainfield Middle School ranked in the top 50% of elementary and middle schools overall and in the top 30% of middle and high schools on the NJSLA-ELA. One practice North Plainfield educators cited as supporting their successes is a teacher-initiated

Consistency Committee responsible for norming the language around schoolwide expectations, establishing clear grading policies, and creating classroom lessons for the opening days of school. Additionally, the committee collects feedback from the staff about these procedures to foster a collective investment in the school's culture. Finally, the team creates "*engaging lessons*" about student goal setting and common Google Classroom expectations for all teachers.

Leadership Training for All

School 28 (PK–8, Paterson Public School District, Passaic Co.)

- In 2021–22, School 28's NJSLA performance ranked in the top 1% of all elementary and middle schools in the state. School 28 students exceeded the state average in ELA by 55.7 points and in math by 43.3 points. When discussing their successes, School 28 educators emphasized the positive impact of their culture of shared leadership, which they have institutionalized by sending select teaching staff to training courses through a program known as the William Paterson Educational Leadership Program. This program emphasizes teamwork and professional development, establishes trust in the workplace, and provides resources to administrators working in education. School 28's primary innovation in this realm is to provide an opportunity for teachers to participate in the same training as administrators. Teachers and administrators noted that this practice allows administrators to better relate to teachers and vice versa in the context of making decisions related to curriculum and instruction.

Professors in Residence

School 28 (PK–8, Paterson Public School District, Passaic Co.)

- School 28's partnership with William Patterson University extends beyond the Educational Leadership Program (see above) to also include the Professors in Residence (PIR) program. As with the training program, though the original intent was to support administrators, the principal has requested that PIRs focus more on supporting teachers directly. A minimum of one and often two PIRs work directly with teachers to provide support via Professional Learning Committees (PLCs) and professional development opportunities. Some of the PIRs primary responsibilities include leading small and whole group discussion on topics such as curriculum, lesson planning and differentiation, and supporting teachers in analyzing data for planning purposes.

Cross-network Collaboration

College Achieve Central Charter School (K–12, Union Co.)
College Achieve Greater Asbury Park Charter School (K–9, Monmouth Co.)

- Between 2018–19 and 2021–22, College Achieve Greater Asbury Park Charter School increased schoolwide NJSLA scores by 26.6 points in ELA and 19.8 points in math. Over the same period, College Achieve Central Charter School increased schoolwide test scores by 22.1 points in English language arts (ELA). When sharing practices that underlie their improvements, College Achieve Charter School educators noted that teachers, deans, and school counselors across all three schools in the College Achieve network—Plainfield, Asbury, and Paterson (not sampled for qualitative inquiry in this study)—collaborate to explore and share practices as a larger professional team. This cross-network collaboration furthers teachers', administrators', and counselors' awareness of practices taking place across the network and aligns curriculum, rigor, and expectations. It also supplies all staff with the same teaching resources, training, and professional development. Professional development training is open to all staff and takes place every Friday. New staff members receive 2 weeks of summer professional development, with some occurring virtually and some in person. Grade-level coordinators triangulate training across the district, with six network-wide sessions occurring during the school year. One noteworthy practice is using the Myers-Briggs personality assessment to pair co-teachers.

Labor Management Collaborative

Rosa International Middle School (6–8, Cherry Hill School District, Camden Co.)

- Rosa International Middle School participates in the Labor Management Collaborative (LMC), a joint initiative offered by the New Jersey Education Association (NJEA), which represents public school employees across the state, and Rutgers University. The LMC is "*designed to bring all kinds of different stakeholders of the building*" together. Participants include campus police officers, secretaries, child study team members, education assistants, teachers, and staff union representatives. According to Principal George Guy, these stakeholders "*work together to create a culture and climate that can support*" the success of historically underserved students and their families. Members of the LMC have advocated to "*refocus*" some of the school's professional learning on "*mental health supports and de-escalation techniques in the classroom*" so staff are well-positioned to address students' post-pandemic needs.

- Resources: For additional information about LMC implementation across the country, please see this 2010 study entitled Collaborating on School Reform: Creating Union-Management Partnerships to Improve Public School Systems written by Saul A. Rubinstein, PhD and John E. McCarthy.

Engaging Administrators in Early Literacy Training

Sara M. Gilmore Academy (1–8, Union City School District, Hudson Co.)

- Access to early literacy training for all principals has been institutionalized in the Union City school district. An early literacy workshop that was initially intended for teachers was made available to principals when one principal asked if she could sit in. According to Silvia Abbato, Union City School District Superintendent, "*It was great because when you are a principal and you're not majoring in literacy and you're doing evaluations, you need to know what's taking place in the classroom.*"

Intentional Relationship Building and Social-emotional Supports

- **Starting with Getting to Know You**, Community Middle School (7–8, Bound Brook School District, Somerset Co.); Passaic Preparatory Academy (6–12, Passaic City School District, Passaic Co.)
- **Looping Administrators and Counselors**, University High School (7–12, Newark Public School District, Essex Co.)
- **Friendship Bench,** Frederic W. Cook Elementary School (K–5, Plainfield Public School District, Union Co.)
- **Therapy Dogs for Socio-Emotional and Academic Support**, Robert Morris School (PK–8, South Bound Brook Public School District, Somerset Co.)
- **Student Teacher Legacy Projects Forge Relationships Across the Community**, Middle Road School (1–4, Hazlet Township Public School District, Monmouth Co.)
- **Three Recesses a Day for Emotional Regulation,** Princeton Charter School (K–8, Mercer Co.)
- **Wellness Weekends Promote Reconnection and Recovery**, Packanack Elementary School (K–5, Wayne Township Public School District, Passaic Co.)

Starting with Getting to Know You

Community Middle School (7–8, Bound Brook School District, Somerset Co.)
Passaic Preparatory Academy (6–12, Passaic City School District, Passaic Co.)

- In addition to Community Middle School's strong results with MLs (see above), its students overall performed in the top 40% on the NJSLA-ELA among middle and high schools across the state. Community educators attributed their successes in part, to

centering student-teacher relationships, which often must be forged across socioeconomic differences given that 68% of their student body is considered "*economically disadvantaged.*" During the first week of school, many teachers focus on relationship-building and developing students' sense of belonging through "*get-to-know-you*" activities. Activities range from classroom scavenger hunts to heritage projects, and focus on students and teachers educating one another about unique talents, extracurricular activities, family backgrounds and heritage, and heirloom recipes. This practice is used to better understand students' social and academic needs, interest in extracurricular activities, and access to external support. Interviewees shared that this relationship-building practice guides their approaches to supporting students for the school year.

- Passaic Preparatory Academy similarly standardizes schoolwide getting-to-know-you activities early in the year. In addition to implementing practices to address postsecondary outcomes for its large Hispanic, ML, and ECD student body (see above), Passaic has also seen strong success in ELA scores (60.9% proficiency), outperforming the state average in 2021–22 (49%) by over 10 percentage points. When discussing practices that support their students' academic success, ELA teacher Lisa Taylor shared that "*In the beginning of the school year, for the first few days, we focus on social-emotional learning—getting to know our students, getting to know our teachers, just making them comfortable. It's really get-to-know-you activities. 'What's your learning style? What could benefit you in the classroom? What do you think a teacher should be? What do you think our class rules should be? Or expectations?' It's in our curriculum.*"

Looping Administrators and Counselors

University High School (7–12, Newark Public School District, Essex Co.)

- Even with a poverty rate (82%) more than twice the state average (37%), University High School's graduation rate (91.0%) is on par with the state average (91.1%). University educators attribute much of the school's success to prioritizing building strong relationships with students from the start of their high school career. To this end, a grade-level lead administrator (vice principal or department chair) and a school counselor loop with each grade level for 4 years starting in ninth grade. University educators note that the 4-year relationship with the same administrator assists in building students' trust, facilitating collaboration between teaching staff and counseling staff, and forging deeper relationships with parents. Vice Principal Shavon Chambers shared, "*I started off with the ninth-grade team of teachers, then the 10th-grade team of teachers. Now I'm with the 11th-grade team of teachers. Because I already have an idea of the students, I'm able to get ahead of certain things and say I know they can do more.*"

Friendship Bench

Frederic W. Cook Elementary School (K–5, Plainfield Public School District, Union Co.)

- Frederic W. Cook Elementary School's parent-teacher organization (PTO) purchased a "*friendship bench*" to help students build relationships with one another. This bench is placed outside and "*kids can sit on it if they need somebody to play with.*" The bench is emblematic of wider social-emotional supports provided by the school, including assemblies about bullying and kindness, discussions about core values, a focus on child assault prevention, and attention to mitigating racial bias. Collectively, these efforts support students' holistic development.

Therapy Dogs for Social-Emotional and Academic Support

Robert Morris School (PK–8, South Bound Brook Public School District, Somerset Co.)

- At least four Promising Practices schools have turned to therapy dogs, utilizing the calming effect of human-animal relationships to provide both social-emotional and academic support to their students and staff. Robert Morris School partners with the volunteer organization Bright and Beautiful Therapy Dogs Volunteers, which visits the school on a biweekly basis. For 12 years, these volunteers have offered a program called Reading to Dogs, during which the students relax and read books to the dogs. This practice helps students decompress while practicing their literacy skills. Periodically, the principal's dog participates as an additional therapy dog for the students. Hoover Elementary School, Navesink Elementary School, and Roosevelt Elementary School also have or intend to implement similar practices.

Student Teacher Legacy Projects Forge Relationships Across the Community

Middle Road School (1–4, Hazlet Township Public School District, Monmouth Co.)

- Each year, Middle Road School hosts clinical interns (i.e., student teachers) to develop and implement a "*legacy project*" for the school. The project can serve any educational purpose; for the past several years, the general theme has been social-emotional learning. Fourth-grade teacher Christine Grabowski recalled that one year, the student teachers organized an opportunity for senior citizens from a local nursing home to visit the school: "*They read to the students, and then our older students taught them technology.*" For the most recent project, student teachers filled the school with positive affirmations. The legacy project is one of the many activities that are part of Middle Road's partnership with Monmouth University as a Professional Development School.

Three Recesses a Day for Emotional Regulation

Princeton Charter School (K–8, Mercer Co.)

- Princeton Charter School mandates three recess periods for its students. Lisa Eckstrom, assistant 5–8 division head of school, shared that she was "*really surprised going from the elementary school where they were always outside to ... middle school where they were inside all the time. We go out when it's cold, we go out when it's rainy; our students sometimes don't want to go outside, and we say you have to go outside. But I think it helps a lot with emotional regulation and stress; our middle schoolers are out there on the swings.*" The school intentionally requires teachers and administrators to oversee these recess periods to emphasize their importance.

Wellness Weekends Promote Reconnection and Recovery

Packanack Elementary School (K–5, Wayne Township Public School District, Passaic Co.)

- Packanack Elementary School students ranked in the top 20% of elementary and middle schools on the NJSLA in 2021–22. Schoolwide chronic absenteeism rates at Packanack are nearly 2.5 times lower than the state average. When sharing their most innovative practices, Packanack educators pointed to a districtwide initiative called Wellness Weekends. For four weekends out of the year, teachers do not assign any homework, tests, or projects. This break from take-home work allows students to relax and rejuvenate from any accumulated stresses. Fourth-grade Teacher Matt Grossman reflected that this initiative emerged out of a need to focus on mental health and interpersonal connection that arose during the COVID-19 pandemic: "*Not that academics were less important, but the person was most important and that was from top down, from superintendent to principals to everyone. And so, in a data-driven world with test scores and things of that nature ... the message was ... we don't know what type of situation they're dealing with right now. And it's okay to put whatever you're working on aside and have a conversation.*"

Centering Equity and Justice

- **Redistributing Resources to Economically Disadvantaged (ECD) Families**, Lincoln Elementary School (K–5, Caldwell-West School District, Essex Co.)

- **Nonstigmatized Access to Material Needs**, Gateway Regional High School (7–12, Gateway Regional High School District, Gloucester Co.)

- **Students Talking About Racism,** Oakcrest High School (9–12, Greater Egg Harbor Regional High School District, Atlantic Co.)

- **Cultural Proficiency, Equity, and Character Education**, Rosa International Middle School (6–8, Cherry Hill School District, Camden Co.)

Redistributing Resources to Economically Disadvantaged (ECD) Families

Lincoln Elementary School (K–5, Caldwell-West School District, Essex Co.)

- Lincoln Elementary School has a relatively small population of students considered ECD (6.8%). In order to mobilize the school community's collective resources to support all students and their families, Lincoln parents initiated the EQ Change Initiative where families anonymously donate money to support equity efforts, such as purchasing clothes and school supplies, enrolling kids in recreational activities, and providing internet access for students. According to Principal Adam Geher, "*This idea to promote equity by encouraging our school's parent community to contribute financially came from one thoughtful parent. We embraced the suggestion and formed a committee that includes our school counselor, ESL teacher, parent volunteers, and myself to support the initiative. Together, we collaborate with families to identify their needs and the barriers they face, ensuring their children have the resources they need to succeed.*"

Nonstigmatized Access to Material Needs

Gateway Regional High School (7–12, Gateway Regional High School District, Gloucester Co.)

- Around a quarter of Gateway Regional High School's student population is considered ECD (26.6%). To address this population's needs, Gateway instituted a Comfort Closet where students can retrieve donated clothing for both school and special events like interviews and prom, as well as hygiene essentials. The "closet" is actually a dedicated classroom in which items are kept neatly and organized. All teachers have a key to the room so that access is normalized and "*it's not a stigmatized thing.*" Some teachers incorporate this resource into their teaching. For example, English Teacher Elizabeth Desmond discussed leading lessons with her classes about "*the fact that [resources like the Comfort Closet are] a need in [their] community.*"

Students Talking About Racism

Oakcrest High School (9–12, Greater Egg Harbor Regional High School District, Atlantic Co.)

- Oakcrest High School's student population is relatively diverse, with 30.7% Black or African American students, 22.6% Hispanic students, 38.1% White students, and 6.6% Asian students. When a group of 50 African American and Hispanic students made it known that "*they don't feel sometimes as included in decision making*" as their peers at Oakcrest, staff and students came together to form a group inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement called Students Talking About Racism (STAR). The group has required strong relationships among staff and students, and the safety to be vulnerable and take risks as individuals and as a school community.

Cultural Proficiency, Equity, and Character Education

Rosa International Middle School (6–8, Cherry Hill School District, Camden Co.)

- Cherry Hill School District initiated the Cultural Proficiency, Equity, and Character Education (CPECE) committee, which meets monthly and turnkeys information back to each school at all grade levels. During the first year of the committee, educators discussed the book *Uncomfortable Conversations with a Black Man* (Acho, 2020). Seventh-grade Math Teacher JudithAnn Albuquerque reported, "*a lot of courageous and uncomfortable conversations, but [also positive outcomes from] the resources that have been brought to us, the conversations that are being had, the fact that [they are] being had across the district, [and] that it's not starting in middle school. Students are being exposed to these concepts—to diversity, equity and inclusion—as young as kindergarten, just at the level at which they can access it. I think that has a lot to do with why it has been so impactful for us.*"

College and Career Readiness

- **Supporting Advanced Placement Success**, College Achieve Central Charter School (K–12, Union Co.)

- **Imagineering and Public-Private Partnerships**, Dewitt D. Barlow Elementary School (K–5, Plainfield Public School District, Union Co.)

- **Strong Recruitment for SAT Preparation**, North Warren Regional High School (7–12, North Warren Regional School District, Warren Co.)

- **Summer of a Lifetime (SOAL)**, College Achieve Central Charter School (K–12, Union Co.); College Achieve Greater Asbury Park Charter School, (K–9, Monmouth Co.)

- **Inclusive Dual Enrollment at HBCUs and Beyond**, University High School (7–12, Newark Public School District, Essex Co.)

- **Postsecondary Pathways with College Credit and Certificates**, Passaic Preparatory Academy (6–12, Passaic City School District, Passaic Co.)

- **Gateway to Careers via Internships and Entrepreneurship**, Gateway Regional High School (7–12, Gateway Regional High School District, Gloucester Co.)

- **College Counseling and Credit for "Purpose" and Well-being**, Ocean City High School (9–12, Ocean City School District, Cape May Co.)

Supporting Advanced Placement Success

College Achieve Central Charter School (K-12, Union Co.)

- In the 2022–23 school year, nearly all 11th- and 12th-grade students (99.5%) at College Achieve Central Charter School enrolled in one or more advanced placement (AP) courses; 91.9% of all 11th- and 12th-graders took at least one AP exam, more than three times the average statewide (29.7%), and 45.7% of students scored a 3 or better (considered passing) on at least one AP exam—more than double the state rate of 21.3%. To achieve these outcomes, all teachers at College Achieve Central take part in the College Board AP testing and grading annually. Students enter ninth grade knowing they are expected to take at least three AP courses. All students can take AP courses regardless of their anticipated performance on the AP exams.

Imagineering and Public-Private Partnerships

Dewitt D. Barlow Elementary School (K–5, Plainfield Public School District, Union Co.)

- Dewitt D. Barlow Elementary School participates in the 21st Century Program, a state grant-funded initiative that allows Barlow to offer after-school activities for students in Grades 3–5. These activities include homework tutoring and sports. Every Friday, students participate in the "*imagineering*" initiative in partnership with Rutgers University's math and science departments. This program provides students with opportunities to "*code, fly a drone,*" and participate in similar science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) activities. Another component of Barlow's 21st Century program involves a partnership with Wardlaw+Hartridge, a nearby private and college preparatory school. Through this partnership, Barlow students work with Wardlaw+Hartridge students, which promotes a college-going mindset rooted in community engagement.

Strong Recruitment for SAT Preparation

North Warren Regional High School (7-12, North Warren Regional School District, Warren Co.)

- Students who graduated from North Warren Regional High School in 2022 enrolled in postsecondary institutions within 16 months of graduating at a rate more than 10% higher (86.7%) than the state average (75.1%). Regarding their postsecondary outcomes, one practice North Warren educators described as impactful was the provision of free after school SAT preparation for their students. Students are not required to sign up for the course in advance and can attend any number of sessions. Principal Carie Norcross-Murphy sees this program as an opportunity to promote equity: "*The SAT has typically been criticized because students who have access to the resources for SAT prep classes generally tend to do better just because they're familiar with the test. This program allows all of our students access to SAT prep. Their parents are not spending hundreds and hundreds of dollars because we offer it here for free.*" Although this is a common practice in high schools, North Warren Regional uses various communication channels to recruit and retain student participation. Through a schoolwide information system, periodic newsletter (Patriot Post), and an online application, regular updates are sent out to all parents and students. Extending beyond SAT preparation alone, these notifications update students on upcoming events including "*softball games, student council meetings, and field trips.*" These multiple avenues of communication encourage students to attend school events.

Summer of a Lifetime (SOAL)

College Achieve Central Charter School (K–12, Union Co.); College Achieve Greater Asbury Park Charter School (K–9, Monmouth Co.)

- At College Achieve Charter Schools, students are "*given the opportunity to travel to universities, both domestic and abroad, and study for anywhere between 1 and 3 weeks at places like Stanford, Oxford, Yale, Georgetown, [and] University of Paris.*" This opportunity is organized through a partnership with Putney Student Travel. It is provided at no cost to students and families through a discount from Putney, supplemented by subsidies from the school. This program specifically aims to provide over 100 low-income, predominantly Black and Latinx high school students access to a fully immersive collegiate experience each summer.
- Resources: Putney Pre-College Programs; CAPS Paterson Summer Programs

Inclusive Dual Enrollment at HBCUs and Beyond

University High School (7–12, Newark Public School District, Essex Co.)

- University High School has dual enrollment partnerships with several universities, including Howard University, a Historically Black College and University (HBCU), Essex County College, Rider University, and Rutgers University. All students are eligible to enroll in dual enrollment courses, and each dual enrollment course includes at least one student with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Students who take dual enrollment courses with Essex County College are able to graduate with an associate's degree alongside their high school diploma.

Postsecondary Pathways with College Credit and Certificates

Passaic Preparatory Academy (6–12, Passaic City School District, Passaic Co.)

- Students who graduated from Passaic Preparatory Academy in 2022 enrolled in postsecondary institutions within 16 months of graduating at a higher rate (78.0%) than the state average (75.1%). Passaic Prep's graduation rate (93.9%) is also higher than the state average (91.1%). Notably, the school's graduation rate has increased each year from 70.7% for the 2021 cohort, to 90.0% for the 2022 cohort, to 93.9% among the most recent 2023 cohort. When discussing their postsecondary pathways, Passaic Prep educators explained that students can participate in 4 years of a career-oriented pathway characterized by project-based learning and access to college credit. An illustrative

example is Passaic's music technology pathway, which includes a class on DJ-ing that pairs students with DJ organizations and events throughout the city. Different pathways are productively and practically intertwined (e.g., Passaic's law pathway facilitates the creation of contracts and payments for the DJs). Passaic also has partnerships with Kean University, Montclair State University, William Paterson University, and Passaic County Community College. As part of their early college program for their top (10%) students, students can graduate high school with their associate's degree or certificates in emergency medical dispatching, Adobe Creative Cloud, audio engineering, and real estate. During their senior year, students can participate in internships and work-based projects in a "*double base period.*"

Gateway to Careers via Internships and Entrepreneurship

Gateway Regional High School (7–12, Gateway Regional High School District, Gloucester Co.)

- Gateway Regional High School's graduation rate (95.2%) is higher than the state average (91.1%). Notably, the school's graduation rate has increased each year from 91.9% for the 2021 cohort, to 92.8% for the 2022 cohort, to 95.2% among the most recent 2023 cohort. Gateway Regional hosts a Gateway to Careers program, which started with a "*basic career day.*" Held during the first week of December, alumni return to Gateway to speak about their experiences pursuing college, careers, and technical vocations. This program is also a pathway to Gateway's internship program focused on construction, entrepreneurship, and culinary arts, which aims to provide students with real-world vocational experiences. In the entrepreneurship program, students develop a business plan, launch a business, learn marketing, etc.

College Counseling and Credit for "Purpose" and Well-Being

Ocean City High School (9–12, Ocean City School District, Cape May Co.)

- Ocean City High School's 2023 graduates enrolled in postsecondary institutions the fall following their graduation at a higher rate (76.6%) than the statewide average (69.8%). In 2022, the rate of graduates who enrolled in a postsecondary institution within the months of graduation (82.6%) was also higher than the statewide average (75.1%).Ocean City's graduation rate (95.7%) is also higher than the state average (91.1%). According to an administrator in the guidance department, the school's extensive, dynamic dual enrollment program gives many students "*a purpose in classes they might not otherwise have felt*" and helps them "*mature.*" Lauren Gunther, the district director of student services,

shared that it is a *"pretty seamless process"* for a teacher to make their course dual credit through the school's partnership with Stockton University. Gunther also emphasized that the college and career counselor is *"key to our mental health and wellness staff, because all of that 'college and what am I doing next?' can bring on anxiety."*

Pandemic Impacts

Introduction

It is no secret or surprise that the COVID-19 pandemic posed incredible challenges to educators, students, and families around the country and world. The most vulnerable children suffered the greatest learning losses due largely to resource inequities both at home and in the schools to which they returned (Alejo et al., 2024). Teacher job satisfaction across the U.S. fell to "*a low of 12% in 2022 after the pandemic,*" as compared to a high of 52% in 2001 (Kraft & Lyon, 2024). This dismal figure has only rebounded to "*a modest uptick*" of 20% in 2023. In short, many students and educators have a long road ahead of them to get back to where they were in 2019. The NJDOE initiated the Promising Practices Project when it observed that around 15% of public schools across the state seemed to defy the trend of massive learning losses over the 2018–22 period, as measured by the NJSLA score for English language arts and mathematics (see Methodology section). Researchers visited 52 of these schools to explore whether some of their approaches to teaching and learning both during and in the aftermath of the pandemic lockdowns might point towards innovative, impactful, replicable practices of use to peer schools on the long path towards pandemic recovery.

The bulk of this report focuses on practices that are not specific to how schools function under the extreme restrictions of public health quarantines. However, before further delving into the ways in which Promising Practices schools are teaching *now*, it is necessary to appreciate that they were selected because of their relative ability to weather the extreme traumas, disruptions, and technological gaps that all schools struggled with to varying degrees. Their school communities faced isolation, illness, and death—experiences that had not only enduringly negative impacts on student and staff behavior and mental health, but also fostered community, collaboration, and a prioritization of social and emotional learning and supports. They had to swiftly and unexpectedly transition to fully virtual instruction, while simultaneously providing needed resources and training to students, families, and staff. And while many schools and educators have retained pervasively digital classrooms, others have reverted at least in part to paper and pencil. There was no singular experience of the peak pandemic period, but there were commonalities in schools' efforts and abilities to face trauma and crisis with care and resourcefulness.

Acute Challenges and Responses During Pandemic Lockdowns

Promising Practices schools reported **confronting individual and collective trauma in the face of isolation, illness, and death.** These traumas disproportionately affected students from more working-class backgrounds whose parents were "*essential workers*" and therefore both more exposed to COVID-19 and less able to stay home to supervise their children during virtual instruction. Frank D'Amico, now superintendent of **Lodi School District** (then the principal of a high school), recalled:

> **There [were] several students who had family members that they were living with pass away during the pandemic, and they were dealing with those social-emotional concerns. And maybe that's why they weren't logging into instruction. Or their parents' jobs didn't allow them to work from home, so [the students] were staying home alone. And who was watching them? Who's ensuring that they were even having a meal at that time?**

Silvia Abbato, superintendent of **Union City School District (Sara M. Gilmore Academy)**, remembers a first-grade teacher observing that one of her struggling students was holding her baby sibling while on Zoom, reflecting, "*those are the things that our community [faced]. ... The wealthy communities, they had the nanny, they had the au pair.*" Assistant Superintendent of Union City School District Geri Perez reflected more broadly that "*we had a lot of trauma during that time. We had a lot of deaths. We had a lot of students impacted by loss, and the ambulance just kept going by.*" Domenico Carriero, principal of **Charles J. Riley School 9**, reported how heightened socioeconomic struggles at home often took precedence over the routines of schooling:

> **Parents lost jobs. Parents, because of the issues that were going on, were fighting in front of their children, which the child may have never seen before. "We can't pay the rent. They're going to kick us out. How are we going to buy food?" And we're trying to teach the child, right? We are expecting the child to get up at 8 a.m. in the morning to log in ... until 3 p.m., do homework, et cetera, et cetera. But meanwhile, we also had to be cognizant of what was going on inside the house.**

Many schools became hubs of needed supports and resources for struggling families. Wilson Aponte, principal of **Dewitt D. Barlow Elementary School**, described this as a significant paradigm shift regarding their relationship to their community:

> **No matter what, schools are the hubs. I mean, this is where parents get information [on] not just the academics, but the resources that are here. ... That's been a paradigm shift, where we're ... not only first responders, but we're the first stop for all. Again, they'll come here not only for seeking academic help, but help family needs.**

Many school staff also faced similar hardships as those afflicting their students. An administrator at **University High School** spoke to the losses faced by staff and the illuminating and humanizing impact that had on their school community: "*Most adults had it together. But that, to me, exposed the realities of what inequities looked like in all facets and not just with our students. So you just lost somebody. These were realities of staff stories. 'I have to stay home to take care of my mother' ... So to me, that reality of unpeeling the layers for themselves and starting to see each other, now I leverage that to help them.*" Jacqueline Cruz, a K-5 bilingual intervention teacher at **Rieck Avenue Elementary School**, noted that while in her estimation "*it was harder for the parents and the kids,*" staff also struggled: "*We were so isolated ... some of us were depressed, some of us were not motivated.*" Elizabeth Desmond, an English teacher at **Gateway Regional High School** lamented how during this period teaching felt drained of its very heart and soul: "*I never want to go back to that type of teaching ever again. It was so disheartening. If you love teaching, you were just like, oh my God, this love has been taken away from me.*"

In addition to acute challenges related to basic survival and mental health, many Promising Practices schools reported **difficulties ensuring that all students and teachers had the needed technological resources and skills to engage in virtual learning.** An administrator at **Mount Tabor Elementary School** shared that "*what the pandemic brought to light too is that there is still a disparity at home with technology. I think we assumed that because of phones, everyone at home has a computer or some form of access, but when the pandemic happened, [we realized] that wasn't the case.*" Tabor's district, **Parsippany-Troy Hills Township School District**, was one of many that provided one-to-one devices for all of their students. Charlene Pappas, a second-grade teacher at **Upper Greenwood Lake Elementary School**, reflected on both the emotional and material challenges that arose amid efforts to provide students and families with needed technological access:

> **Our community really, really, really came together during COVID. It was very scary for the families who didn't necessarily have the resources, like Wi-Fi, and the virtual piece of teaching and learning was very intimidating, especially when there were very little resources for them. We gave out hotspots, we drove packets to families, we dropped things off.**

A number of Promising Practices schools similarly reported providing hotspots and computers for families that needed them. Educators acquired such technologies in various ways. While **Roosevelt Elementary School** reported "*purchasing the technologies to be able to [be] one-to-one,*" Silvia Abbato, district superintendent of **Union City School District (Sara M. Gilmore Academy)** offered, "*the first thing that we did differently than other districts was we cleaned out the technology in our schools. We did not wait to place a purchase order. That would take months, even years to get to. They said, let's get the technology to the students as soon as possible.*" In addition to getting their students the needed hardware, schools found that they needed to teach students and teachers how to use these technologies. Principal Robert Lake of **North Plainfield Middle School** reflected:

> **One of the things we learned through COVID and during COVID [is] don't expect students to be able to know how to use the technology. They are gamers, they are app users, they're cell phone people. They don't necessarily have the skills to properly use educational platforms or even create a document. If they can't write an essay, why do we expect that they can open Google Docs and begin using it and all the different functions of it?**

Other schools had the advantage of already having students with one-to-one computer access and training. Andrew Heiser, a social studies teacher at **Community Middle School**, shared that he and his colleagues struggled more with getting teachers access to needed technology and skills: "*The thing that held tight through COVID is that our kids already had computers and were already knowledgeable on how to use them. So the one thing that had to get caught up [was] the teachers, and all of a sudden teachers are getting caught up as fast as we can.*"

Several schools reported that they engaged in **extensive informal and formal collaboration during the lockdowns** to get teachers up to speed on how to teach under pandemic conditions. More informally, Charlene Pappas, a second-grade teacher at **Upper Greenwood Lake Elementary School,** recalled that "*teachers as a whole really came together then and everybody was sharing things, creating things, figuring things out, and posting tutorials.*" More formally, many districts coordinated districtwide "*hubs*" for resource-sharing as well as districtwide Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). Danielle Adase, a third-grade teacher at **Oak Tree Road Elementary School (Woodbridge Township School District)** shared:

> **One of the first things I felt that was really important that we needed was a central hub [where teachers could access] resources [about] how to do things, what our curriculum was ... links to all the PD that we were providing, [and information] about Genesis, iPads, and Google. Teachers that might not have been as tech savvy, [or] didn't have access to the devices in their school building at the time, were now thrown into this whirlwind of incorporating this technology and everything else on top of shifting our ideas of things.**

Washington Township School District (Whitman Elementary School) implemented districtwide PLCs during the pandemic "*to take a little bit of the lift off of individuals as a team.*" **West Milford Township Public School District (Upper Greenwood Lake Elementary School)** also convened PLCs during COVID. "*It was a big effort to make sure across the district we were meeting with our grade level.*"

Given the stresses of life under quarantine, **schools endeavored to bolster students' mental and physical health by preserving fun activities and events virtually.** A social worker at **Rieck Avenue Elementary** remembered "*dropping in on ... [a] third grade self-contained teacher, and she had them doing jumping jacks and pushups and all kinds of stuff just to get 'em moving. I did too. She kept saying their brains need movement.*" Both **University High School** and **Orange Preparatory Academy** hosted virtual "*Wellness Wednesdays.*" University's included activities such as "*how to*

make a smoothie from home with limited resources, a pep rally online, a staff workout session, and dance session." **Orange Preparatory Academy** focused on student and staff wellness: "*We even had yoga. We had our Wellness Wednesdays that we would do for the staff. We would give our kids wellness activities so that we can try to help them and support them with their mental health.*" **Princeton Charter School** also implemented "*Wellness Wednesdays*" as a needed break from online teaching and learning:

> **Especially when the sun was setting early and it meant that school was off early ... [we gave] no homework. ... We finished at 1 p.m. [or] whenever we finished, and parents later told me that they took the time off too because they'd been working on screens.**

As a counterexample, Principal Domenico Carriero of **Charles J. Riley School No. 9** suggested that some students who preferred smaller learning settings actually "*thrived*" during virtual instruction:

> **A lot of our resourced students and ML students actually thrived at home because some of them have phobias; they like small groups. Being at home, [they] didn't have to worry about, "What am I wearing today? Who's looking at me today?" It's only the teacher and [student] that are face-to-face there. So we did have a lot of positives.**

Due to the necessities of online learning at home, many schools reported that **parent and family involvement during the pandemic lockdowns was both more challenging and more intensive. Mount Tabor Elementary School** engaged in carefully timed small group instruction online, which required "*a lot of scheduling and ... working with the parents so [they] would know the schedule, because it's very hard to tell a first grader, 'I want you on at 1:15.' So really there was a lot of communication with the parents.*" A social worker at **Rieck Avenue Elementary** stated that "*[parent] engagement overall went up during the pandemic*" because "*lots of parents would ask lots of questions, [like] 'What can I do at home to help my child?'*" They shared a particularly dramatic success story in the case of special education:

> **Special education teachers were just on it. They knew exactly what to tell parents. I can think of one in particular that stands out to me ... The special ed teacher spoke up and she said, "I want you to label everything in the house. I want you to practice words with him on the table, make sure that you're labeling it with a picture of the table and show him. Just start recognizing letters and words." And after the pandemic, when he came back, he had progressed so much that he no longer required a different placement. ... A few years later, he was declassified so he no longer required special education support.**

Schools often had to reach out to parents to address chronic absenteeism and other struggles. In some cases this took place online, like at **Orange Preparatory Academy**, which "*set up Zoom meetings with parents and students who were not attending, who were not putting their cameras on, and who were not doing the work.*" A social worker reflected that this improved home-school relationships and understanding:

> **I thought that was very innovative because you're telling the parents, "Hey, we are here for your kids." And in those meetings we got a lot of insight about what was going on with the families [for example] not having devices, not having internet, not being home, being displaced.**

In cases where both students and their families were unreachable, often because "*[parents] couldn't pay their phone bill,*" **Charles J. Riley School No. 9** sent out their district security guard to do "*wellness checks.*" Principal Carriero recalled, "*We're trying to teach them math and reading, but there are a lot of other obstacles that were going on within the child's family of which we had to be cognizant and understanding.*"

Lasting Impacts of Pandemic Challenges and Responses

Several Promising Practices schools reported that a perhaps counterintuitive result of the stresses of isolation during quarantine was **the forging of more enduring relationships between staff and students.** Josephine El-Reheb, assistant principal of **Robert Morris School**, observed that teachers and administrators "*built stronger relationships during COVID and they've just continued to grow after COVID, especially with things that [the principal] did as far as doing something special for the staff every month or being able to go to the curriculum supervisor and say, this isn't working.*" In the realm of teacher-student relationships, Charlene Pappas, a second-grade teacher at **Upper Greenwood Lake Elementary**, recalled the longer-term impact of teachers making an effort to celebrate students during the lockdowns: "*I think that our staff was the best before COVID too, but after COVID, students felt 'They really care about me. They showed up, they met us outside for my birthday. They came to my graduation. We did confetti cannons.'*" Similarly, a fifth-grade teacher at **Good Intent Elementary School** reflected that, "*I've been invited to more birthday parties and graduation ceremonies after COVID than my first 15 years of working [here]. We did something right.*" However, others, such as Alicia Bakely, a fourth-grade teacher at **Reeds Road Elementary School**, found that **pandemic-induced isolation had severely hampered long-term relationship building:**

> **There's a huge difference from before COVID to now because of that separation ... Even now, there's people in the building that I don't know their name and that's hard to establish ... Before COVID, I could have told you almost everyone's name, assistants included. That's because we were always together. We were always doing things, passing in the hallway. It was communal. COVID completely tore that apart.**

The predominantly crisis-fueled deepening of relationships was coupled with **the lasting benefits of educators feeling compelled to collaborate more extensively during the pandemic.** This increased emphasis on intentional collaboration took place at both the school and district level. At **Harrison Elementary School**, a fourth-grade teacher observed that their school's current culture of collaboration and experimentation "*started before COVID ... [but] if you weren't ready to shift*

during COVID, there was no way around [it]. I can no longer do what I've been doing for so many years. It is no longer going to work." An administrator at **Cedar Creek Elementary School** reported an increase in "*informal collaboration among teachers*" during the pandemic that has endured:

> **I think that's definitely something that carried through [the pandemic] and that's successful because teachers don't always learn best from who's in charge. They learn best from each other and they learn best from seeing each other. And I think during COVID, because they shared lessons, whether they divvied it up and they created different videos and made a bank, they got to see other teachers teach. And that's one of the most valuable pieces of professional development.**

An administrator at **University High School** described the development of far more extensive, student-centered, data-driven Professional Learning Communities (PLCs): "*We had staff check-ins almost daily during that time ... The Student Study Team would come together every day. They had to do a check-in to really identify needs, variation in student needs, and how we can respond. That was where I was trying to get [us to go away]; the pandemic pushed it.*" **Brick Memorial High School** revised its schoolwide philosophy during the first summer of the pandemic. Based on data collected from surveys sent to teachers, students, and parents, the school devised a new set of four underlying principles: "*relationships, routines, roles, and rigorous tasks.*" They reported that collaboration and "*collective efficacy*" improved as a result over the long-term. Jennifer Lane, secondary science supervisor, shared:

> **The teachers knew what the four Rs were, and we started the year [2020–21] off with hitting that philosophy hard ... Longevity wise, collaboration has outlived almost all of this—the collective efficacy of departments individually, they're all working together, they're all sharing.**

At **Lincoln Elementary School**, Alyna Jacobs, the director of elementary education for **Caldwell-West School District,** explained how the need for more consistency during the pandemic ultimately facilitated districtwide teacher collaboration:

> **The pandemic shed some light for us as a district on a need for coherence. When everybody was teaching online and we began working together as grade level teams to share in the planning, we discovered that people were doing different things from one school to the next. That experience really pushed us as a district to get on the same page; as a result, we created a pacing and assessment calendar. Teachers across the schools are now aligned and have opportunities to collaborate, share resources, and do grade level planning.**

Collaboration among teachers across the **Parsippany-Troy Hills Township School District** endured past the pandemic lockdowns due to the simple convenience of virtual meetings. At **Mount Tabor Elementary School**, an administrator shared that the district is "*helping support 10 elementary schools of teachers. And while Mount Tabor is one of those schools for them to talk to other teachers in other schools is so important. And so sometimes [virtual meetings] allow an avenue for that*

because they're not forced to drive across town and come to a meeting." Another administrator at **Mount Tabor** continued, "*the pandemic kind of spurred that, that we were able to do those types of meetings.*" During the lockdowns, **Woodbridge Township School District's** Elementary Distance Learning Committee developed an online "hub" of resources "*for any new teacher in the district.*" Danielle Adase, third-grade teacher at **Oak Tree Elementary School**, expressed:

> **When you [ask] what has stuck from [virtual instruction], this is one actual tangible thing that our district has that was a literal labor of love. ... I'm so proud of it still today because it's something that is going to live on and it's a place that any teacher can go if [they] need a resource at any point. So it's still something that we're using, which is pretty cool.**

A significant number of Promising Practices schools emphasized how **the pandemic reaffirmed and deepened their prioritization of social-emotional learning (SEL)** in ways that have endured. **Several schools asserted that their centering of SEL before the pandemic served them well when the crisis hit.** William Fleming, principal of **Hoover Elementary School**, shared that he has long focused on "*what is now coined as social-emotional learning. ... Even pre-pandemic, what works and what was innovative is that we've been doing a lot [of social emotional learning] for a long time.*" Hoover educators carried on and deepened this work through the COVID-19 crisis:

> **Once the pandemic hit, we really harnessed our use of social-emotional learning. And we launched that year coming back with an understanding [that] everyone has a very unique story and we don't know what each of our children faced during the pandemic. We don't know if they had loss in their family, if they themselves were sick. That was the foundation of how we approached the work during the pandemic and post-pandemic. But I think one of the things, in talking about innovation and impact, is this has been an ongoing evolving process for us for 10 [or] 11 years now.**

Hoover implemented a number of SEL practices upon returning to in-person schooling, including the use of a "*therapy dog,*" "*brain breaks throughout instruction,*" and items on students' desks to assist with focus and breathing: "*Every room has their glitter jars on the desk. If the kids feel like their brains are just kind of muddled and it's too much, they flip their jar over. It's a breathing technique. We have Hoberman spheres for the kids, so they learn to breathe with the Hoberman spheres.*" An administrator at **Marie Durand Elementary School** similarly highlighted how a pre-pandemic focus on SEL endured and extended:

> **All of our SEL lessons—and this started pre-pandemic and has continued for first, second, and now third grade—[include] students coming in every day and identifying how they're feeling that day. In schools like ours after a long break, even [on] Mondays, there are many challenges that our students faced over the**

> **weekend, whether it was not having enough to eat or watching violence in the home or whatever it might be. So that is another [reason] we started SEL before it even became social and emotional learning, before it even became [formally known as] a true thing that everybody was pushing for.**

Joe Costal, supervisor of English and social studies, reflected that somewhat fortuitously, **Oakcrest High School** was already "*in the midst of our year of empathy*" when the pandemic hit. "*We spent a whole year just encouraging our faculty to discuss their own trauma because we decided that we couldn't possibly expect them to understand the trauma of our students if we didn't put a year into being empathetic to their trauma.*"

Others shared how the pandemic catalyzed their implementation of SEL practices and initiatives. Broadly, Principal Aponte at **Dewitt D. Barlow Elementary School in Plainfield Public School District** shared, "*the social-emotional learning piece is picking up steam, I mean districtwide. And again, that's one of the offsets from COVID and we're pushing that.*" Principal Renie Egan at **Middle Road Elementary School** described a similar practice of daily emotional check-ins as **Marie Durand** (above), but at **Middle Road** this practice was more directly initiated by the pandemic:

> **The Monday morning check-ins were a big part of it. And like I said, that has stayed and we do think that's really important. ... All of our teachers have boxes for calm down corners for kids who are struggling, who need a minute, who need to step away. Like I said, [we've incorporated] lessons from the guidance counselor, focusing our health lessons on social-emotional learning [during] interactions with your peers. ... Okay, you're upset about X, Y, and Z, how can you work through this? I can't be disappointed if they don't know how to do it. We've been focusing a lot on that. And I would say that all started in COVID.**

At the high school level, **Brick Memorial High School** similarly described instituting regular check-ins with students during and after the pandemic lockdowns, mini-lessons with frequent breaks in between to address limited attention spans, and more grace in their grading practices:

> **Teachers have continued to offer social-emotional learning, starting their lessons with a brief connection with their students. Even if it's just, "Hey, what was your favorite thing you did over the weekend?" We saw the value. We recognized that we would only have the attention of these students for a very short time. Part of our lesson plan was a mini-lesson. Give a very short but rigorous lesson to the students and then give them a break. Teachers have recognized that these small chunks of lessons are helping the students. They don't have that long of an attention span. Frequent breaks and things like that have helped. Before the pandemic, if a student failed to do assignments, they earned a zero. The pandemic gave teachers a window into their students' homes. Teachers became more understanding of the situations students were dealing with at home.**

Jeanene Dutt, superintendent of **North Warren Regional School District,** observed that "*the social-emotional learning that we were doing during COVID, we've continued, and even have done more as just a general practice. We may be seeing an uptick in how our kids are doing academically—failing fewer classes, growing on those state assessments—because of the connections that we're building between our teachers and our students.*" Principal Carie Norcross-Murphy elaborated that "*[one] of the ways that we do this is by requiring our teachers to meet students at the door and greet them as they enter the classroom. It's a way for us to set the tone for the class. It also allows you to learn things about your students that they might not otherwise share. If you get right down to business and it's all content, you're not building that.*"

Beyond a more holistic emphasis on SEL, many Promising Practices schools described the **particular challenges students in the early grades are having with adjusting to school** after missing key early years of socialization. Principal Laura Gore of **Radix Elementary School** noted:

> **Our youngest learners are not coming to us with readiness. What used to happen in the kindergarten classroom in September, October, and November is now taking much longer to get through. [For] many of the kids that are coming to us, this might be their first time in a structured environment. ... But our kindergarten students are definitely coming to us way different than they did before [in terms of] their emotional regulation abilities.**

An administrator at **Mount Tabor Elementary** similarly shared that the first couple of years back to in-person learning were "*the toughest discipline-wise because ... it had been over a year [since the children] had practiced those social skills, especially our little ones, our kindergartners.*" **Mount Tabor** educators had to engage in more direct instruction of basic routines like "*turn-taking, raising [their] hand, getting up out of their seat.*" **Birches Elementary School** faced the same challenge with its kindergartners and throughout the elementary years. Principal Julie LaRubbio asserted, "*we have to give teachers permission to teach these kids those executive functions ... [for example, how to] line up, get the tray, throw things away, use the bathroom. ... I feel like our summer [2024] is going to be driven by a little bit of a bootcamp for how to be a fourth grader, how to be a kindergartner, how to be a fifth grader.*" Kaitlyn Sheehan, a kindergarten teacher at **Lincoln Elementary**, described incorporating "*a lot more free play time for the kids in kindergarten to really help build some of those social skills that ... in the past they kind of came in already having.*" **Lincoln's** school counselor has also contributed "*a lot of lessons with ... problem solving skills, regulating emotions, and coping strategies.*" **School 28** similarly has initiated "*a social skills group*" for students who are struggling to build healthy relationships with their peers. At **Sara M. Gilmore Academy**, peer tutoring assists the youngest students in developing social skills:

> **Talking about kids coming back post-pandemic, the little ones, especially our first and second graders, [are] having trouble navigating relationships, maintaining friendships. And so these are some of the things I instructed those peer tutors to work on with the kids.**

Educators reported **post-lockdown behavioral and mental health challenges among students of all ages.** Several educators described pervasive depression and apathy. Danette P. Boone, vice principal of **Rieck Avenue Elementary**, reflected that returning from virtual learning, "*discipline increased because prior to that ... [students] could do whatever they wanted to do at home.*" Boone observed that students were both un-disciplined and un-motivated:

> **They only want to do stuff where you sit down. They don't want to get up and do any type of exercise because they're so used to just being in front of Zoom. ... Don't ask them to run around anywhere or anything like that. Don't do that because they're like, "I'm tired. I don't want to do that." And I think maybe we had a whole student body of depressed individuals because they had not been allowed to do anything.**

Lisa Butynes, **Robert Morris School's** curriculum supervisor, noted similar enduring behavioral challenges among students:

> **A lot of our kids are not the same anymore. ... That whole experience has had a very profound impact on just the way they see things. I mean, just their interactions. For some of them, their worlds got very, very small. I think it's been a long climb back to get them the interest [and] curiosity, and social media is just awful. It's just so hard to break that, even here within the building through the course of the day. So that I think has been a huge impact.**

High school educators also reported a lack of motivation and engagement among their students. Jim Haupt, math supervisor at **North Warren Regional High School**, observed that "*students' behaviors are not as they were ... I don't think study habits are the same. I think they're content with mediocrity post-COVID. I don't think their parents are willing to hold the line the way perhaps they were pre-COVID. I think all of those challenges have made students so much different than students pre-COVID.*" Wendy O'Neal, principal of **Ocean City High School**, agreed, stating "*apathetic is the word that we kind of use post-pandemic ... whereas before they were a little bit more invested.*" However, O'Neal cautioned against seeing this as a purely pandemic-related phenomenon:

> **The things that we're seeing, the apathetic student, the detached student, it's not like this is a new thing because of the pandemic. This always existed. I think [COVID] just put its foot on the gas and exploded a problem that already existed. It's like trying to fight a sea change in certain students, and hopefully we're able to find a bunch of things that work to hopefully bring students back and have a connection. These apathetic students, they don't seem to have a hook connection, whether it's a person, whether it's a group, whether it's a hobby, anything. Hopefully with these things that we're trying to implement, we are able to get that hook, whatever that may be.**

Schools such as **Ocean City High School** **instituted a range of trauma-informed practices** in response to the widespread mental health crises aggravated by the pandemic. In several cases, educators highlighted the importance of allocating resources to hire specialized staff as well as developing partnerships with outside mental health organizations. An administrator from **Ocean City High School** described their extensive approach to allocating such resources:

> **We wanted to really think about how we could implement school-based mental health around the pandemic. We researched different school districts and different companies around the world and around the nation, and how [the pandemic-era mental health crisis] was exploding. With the support of our board, we were able to hire a more specialized team of mental health specialists and supports, and we continued to build on that. We've added half a dozen people in that realm, and we've added permanent [wellness] spaces in every building. We have a social worker. We have a clinician. They're hired as district employees, so if we're having a crisis at one of the schools, we can say, listen, we have a priority at this building. A lot of school districts are implementing mental health, but they contract out. I think we feel pretty strongly that we want them to be our own faculty members and embedded in the culture and climate of our schools.**

Roosevelt Elementary leadership highlighted a somewhat contrasting approach to serving the post-quarantine mental health needs of their entire school community:

> **Our supervisor of guidance for the district also put in after COVID some workshops for parents on mental health and some support for teachers on mental health, including professional development on trauma-informed instruction. We were also able to get some grants after COVID to get part-time counselors to further support our students, especially in the middle school and the high school where they seem to struggle the most. We also partnered with a local mental health agency to provide mental health professionals to work with our most at-risk students in all grade levels across the district.**

Principal Michael McGhee shared how **Oakcrest High School** continued its trauma-informed work (see above) with students when returning to in-person schooling:

> **Coming out of COVID, we ran a yearlong heart initiative. We call it Healing Hearts. September was "De-stress for Success," [October was] suicide awareness and prevention. November was substance abuse. December was social media etiquette, growth mindset in January, racial equality in February, conflict resolution team dating, mental health and LGBTQIA. ... We also have AtlantiCare Team Center, which is attached to our building now. We've had that for years and it's pretty successful. We also brought in ESS, Effective School Solutions, where we have tier two counseling and tier three counseling here for students outside of our guidance counseling.**

(See Section 4 on Social and Emotional Learning for far more detail on Promising Practices schools' varied approaches to SEL and trauma-informed practices.)

While Promising Practices educators frequently discussed lasting pandemic impacts related to relationships, collaboration, and social and emotional wellness, they also noted that the **massive technological shifts hastened by the pandemic have lingered, for better and for worse.** Many educators reported that the extensive use of computers and online learning has continued. Samantha Regina, a sixth-grade ELA teacher at **Walter Hill School**, stated, "*we use technology a lot in our department, and that really was motivated from COVID. When COVID happened, we were forced to change all of our materials because we were doing kind of the classic pen and paper. ... We always had Chromebooks, but not to this degree. [Now] we use the Chromebooks every day, every day, every day.*" Principal Norcross-Murphy of **North Warren Regional High School** said that at this point, "*99% of our teachers are using Google Classroom.*" According to an administrator in the **Ocean City School District**, "*We've always been a decent district for utilizing tech ... but I think the pandemic required everyone to get on board with tech.*" He reflected that the "*flipped classroom*" model, wherein a mini-lesson is followed by students working in groups or independently for the bulk of class time, has become far more prominent in the wake of virtual instruction. In particular, many educators have continued the practice of recording short instructional videos for students. He continued:

> **Prior to [the pandemic], we had some teachers that specialized in flipped classrooms, but now everyone became a flipped classroom [expert] overnight. I think one of the things that has had staying power is we recorded a lot of those videos and we've transitioned away from the school day being chalk and talk 55 minutes of lecture and more towards those [flipped] classrooms.**

A fifth-grade teacher at **Marie Durand Elementary** viewed the expansion of this model as particularly successful with special education students:

> **We really embrace that whole flipped classroom where you give [students] the pre-recording and my co-teacher and I, we were constantly recording ourselves doing little mini-lessons so they could get that repetitiveness. Seeing it more than once, and especially our In-Class Resource students, our special ed students that push in, they really benefited from it, I think the most.**

Principal Carriero of **Charles J. Riley, School 9** saw students benefit from online instruction in terms of becoming "*so tech savvy today that now it's a norm. Now Zoom meetings are a norm to these kids. Google Classroom is a norm. We talk about negative [impacts] because of course there were a lot of negatives that did come out of it. But let me tell you, these kids have progressed and I think it put them ahead of the curve.*" **Robert Morris's** assistant principal observed that more extensive use of technology has also furthered students' ability to take more responsibility for their own learning:

> **I think technology went from just a simple PowerPoint to being meaningful, useful, and something that we use if students are absent. It's not just a sub folder anymore, it's "Go to the Google Classroom, you can find your assignments there." Students [are] taking responsibility and going on Genesis to find out what**

assignments are missing or not missing because they became so used to using these things during COVID.

There were also educators who reported **concerns about the prominence of computers in teaching due to the pandemic.** A seventh-grade math teacher at **Richard M. Teitelman Middle School** expressed that "*I actively use computers for educational platforms like IXL, Real World Math, and Holiday Activities. [However,] technology has impacted the children today in that they are used to immediate feedback and quick responses. This has made it difficult for children to stop, think, and take their time to problem solve.*" Andrew Heiser, social studies teacher at **Community Middle School**, and many of his colleagues have carried on with using some online tools: "*Things like using Google Forms a little bit more efficiently for reading comprehensions and such, taking the time to do more online projects and whatnot.*" But in response to the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies,

...now we're going reverse a little bit. Now I'm doing more stuff with paper and pencil because I'm showing them what happens ... when you use AI [to write] a beautiful paragraph. What happens if AI is not there and you have to write something? So we're kind of flipping it back a little bit, like something I did 20 years ago, using paper and pencil.

North Plainfield Middle School has instituted a schoolwide middle ground, called "*tech-free Fridays.*" According to Jennifer Jimenez, an eighth-grade writing teacher,

I think there was a little bit of tech burnout in the pandemic. While we've all enjoyed learning all the different programs, typing essays, and doing assignments online, we've also taken time to realize that we have to get back to some foundational skills in terms of handwriting. We have tech-free Fridays, and the kids love it because it's a day where they don't need their charger and they don't need their Chromebook, and it doesn't matter if they're a fast typer, whatever the lesson is, it's like a break [for] their eyes and their brain, and the teachers love it too because we're not fighting for their attention over games or anything like that.

Conclusion

Anticipating discussions of pandemic-era trauma, Promising Practices researchers brought small packs of tissues with them to each interview. In some schools, tears indeed flowed when recalling this challenging period. Promising Practices schools were not successful because they magically evaded the challenges of teaching under quarantine conditions. Rather, they each struggled in a range of ways depending on their demographic makeup, community characteristics, as well as the practices and resources they had in place prior to the pandemic.

During the lockdowns, they struggled to continue teaching and learning with students and educators who were enduring trauma and hardship. Families sustained by generally low-wage "*essential workers*" disproportionally faced socioeconomic hardships, and schools serving these families often became "*hubs*" of needed resources. Regardless of their demographic makeup, schools nevertheless tried to preserve fun and wellness while at a distance. They had to overcome varying gaps in technological access and knowhow. Some schools already boasted 1:1 technology, while others had to acquire and distribute these resources anew. Meanwhile, teachers collaborated more intensively among one another and with parents to address the extreme difficulties of virtual learning.

Upon returning to school, communities faced a traumatized and, in some cases, socially stunted student body and workforce. However, they also returned to in-person learning with relationships and cultures of collaboration that were frequently stronger for having weathered such a storm together. They addressed the behavioral deficits of early learners with extensive social skill building, and the depression and apathy of older students with group and individual counseling and wellness activities. For some schools, such initiatives were built on a long history of prioritizing social and emotional learning. For others, prioritizing social-emotional learning represented a significant shift in focus. But whether deepened or catalyzed by the pandemic, in many cases, this emphasis on SEL has endured (see Section 4.2 on Social-Emotional Learning).

The technological impacts of widespread virtual learning have also endured in various ways. Most students and teachers are now far more familiar with and have greater access to a range of digital tools that can facilitate more efficient, individualized, and collaborative instruction. However, some educators fear that over-dependence on these tools can hamper more active, embodied learning, and have made efforts to reincorporate pre-digital modes of teaching and learning.

Several years into post-quarantine life, Promising Practices schools continue to wrestle with the legacies of this crisis. **Woodrow Wilson Elementary School** third-grade teacher Dana Emmer spoke to the challenge of maintaining high expectations in the face of enduring pandemic-related learning loss when asserting that she refused to give her students "*any lax because they're pandemic babies.*" Jim Haupt, math supervisor of **North Warren Regional High School**, evoked the specter of a depleted teaching force when he observed "*one thing that I think is a huge threat [and] problem is teacher burnout, post-COVID. [They're] having to deal with the students and the difficulty students are experiencing mentally, physically, [and] study-wise, [and] teachers are getting exhausted, they're getting burnt out.*"

The remainder of this report explores how Promising Practices schools are addressing widespread challenges regarding instruction, social and emotional learning, and supportive school culture— among other topics—in the long shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Appendix

Quantitative Discussion and Conclusion

The quantitative analyses reported here respond to two research questions. The first research question sought to understand the factors contributing to mean NJSLA scaled scores in ELA and math. The second research question studied the sample from a different angle, with an aim to understand the factors explaining schools' likelihood of being a "positive outlier," defined as schools which exceeded statistically-based expectations for mean NJSLA scaled scores in ELA and math.

For both research questions, three central sets of variables were investigated—school leadership and teaching experience, staffing and resource allocation, and school climate. Variables were selected out of the available data to identify malleable factors that could be levers for improving learning and recovery. Most of the selected variables were at the school level, consistent with the requested scope of the project. This study considers these potential levers in the context of school and neighborhood composition and prior performance.

As context for interpreting results, this study reports on the between-district and between-school variability in average student performance. If more of the variation is between districts then, ideally, efforts for improvement would pay close attention to district factors. If more of the variation is between schools, then efforts for improvement would pay slightly more attention to levers in schools.

Across all models, most of the variability can be attributed to differences between districts. This finding resonates with research demonstrating the influence of district practices on school outcomes. Where poor socioeconomic conditions of the district are related to depressed student outcomes, concerted districtwide efforts have been found to mitigate them (Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis, 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2005; Datnow, 2005; Waters & Marzano, 2007; Snipes et al., 2002).

The literature points to the critical importance of strong district vision and school leadership's ability to execute that vision in ways that work for the school's population (Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis, 2010). Still, districts and their schools do not automatically align, and well-intended district efforts can fall short if poorly implemented in schools (Datnow, 2005; Oldac & Kondakci, 2019).

School Leadership and Teaching Experience

Variables representing school leadership and teaching experience included indicators of administrator retention in the district and teachers' years of experience in the school, along with a quadratic term to study a possible non-linear relationship. This study's findings indicate that teachers with more

experience—approximately mid-career and beyond—consistently contribute to a slight increase in achievement in ELA and math, and increase the likelihood that schools will achieve "better than expected" performance categories. Earlier increases in teachers' years of experience—consider an early career teacher—were associated with decreased mean achievement and decreased likelihood of being in the "better than expected" performance categories. From the subgroup analyses, this finding was true for Black, Hispanic, and economically disadvantaged students. Evidence from the schoolwide models also indicates that administrator retention in the district for at least 1 year plays a role in boosting ELA and math student achievement.

Research consistently shows that increased teacher experience is positively associated with student achievement (Kini & Podolsky, 2016; Ladd & Sorensen, 2017; Podolsky et al., 2019), and some evidence from value-added models indicates that grade-level experience is a driver of teacher experience effects (Huang & Moon, 2009). An oft-cited finding is that teacher effectiveness typically increases dramatically in the first 2 to 3 years of teaching and flattens thereafter (Boyd et al., 2009; Henry et al., 2011; Staiger & Rockoff, 2010).

This study's analyses do not identify a positive effect of the first 5 years of teaching, but corroborate the part of the research which finds learning gains with greater years of teaching experience. As teachers gain experience, they can refine classroom management skills, instructional strategies, and the ability to adapt to diverse student needs, which contributes to improved academic performance (Kini & Podolsky, 2016).

School administrator retention is similarly impactful, as consistent leadership fosters a stable school environment and provides continuity in implementing policies and educational practices. High administrator turnover disrupts school culture, undermines teacher morale, and interrupts the implementation of long-term improvement plans. Conversely, administrators who stay longer can build trust with teachers, students, and parents, leading to sustained improvements in student learning outcomes (Grissom et al., 2021).

Staffing and Resource Allocation

Staffing and resource allocation variables included teacher-to-student ratios, administrator-to-student ratios, support staff-to-student ratios (i.e., social worker, counselor, and psychologist), and per-pupil spending. Per-pupil spending did not emerge as the most central predictor among all the other variables; but, in general, it was either clearly or marginally associated with increased ELA and math achievement schoolwide and for most subgroups of students. Per-pupil spending was one of the more substantial predictors for Hispanic students' math achievement.

Ratios of support staff-to-students were interacted with two school demographic variables—percent of students with disabilities and school need—to study the hypothesis that the influence of support staff may vary with these aspects of school context given the needs these staff are

typically hired to address. The ordinal logistic regression analysis finds that all three support staff roles—counselors, social workers, and psychologists—were associated with increased likelihood of schools being in the "better than expected" performance categories. When predicting mean achievement, however, the findings were mixed.

Considering schoolwide mean achievement, the psychologist-to-student ratio was associated with sizeable increases in both ELA and math achievement as school need increased. In other words, the psychologist-to-student ratio appears to have the potential to offset the negative effects of concentrated need in schools. Concurrently, however, once the moderating role of school need is controlled for along with the other variables, the counselor-to-student and/or social worker-to-student ratios tend to be negatively associated with both ELA and math achievement.

Some additional variability in the influence of support staff ratios on subgroup ELA and math achievement is observed. The psychologist-to-student ratio boosts ELA and/or math performance for all subgroups and appears to be moderated by either school need and/or percent of students with disabilities, so that the positive influence of the psychologist-to-student ratio is seen when contextual characteristics increase. One exception is for Black students' mean ELA achievement, where the psychologist-to-student ratio's influence is negative as school need increases. The counselor-to-student ratio appears positive for Hispanic students and students with disabilities, particularly when either school need or percent of students with disabilities increases. For other subgroups, the counselor-to-student ratio plays a negative or null role after accounting for all the other modeled variables. The social worker-to-student ratio does not emerge as a prominent influence on ELA or math mean achievement for most subgroups except for economically disadvantaged student achievement where it is generally positive, but not as the percentage of students with disabilities increases.

These findings may merely be signaling the complexity of the relationship between support staff allocation and academic performance when needs specific to school context are considered. With this in mind, readers are cautioned against using these findings without further qualitative inquiry. Ideally, it would be important to understand the mechanism through which each of these support staff roles could directly impact student learning, the timeframe within which any impact would be detectable (the study only covers 1 year), and the relative weight of each staff role relative to the other. Note, for example, that the effect of the psychologist-to-student ratio mostly remains positive with increasing enrollment of students with disabilities or school need. For Hispanic students, there is a positive influence of the counselor-to-student ratio when the percentage of students with disabilities also increases.

It is clear, though, that schools should be thinking carefully about where they can invest in support staff roles because, for all subgroups and schoolwide, at least one support staff is beneficial for average achievement. The mixed findings around staffing and resource allocation suggest a need to reevaluate optimal staffing configurations within school context.

Established literature explores possible mechanisms in the relationship between support staff and academic achievement. Research has identified positive effects of increased psychologist-to-student ratios, particularly in high-need schools (López et al., 2021). Noted mechanisms include improvement of social-emotional learning, working with teachers to implement academic and behavioral interventions, and promoting problem-solving skills (National Association of School Psychologists, 2021).

School psychologists are often associated with the special education identification process, but according to the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), that role may be broader and is directly connected to student learning. Indeed, their role is designed to impact both general and special education (NASP, 2021). "School psychologists help schools and families address some of our biggest challenges in education: improving and individualizing instruction to close the achievement gap; increasing graduation rates and preventing dropouts; creating safe, positive school climates and preventing violence; providing meaningful accountability; and strengthening family-school partnerships" (NASP, 2020).

The sometimes negative association between school social workers and reading achievement does not necessarily mean that social workers harm literacy achievement directly. Instead, it could reflect contextual factors. For example, schools with higher ratios of social workers might be responding to more significant social or behavioral challenges, or severe systemic or socioeconomic challenges (e.g., poverty, chronic absenteeism), which could indirectly impact literacy outcomes.

While social workers may not directly influence literacy achievement, their role in addressing social-emotional and behavioral needs can indirectly support academic environments over time. Recent research unfortunately has not explicitly studied the link between school social workers and reading performance. Some research, finds positive impacts of integrated social services on reading achievement (Chen et al., 2023; Wegmann et al., 2017); however, a social worker-to-student ratio will not necessarily capture integrated social services. More investigation is needed here.

The literature generally links better counselor-to-student ratios with improved academic performance and highlights mechanisms (Carey & Dimmitt, 2018), but the research does not have a strong base of causal evidence (Brown & Trusty, 2005; Carey & Dimmitt, 2018; Sink & Stroh, 2003). Though more often linked to improved behavioral outcomes (Carey & Dimmitt, 2018), school counseling programs might enhance academic achievement through direct interventions, such as personalized academic planning, goal setting, and teaching study skills through classroom lessons and small group sessions to address specific academic challenges (Sink & Stroh, 2003; Whiston & Quinby, 2009). Counselors might play a role in creating a supportive environment that enables better focus on academics by addressing emotional and behavioral barriers to learning through short-term counseling and by connecting students to external resources (American School Counselor Association, 2019). According to the American School Counselor Association (ASCA), counselors can also advocate for equitable access to resources for underserved populations.

Comprehensive school counseling programs (CSCPs), aligned with the ASCA National Model, emphasize reducing systemic barriers to student success and collaborating with teachers and parents to identify and address student needs, aligning strategies to improve academic outcomes (Brown & Trusty, 2005). However, like any intervention, outcomes of counseling programs will most likely depend on the quality of implementation, consistency between counseling and broader school goals and priorities, and alignment between the counseling approach and the student needs and family preferences. Counseling can also be stigmatized or deemed irrelevant, which could impact prioritization of the resource (ASCA, 2019).

School Climate

School climate emerges as an important factor in the analytic results of both research questions. Specifically, out-of-school suspension rates and chronic absenteeism, both at the schoolwide level and for specific student subgroups, are consistently associated with reduced mean achievement in ELA and math and reduced likelihood of schools being in "better than expected" performance categories. The results highlight the critical need for policies and interventions aimed at improving the overall school climate, such as reducing out-of-school suspensions through restorative practices (Darling-Hammond, 2023) and tackling chronic absenteeism through targeted outreach (Allensworth et al., 2021).

Notably, the contrasting effects of subgroup-specific chronic absenteeism compared to schoolwide chronic absenteeism point to the importance of addressing vulnerable student populations' unique challenges and needs. Attendance issues like absenteeism became particularly concerning during the COVID-19 pandemic, as educational disruptions disproportionately impacted students from vulnerable populations more severely, which can exacerbate existing inequities in academic outcomes. Therefore, it is essential to design targeted, evidence-based strategies that address the needs of these student subgroups to promote equitable academic opportunities and outcomes. Addressing absenteeism through proactive engagement strategies, such as family outreach, wraparound services, and school-based supports, could play a pivotal role in improving outcomes for all groups of students.

Varying Achievement with Grade Progression

Grade-level indicators were included in the models to understand achievement in each grade separately. Grade level is consistently associated with higher mean achievement in both subjects, with substantial increases observed as students advance from fifth through eighth grades as compared with third grade. However, for multilingual learners and students with disabilities, a "reversed" grade effect shows achievement declines in higher grades. This highlights the importance of an equitable approach to grade-level progression to support academic outcomes for all students.

It is important to note that as some students achieve language proficiency, they are no longer included among multilingual learners. The same may be true for students who test out of special education services. In general, these results could raise questions about curriculum alignment, developmental shifts, or instructional practices at specific grade levels. Educators might consider evaluating instructional quality and curricular coherence across grade spans to ensure continuity, building on the observed improvements in middle grades.

Conclusion and Future Research

The findings from the quantitative analyses provide valuable insights into the factors driving school performance, challenging simplistic views of academic performance by uncovering the significant roles of student support staff and school climate. The findings that various support staff positively influence achievement schoolwide and for subgroups suggest that investing in mental health, support services, and academic interventions remains particularly impactful for addressing the challenges students face—especially in high-need school environments. The importance of supportive staffing and school climate reforms to improve outcomes for all students offers policy and practice implications.

These results suggest important directions for future research. Qualitative studies are needed to explore the unique challenges faced by various student subgroups and better understand their unique struggles within New Jersey's diverse educational settings, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, quantitatively examining differential effects for specific student populations can inform both qualitative research and policy design, helping to develop tailored interventions that address subgroup-specific needs and promote equitable academic outcomes.

Furthermore, future research should investigate the causal mechanisms underlying the significant associations and complex relationships identified in this study. One example would be exploring how student support staff contribute to improved outcomes, whether through providing additional social-emotional support, academic guidance, or facilitating family engagement.

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